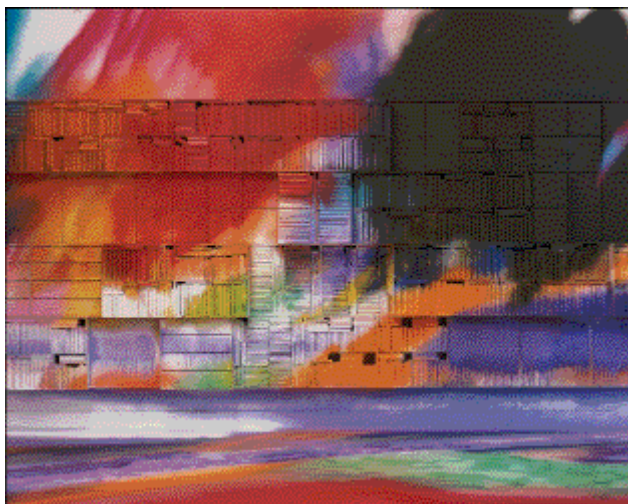


What Makes a Painting a Painting?



BY LINDA YABLONSKY

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Grosse uses painting to create her own kind of space. The site-specific Double Floor Painting, 2004, was installed at Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik in Odense, Denmark.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, SANTA MONICA

The older painting gets as an art form, the harder it gets to describe. Is a painting that doubles as a video still a painting? What is a painting that is also a print? What about the painting that is a collage, a cartoon, graffiti, or some other form of illustration? Artists have long incorporated objects into paintings on canvas, but what should we call a work if no paint or canvas is involved? Is a painting made with nothing but fabric or putty still a painting? And what kind of a painting takes up not just a whole wall but the space of an entire room?

It used to be so simple: a painting was the mediated result of an artist's application of wet paint on a flat surface. No more. Having absorbed high culture and low, painting has turned itself out in mixed-media assemblages that include both organic and synthetic materials and occasionally involve photography and digital printing. It has borrowed from commercial illustration and architectural, tattoo, and textile design, and exhibited itself as sculpture or in various combinations of all the above, in both abstraction and representation. At this point, even those distinctions seem quaint.

Ours is the age of the hybrid, the crossover, the many-splendored thing, a time when the combined force of new media, postmodern thought, and human history has made it impossible for artists to worship a single god of painting. Indeed, the practice of this ancient art may owe its continued health to its amazingly elastic nature.

Reassuring though that may be, it only complicates attempts to pinpoint exactly what we now identify as a painting. For an artist like **Pat Steir**, a painting is simply something that “deals with paint.” Steir is probably best known for large-scale abstract canvases that suggest cascading waterfalls, each the consequence of a calculated system of brushing, dripping, and splattering paint. “Of course,” she notes, “you can do a painting with a pencil, as Cy Twombly has. Then there are Warhol’s urine paintings. Does that mean the image is the painting? No,” she explains, “because we have Ellsworth Kelly, where the image is a color, or Christopher Wool, where the painting is a word.”

Even **Robert Storr**—a professor at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts and the curator of the 2007 Venice Biennale—trips over his definition. “A painting has to be made of paint or paintlike materials,” says Storr, an artist himself. “But then I think of a photographer like Jeff Wall, who makes images resembling history paintings. Or Sigmar Polke, who manipulates the chemical process in photography in ways akin to what a painter does, but the result is a printed object.” Recalling that **Robert Rauschenberg** once made paintings out of dirt, Storr concludes, “It’s both the pictorial conventions and the material qualities of an object that make it a painting. For an increasing number of artists, the very game of stretching definitions is the substance of the work.”

Rauschenberg may well be the patron saint of the hybrid form. He is now as famous for claiming to act within the “gap between art and life” as he is for his Combine works, in which he bridged the gulf between painting and object. Last December PaceWildenstein exhibited his “Scenarios,” a suite of totemic, 7-by-10-foot paintings of vaguely thematic photographic images transferred to a plasterlike surface to resemble frescoes. Each bore clear references to his own pictorial history. For example, *Key West Rooster* (2004) evoked the artist’s silk-screened newspaper transfers of the early 1960s. It made an obvious link with *Odalisk* (1955–58), the category-defying Combine on which he placed a stuffed rooster atop a paint-slathered wooden box covered in dried grass, photographs, newspaper, and electric lights, and stakes the whole thing to a pillow on a low, rolling platform. (At the end of this year, on the occasion of Rauschenberg’s 80th birthday, the Metropolitan Museum of Art will host a retrospective of the Combines that will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the exhibition’s organizer, and later to museums in Stockholm and Paris.) As Steir says, “Rauschenberg found a way to stretch the meaning of painting, and it has been stretching ever since.”

