Abstraction Revisited
Curated by Elga Wimmer
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This show “Abstraction Revisited” displays the work of contemporary artists engaged in abstraction, alongside examples from some of the earlier Abstract Expressionists. The works were chosen for their visual impact and the strong dialogue they establish between the first generation and today’s abstractionists.

This juxtaposition seeks to shed light on the parallels and differences within a practice which shows no sign of fading, indeed which is more vital and innovative than ever, as evidenced by a surge of interest from artists, critics and art lovers alike. While the younger artists acknowledge their illustrious predecessors, they are less doctrinaire, willing to mix genres and media, from painting and sculpture to photography, video and film. They demonstrate their independence and individuality within an idiom which appears as vital today as it was when artists first sought freedom from representation.

Where the early stages of Abstract Expressionism took place mainly in Europe and the US, this exhibition demonstrates that younger international artists from places as diverse as Korea and Argentina, as well as from multiple generational backgrounds, can stand up to being shown ‘cheek to jowl’ to the Masters of the first generation. This exhibition allows for a new and exciting look at abstract art from the 1950s to today, offering a fresh understanding of its history, while enhancing the importance of the works of younger generations.

Elga Wimmer
Curator

The Persistence of Abstraction

Abstract painting can be its own subject, its own world, one that reveals itself slowly over time and may not look exactly the same to us from one day to the next. Humans change from day to day, whether or not they themselves immediately register those changes. And humans account for those of us who produce as well as receive art; artists are not in any sense “superhuman.” In 1968 Douglas Huebler’s famous and humbling proclamation stated, in part, “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place.” Now, when the daily flood of images appears unrelenting, when millions of people across the face of the earth can lift up their cell phones and “make a picture” in an instant, can stop time for one one-hundred-and-twenty-fifth of a second, abstraction – even as it continues to abundantly introduce new images to the world – can be seen as an antidote. And if you subscribe to the notion that what artists make is exactly what they want to see at any given moment (this is called having faith in the artist) then the proliferation of abstract art today may well have something to do with the dispensation of this antidote.

Gerard Mosse

The sublime must be mediated, or translated, into something visible - in Mosse’s case it is a redefining of color, as well as an understated exploration of perspectival depth, enabling him to create numinous fields of light, with the columns extending into an atmospheric background. Mosse achieves a mystical connection with light; as Carter Ratcliffe puts it (in his catalogue essay for the exhibition, “Incandescence”): “As color becomes light, existence illuminates itself.” The danger of working this way is that the existential experience of incandescence can lose focus, giving way to an inchoate haze. Yet Mosse eschews pure emotionalism in the form of color alone; there is a fineness of perception, rooted in perspective, and a sharp idiom of color, based in the tradition of New York art, that cuts through perceptual and conceptual materialism. Instead of vagueness or vacuity, what the viewer sees is a controlled experiment in light, in color, in form.

Excerpted from Jonathan Goodman’s review for Art Critical, 2010
Haeri Yoo creates a dichotomy and emotional rupture in her work, pitting sweetness against an insidious violence and darkness, which she keeps pushing and developing, exploring increasingly the ability of paint itself to convey these states of being. Suspended between figuration and abstraction, Yoo sees her works as an expressive metaphor in paint for the psychological deep end of “human vulnerability and life experiences.” Her riot of media, colors and modes of application, over time, reveals a careful attention to craft, technique and an economy of form; with each stroke carrying an expressive energy, here embodying the concept of “chi”, as seen within the framework of traditional Korean calligraphy.

Lazy Sitter   2010
90 x 72 in / 228.6 x 182.9 cm
Acrylic, spray paint, collage on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, NY

Honeymoon Island   2010
90 x 78 in / 228.6 x 198.1 cm
Acrylic, pastel, spray paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, NY
From Romanticism, geographical remoteness and ethnicity began to exercise its power of fascination unknown until then. The charming effect of remoteness is felt in a way perhaps for the pure pleasure of doing so with a sense of conquest of freedom and beauty absolute, unadulterated, uncontaminated, that travel can offer. A trip, following the same steps of the first breaks in the folds of the mind and memory. The painting is not a reaction. Hernán’s aesthetics is a personal and spontaneous response to the reality of our time. Painting is, for him, learning to see, sharpen the gaze to penetrate reality and discover the bowels. Investigates not only the identity but also moves into the secret of textures, colors and their vibrations, weight and density of matter, the touch and the eye, lines and structures. Expressionism, pure pictorial letters, numbers, this young artist takes over all this to offer a sensible translation of today’s world. This fabric of sensation is painting a picture that is also a metaphor, an act of freedom and revelation. Their world is ours, every day, tender and cruel, small and immeasurable. However, to Hernán the truth of the painting is not in power to represent but to evoke an inner truth, a purely spiritual reality beyond the immediate.
“Arising from inner conflicts, my painting is a projection,” Jean Miotte has said, “a succession of acute and intense moments realized in full spiritual tension. Painting is not a speculation of the mind or the intellect; it is a gesture which comes from within.”

According to Marcelin Pleynet, Miotte’s work “defies cliches of schools and national styles in order to impose a style that holds only to the singularity of his inspiration. We could say that Jean Miotte passed through the school of Paris, as well as through the school of New York, through French post-Cubism and American Abstract Expressionism, with an acute sense of independence that kept him from falling into any of the formal dogmas that age works before their time.”

Miotte has been invited to show his work in one-man exhibitions in internationally recognized museums, and also many times with his contemporaries Mitchell, Riopelle, Motherwell, Francis. The most unusual was surely the invitation for a one-man show as first western artist to exhibit in Beijing as early as May 1980, and thus to compare his paintings of the 70s to the works of Asian artists. While he had started off with completely filled canvases which could be classified as “abstract expressionism,” Miotte developed a more and more minimal gestural abstraction which could be related to calligraphic Eastern paintings, even though the artist had never studied Zen philosophy or paintings from the Far East. Effectively the Chinese artists discovered a familiarity in these works; and they sensed at the same time the differences - where Miotte came from and where they came from - an encounter or meeting in gestural works understandable by both sides. This cultural bridge for which Miotte’s work stands makes him unique.
Jean Paul Riopelle

As long as I can remember I have been fascinated by the art of Jean Paul Riopelle. His color inks awake memories of childhood, when everything was a source of wonder. Indeed whenever I come across one of his works, I plunge into a supernatural and phantasmagoric universe. The richly varied colors and the automatic writing with black ink induce an intense personal attraction, a sort of sensory excitement. I can compare his pictures only to the “psychological morphologies” of Roberto Matta. The extra-terrestrial landscapes from unknown realms, do they derive from an indefinitely small place or from another galaxy? These mysterious watercolors may well reflect images of the subconscious, a veritable topography of the inner self.

—Francois Odermatt
(Foreword for catalogue raisonné of Jean Paul Riopelle)

Grande Fete 1952
39.4 x 19.7 in / 100 x 50 cm
Oil on canvas
Collection Francois Odermatt
With the advent of Pop Art, minimalism and conceptual art in the 60’s, or “Pop, slop and flop art” as she called them, Joan Mitchell felt herself to be, and was, out of fashion as a straightforward non-ironic abstract-expressionist.

Her sense of isolation from the mainstream of American art only increased when she moved to Paris, part time at first and full time by 1959, and then to the country, an hour outside of Paris to Vetheuil, in 1968.

Joan did not like to talk about her painting much, saying, “The moment you put the blah-blah-blah on it, it destroys the whole thing.” But when pressed she was consistent in her vocabulary. In 1957 she described for Irving Sandler the mental process she entered when she painted: “I want to make myself available to myself. The moment that I am self-conscious, I cease painting.” Thirty-three or so years later, talking about the state of mind in which she painted in the film by Marion Cajori (released 1992) she said, “music puts me more available to myself. “The self she was making available was her deepest, her unconscious self, and what made it available to her was a state of heightened, almost passive attention. Attention to the most fleeting sensation, which for her was something seen and a mark made on canvas — or maybe made and then seen.

Mitchell, in her youth an athlete, often compared the creative state to riding a bicycle with no hands: “You do not exist.”

**Untitled** 1952-1953
60.75 x 65 in / 154.3 x 165.1 cm
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Cheim & Read, NY and The Joan Mitchell Foundation
The incremental strokes of Poons’s “landscapes” are born of memory, not observation—other than the vigilant observation of the events directly taking place on the canvas itself and the artist’s experience of his own self-generating process of painting. “It is intensely personal and intensely detached,” Poons says.

...working near-feverishly along the unfurled roll. Inventing and finding coves of foci, massing strokes about freshly-made gestures or suddenly-discovered past ones, Poons instrumentalizes chance (the very hallmark of Abstract Expressionist painting) as he moves along the canvas causeway.

Poons’ method of painting is comprised of small, energetic registers of cascading strokes...—many of them idiosyncratically struck from lower left to upper right—which recall Cézanne’s verge-abstract foliage studies painted during his latter years.