To the Brooklyn-based artist **James Esber**, “Paintings are unique objects with a strong physical presence that are also in some way illusionistic.” Esber “paints” with Plasticine, a pigmented modeling material that adheres to the wall in low relief and never really dries. That leaves his distorted, photo-based images vulnerable to further alteration by gravity or touch, be it accidental or intentional. It also gives his art the character of sculpture, placing it in that middle ground where the painted constructions of established masters

like **Elizabeth Murray** and Frank Stella also reside. “I try to create things that occupy the space of the gallery and also describe a space that is not present,” Esber says. “But I never talk about my work as sculpture. To me it’s always painting.”

For **Fred Tomaselli**, Esber’s work “refers to painting without being painting,” though Tomaselli admits to being a “hybrid person” himself. Indeed, for a number of years Tomaselli has embraced the natural world in radiant, highly decorative paintings that make almost no distinction between the illusory and the real, the figurative and the abstract. He has used, among his primary materials, psychoactive drugs—pharmaceutical pills and marijuana—as well as magazine cutouts. Embedded in thick layers of resin, they look exactly as if they were painted. His work, he says, comes out of California surf culture and the vernacular of album-cover illustration, though he also borrows from Indian miniatures and Renaissance painting.

“What’s exciting about painting today is that it borrows from all sources,” says **Joe Amrhein**, the artist who founded Brooklyn’s Pierogi Gallery, which represents Esber, as well as Jane Fine, Carey Maxon, and Ati Maier. All subscribe to an esthetic involving obsessive, densely layered drawing. “It’s a great way to develop ideas, since it goes right from the hand to the canvas, so it offers that spontaneity. Other mediums don’t.”

David Salle would agree. “I am an unapologetic advocate for painting,” he says. “I don’t think painting and photography are equal, or that one is a flatter version of the other. Painting’s performative aspect will always set it apart from other media and raises the stakes over other forms. That’s why a painting today, no matter what it looks like, is connected to a painting made hundreds of years ago, to a Pontormo for example. Not in a referential way but in a ‘making a thing’ way.”

Nevertheless, it is in the performance of “Unhinged,” a series of vertical diptychs by **Joe Zucker**, that the line between image and object becomes especially blurred. Zucker paired a sandboxlike container, into which he poured paint of a solid color, with a box of a slightly smaller size that he had sectioned with thin dowels to suggest the shape of a sailboat on water. Into each compartment he poured paint of a complementary color, manipulating its depth and texture by tipping the box as he worked. When he set the top of the diptych on the bottom, the frame doubled as its own shipping crate.

“If a painting has a physical presence, it has an ability to transcend its literal meaning,” Zucker says, recalling his early canvas-weave works of the 1960s. “I was making paintings of what I was painting on,” he says. From his mosaic-like, pigment-soaked, cotton-ball paintings of the 1970s (exhibited last year at Gavin Brown’s enterprise) to the “box paintings,” Zucker has continually found ways to blend image into surface.

An emphasis on materials and process is evident today in the wildly different methods of figural artist Dana Schutz and abstractionist Mark Grotjahn. Their expressive, very subjective pictures seem to be trapped in paint, while Karin Davie's recent neoprene twists are three-dimensional translations of the sweeping gestures of her painting. To create her bright, highly decorative works, the Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes paints contrasting geometric patterns on screens and affixes them in imperceptible layers to her canvas.

Michael Bevilacqua incorporates artifacts in his installations of still-life paintings that connect modern old masters like Giorgio Morandi with punk bands like the Ramones, while the ceramicist Betty Woodman, who draws on a variety of art-historical sources, has begun attaching glazed wall pieces to new paintings. Joan Wallace transforms two-dimensional paintings into three-dimensional environments. In one painting, *Piece of Cake (for Jack Goldstein)*, 2004, she inserted a blue-and-yellow video into a flat blue-and-yellow composition. Jeremy Blake makes intensely-colored videos that play on flat-screen monitors like color-field paintings in motion.

The computer may well be the source of flat paintings in synthetic printer colors that artists like Takashi Murakami, Jeff Elrod, and Inka Essenhigh use, though to very different effect.