Lee Krasner

One of the few women to work in the Abstract Expressionist style, Krasner constantly challenged her own approach to painting, at times even cutting up her older paintings and reassembling them using a collage technique inspired by Henri Matisse.

“All my work keeps going like a pendulum... it seems to swing back to something I was involved with earlier, or it moves between horizontality and verticility, circularity, or a composite of them. For me, I suppose, that change is the only constant.” (Lee Krasner)

Lee Krasner never really fit in. Her peregrination through the currents of artistic practice, bridging the post-war to post-modernist eras, defined a singular and improbable model, one often inconsonant with prevailing artistic currents. As an artist as well as in her personal life, she could be steadfast and indifferent, unpredictable and caring. Simultaneously intimate with the art world and isolated by its vagaries, she courted success and pushed it away. Today Lee Krasner’s later works, and particularly her final collages, emerge as clear and forceful statements by an artist captured in a confrontational and fruitful dialogue with her own past, the history of modernism, and the frustrations of the present, dynamics clearly and eloquently expressed in her late style. (Jeffrey D. Grove for Lee Krasner “After Palingenesis” at Robert Miller Gallery, 2003)

She is a major, independent artist of the pioneer Abstract Expressionist generation, whose stirring work ranks high among that produced here in the last half-century. (Grace Glueck)
Fire in the Heart is one of several paintings I made after returning from two months of work at Dartmouth College. I had chosen to use unfamiliar materials (acrylic on cotton duck) and to let them lead the way to new work. There is a natural charge – a fire – if you will, of freedom and invention that accounts for the immediacy and ‘virility’ of this painting.

Stand of Beech was painted shortly after the experience of helping dig a pond on the property that my partner Betsy and I had recently purchased upstate. I had never lived and worked in the country before, and I was deeply involved with the silky, rocky soil at the bottom of the pond site; and the nearby stand of beech trees. This painting is of the slippery moonlight of the pond soil and the majestic trees by its side.
"In her work of the 1990s Dona accentuates the history of materials, making a car crash of various styles: laying down a ground in acrylic, overlaying it with a grid in pencil, using masking tape to put in some off-balance geometry, then adding images from a car manual in oil paint — these to her are reminiscent of both Marcel Duchamp’s early works and Deleuze’s notion of people as ‘desiring machines’. Finally she drips on enamel à la Jackson Pollock, but this dripping is scrappy, non-heroic. The colours are unpleasant institutional colours or the over-bright tones of cosmetics. ‘Colour codes,’ she explains, ‘are both cosmetic and cosmic. Cultural codifications of the “cosmetic bodies” of femininity and masculinity are both quoted and displaced to build a systemized degendered “code”, a third zone of schisms and multiplicities: the zone of techno-urban bodies. The ghostly paintings of the ghosts of the body.”

“Dona is preoccupied with the urban environment. These are paintings created with a keen sense of the invisible infrastructure that keeps a city running and, even more, of the constant breakdowns of urban systems. In their very diversity of sources, their multiplicity of overlapping languages, their crowded cohabitations, I see Dona’s paintings as reflections of the place where they are made: New York City, this dynamic site of “borderline entanglements,” to borrow the title of one of her paintings. It’s also clear, in looking at the paintings Dona has made since 2001, that her work has been deeply affected by 9/11. Her studio is just a few blocks from Ground Zero and the twisted, smoking, piled-up ruins of the World Trade Center seem to haunt her recent work. We live in the shadow of war and chaos, her recent paintings constantly remind us, yet within this situation the artist has the opportunity to discover what Yeats called a “terrible beauty.”
My painting emanates from a desire for absolute freedom. It constantly strives to reinvent and redefine itself. As there is no freedom without order, my painting can be divided into two pairs. Taking first place are the colour and structure of a work; in second place I would put the subject matter and the title, irrespective of whether the painting is abstract or representational. Colour and structure thus constitute the real content – that which is intrinsic to or inherent within the work. A painting is only as good or as interesting as its combination of colour and structure to produce a “meaning”. The freedom I seek consists in not subscribing to or wishing to create any ‘isms’; nor do I consider what is commonly called ‘style’ desirable. In the realm of subject matter and title, anything is possible and absolute freedom exists; colour and structure, on the other hand, demand a certain knowledge and responsibility. Everything must have a dance-like quality in a Kleistian sense.

Painting comes from the inside, roams around the outside world and disappears again inside the viewer; for this it requires the materiality of paint, which of course constitutes a world in itself; in other words, the world of coloured paint is pulled through our real world and produces a picture, whereby the painter is the dedicated servant…
Excerpt from “The long way of the line” by Herbert Lachmayer, Cheim & Read, New York, Otto Zitko, (exhibition catalogue), 2000

At a time when spaces seem to be generally available, as is suggested by the multi-media presence of cyberspace, Otto Zitko’s art of the open line - deconstructing spaces and recreating them in subjective quality - is yet again becoming more current. What tempts us into individual passiveness in the digital media due to the technical perfection of its givens becomes a high degree of activity and pronounced subjectivity in Otto Zitko’s art as he applies the line to give time a site. This is in sharp contrast to the passive users of digital media spaces whose virtuality has very little in common with the worlds of possibility opening up in Zitko’s creations of picture spaces. Their visionary character relies on the imaginative force of individuals and their vital and sensitive creativity that enables them to design environments after the world in their heads, or rather: to appropriate them. From this angle, the line is a natural space-divider; generating space; a dot placed in a void makes space emerge - it is this fascination with artistic creation as an almost archaic-looking achievement of human originality that Zitko’s obsession with the line is grounded in as the art of painting in our times.

Untitled 2000
Oilstick on aluminum panel
86.6 x 78.5 x 1.5 in / 220 x 199.4 x 3.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York
Robert Motherwell

Motherwell’s art displayed his passion for history, literature, and the human condition. From the beginning he strove to evoke a moral and political experience through his art. As an example, the artist drew on the writing of James Joyce as well as poems by Spanish poet Frederico García Lorca for titles to his paintings, drawings, and prints throughout his career.

In the late 1960s, Motherwell began his Open series, a striking departure from his gestural paintings. Typically fields of color marked with faint charcoal lines suggesting a door or a window, the Open paintings were originally inspired by the sight of a small canvas leaning against a larger one. For the rest of his career, Motherwell painted in both expressive and austere modes, in addition to creating collages and collaborating with printmakers to make limited edition prints (© Copyright 2007 Hollis Taggart Galleries).

Motherwell’s politics and spirituality were welcome reminders of a time when one could make art that did not engage the cynicism of a post-modern era. Until the end of his life, Motherwell continued his search for a personal and political voice in abstraction. This search produced a body of work that remains a testament to the human soul and its persistence, and to the genre of abstract painting out of which it came (PBS.org/AmericanMasters).

Nothing as drastic an innovation as abstract art could have come into existence, save as the consequence to a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need. (Robert Motherwell)
This untitled painting by Sam Francis, from 1980, epitomizes the artist’s engagement with color and space while also paying homage to his appreciation for East Asian art. Francis owned a home and a studio in Japan, where he spent extended periods and married a Japanese woman; for much of his career, Japan and Japanese aesthetics served as a touchstone for him. Francis became well-acquainted with traditional styles of calligraphy; the black brush strokes of this painting suggest calligraphic markings. Here and in other paintings, Francis incorporated the spirit and aesthetic of haboku, a Japanese style of drips and flung ink, in his paintings and prints.

Francis’s compositions, here and elsewhere, are comprised of shifting tones of jewel-like colors whose translucent tones evoke stained glass. This painting illustrates the importance of color in Francis’s work, which he stressed in his statement that “Color is the real substance for me, the real underlying thing which drawing and line are not.” Yet while Francis is considered to be one of the premier colorists of the 20th century, the harmonious interaction of color and form in this piece seems to illustrate Francis’s understanding of Cézanne’s famous assertion that “Drawing and color are not at all separate: To the degree that one paints, one also draws; the more harmonious the color, the more precise the drawing.”
Stephen Ellis

The problem for Ellis lies in the creation of a painting which declines an easy cynicism, which moves beyond tired strategies of quotation and referencing of the past. This work comes rather out of a profound belief in painting’s possibilities, not, like so much art at the moment, out of an ironic acknowledgement of its marginalization. Ellis believes that his paintings possess what he has in conversation called a ‘tragicomic’ quality, that they are linked to our own lived experience, our everyday sense of the post modern world’s ineffability. For the artist, that quality lies in the almost irrational need that we have to perceive meaning in mute form, to perceive patterns, structure, symbolic import in the confusion of everyday life. Thus, the incommensurable relation between the pseudo-mechanical, anti-gestural production of his paintings and the vivid, emotional responses they invoke for his viewers (himself first of all)... Their remarkableness lies in the fact that if this feeling is indeed expressed, it is done only through painterly terms of rationality played against irrationality, of a small scale brought together with an expansive structure, of an articulation of the artist’s self which only occurs within a range of possible expression. That, in other words, whatever philosophical or timely truths he believes exist in his paintings... also are material truths about painting today.

Tom McDonough
Today Theodoros Stamos is best known as the youngest member of the “Irascibles,” the core group of fifteen New York School painters publicized by Nina Leen’s photograph in a 1951 issue of the popular postwar glossy, Life magazine. The “Irascibles” were a vanguard group of American artists, each committed to pursuing a new vision of painting and breaking with the long-standing tradition of the School of Paris.

In his works from 1949-1950, such as Composition, Stamos fuses two strains of painting in his earlier work to create the “union of nature-suggesting pictures and the open geometrics.” In its layering of softened geometric shapes in subdued colors, Composition anticipates Stamos’ Teahouse series of the early 1950s; yet its horizontal format and earth tones invite comparisons to his paintings of Spartan landscapes from 1949.

Composition evokes what Barnett Newman referred to in Stamos’ art as “communion with nature.” Newman elaborated on this idea by explaining how the younger artist “redefines the pastoral experience as one of participation with the inner life of the natural phenomenon.”

The blurred, geometric forms offer a subjective impression, perhaps of nature, that conveys mystery and calm; the canvas itself is imbued with subtle, yet persistent, light that appears to emanate from within the depths of the forms themselves.

Composition 1949
38 x 30 x 2 in / 96.5 x 76.2 x 5.1 cm
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Hollis Taggart Galleries
“Build a nest and change the world” Michael Hansell

Spaces which are silhouetted, nominated, outlines which generate a membrane sufficient enough to protect itself, keeping itself safe and from where it is possible to imagine and lose oneself inside organic and uncertain structures, ones which are perhaps empathetic and functional, but neither labyrinthine nor oneiric, and always related to the idea of resistance. They could also serve to house one or various spaces, modulating, expanding or contracting themselves depending on the climatic, economic and social conditions; changing at the same time their shape and generating new structural parameters, like organic membranes that use Euclidean geometry both as a functional and bio-modular ratio.

Size, function, economy, fear, Cartesian equivalencies, modular genetics? Why in certain paintings does the brush not allow us to apply color without remembering vectors, orientation systems or parameters? Turn it around if you cannot stretch it, move at least the paint brush in the opposite way to the hands of the clock, and turn it around again, the opposite way and in the end you will find yourself at the beginning of the turn and with the same shape and size brush stroke as at the beginning, but at least now you will find amid the ocean of paper a new space, a different one to that which you observed when you imagined the brush capable of generating horizons.
The 1940s brought close relationships with many artists in the emerging Abstract Expressionist group. Although Baziotes shared their interest in primitive art and automatism, his work consistently displayed stronger affinities with European surrealism. Baziotes met Chilean-born Surrealist Roberto Matta in May 1940, the same year he exhibited with the Surrealists. By 1941, Baziotes was actively experimenting with abstraction and Matta introduced him to Robert Motherwell.

Although spiritual intensity suffuses Baziotes’ work, the iconography, usually biomorphic, is abstracted and evocative, never explicit. Baziotes explained this intentional ambiguity in 1959: “It is the mysterious that I love in my painting. It is the stillness and the silence. I want my picture to take effect very slowly, to obsess and to haunt.” Rarely literal, his titles are clues to the layers of symbolic and personal meaning.

Baziotes, who was of Greek descent, often used the forms that appeared in the ancient sculpture he owned, and during the 1950s he studied Greek sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Baziotes drew visual inspiration from a wide range of sources, including the rich colors of Persian miniatures and even the grotesque variations seen in specimens from the natural sciences (© Copyright 2007 Hollis Taggart Galleries).
“Abstraction as a tradition is no longer trammelled by formalist restrictions and can be more generally understood as both a lifelong meditation and a pursuit of the unexpected, bringing new things into the world.


“Abstract Expressionists value expression over perfection, vitality over finish, fluctuation over repose, the unknown over the known, the veiled over the clear, the individual over society and the inner over the outer.”

William C. Seitz, American artist and art historian

“Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colours, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential.”

Wassily Kandinsky

Our thanks and appreciation to all artists, galleries and private collectors for their collaboration to make this important exhibition possible. “Abstraction Revisited” perfectly exemplifies the mission of the Chelsea Art Museum.

Dr. Dorothea Keeser, President, Chelsea Art Museum
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Chelsea Art Museum
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556 West 22nd Street
New York, NY 10011
www.chelseartmuseum.org