Artists have long appropriated the strategies, images, and forms of preceding generations or movements, rephotographing, collaging, upending, adding, or erasing to refresh the old with a new proposition or perspective. "It's a big inspiration for me, the computer," says Mary Heilmann, who uses it to design her deceptively decorative abstract paintings. "It's all narcissistic; I just play around with my own art on it, so it's kind of autoerotic." Fabian Marcaccio may have been on to something when he gave the name "paintants" (or "mutant paintings") to his gelatinous, panoramic environments of paint, objects, and digital images that the edges of their supports rarely contain.

In a similar spirit, but a different world, **Matthew Ritchie** combines mathematical theory with mythological symbols in an invented creation narrative that extends across his canvases and spills onto the floor in bright vinyl whorls. This month, at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (through May 29), Ritchie presents such interactive works as *Proposition Player*, a kind of dice game in which viewer movements trigger animated derivations of his paintings on projection screens nearby.

"Marcaccio and Ritchie are right down the middle of the road of what we expect painters to do today," says **Dan Cameron**, senior curator at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art. "That is, to play with painting at its margins, where painting ceases to be painting."

Ritchie is one of the eight artists in "Remote Viewings: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing," an exhibition of large-scale abstract painting

opening at the Whitney Museum in June. Organized by Whitney curator [Elisabeth Sussman](#), it takes special note of the way artists such as Julie Mehretu, Franz Ackermann, and Ati Maier are liberating painting from its conventional frame and expanding its scale to cover a wall or spread over a floor. “Each one of these artists is using abstraction as an element of a larger ambition,” Sussman says of the group, which also includes Steve DiBenedetto, Alexander Ross, Terry Winters, and Carroll Dunham. “They’re interested in spaces in the world that you can’t imagine but that come into being through form.”

Other telling elements of the show, and of this moment, are a certain preference for densely layered, intricate draftsmanship and a shift to what Sussman terms “nonchromophobia,” the artists’ embrace of color and scale in the service of a loose but detectable visual narrative, of the sort found in Lari Pittman’s work. For Sussman, the artists’ use of recurrent ideas sets them apart from James Siena, Yayoi Kusama, Philip Taaffe, and Eli Sudbrack (the artist who is also known as Assume Vivid Astro Focus), whose work incorporates trance-inducing patterning. In the show, Sussman says, “you get lost in the imaginary.”

Coincidentally, [Louis Grachos](#), director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, is mounting “Extreme Abstraction” in July. But this show, which he is putting together with associate curator Claire Schneider, is not limited to painting. Contemporary work by an array of international artists will fill the institution’s campus, indoors and out, along with selections from its permanent collection by Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella, Richard Serra, and Sol LeWitt.

“I’m very fascinated by Katharina Grosse’s way of reinventing space through painting,” says Grachos. And as for Polly Apfelbaum’s confabulations of velvet disks, he says, “How can you not think of Pollock?” Another artist in the show, Jennifer Steinkamp, makes large-scale videos—moving pictures of still images or still images of moving objects—that might best be understood as projected paintings.

In a related vein, the Polish artist Dominik Lejman has projected moving silhouettes of distant figures onto patterned canvases that he calls “time-based” paintings. Luxe Gallery in New York recently sold them as editioned works—a not entirely new phenomenon made possible by technology. Last fall, for example, Peres Projects in Los Angeles and New York’s John Connelly Presents took the psychedelic environment that Sudbrack designed for the 2004 Whitney Biennial and divided it into components that were sold in “electronic editions,” which include a certificate of authentication and the design on a CD, in a digital file. The components—which ranged from decals for \$2,500, to a floor, ceiling, and walls segment for \$15,000—together cost \$150,000; the five sculptures cost between \$5,000 and \$15,000 each.

The Swiss artist **Urs Fischer**, known mostly for his sculpture, has also made editioned “paintings”—laser prints of untitled landscapes or interiors that achieve a nearly abstract, cracked-mirror effect with uneven bands of red, white, or black that the artist adds by hand, using a fine paintbrush or felt-tipped marker. A laser print on canvas by Rob Wynne, a New York–based conceptualist, is a unique enlargement of the landscape painted on a 19th-century porcelain teacup. “You can’t tell what it is,” Wynne says of the work, which is embroidered with its title, *A Scented Mantle of Starlight and Silence*(2005). “It looks just like a painting. It is a painting. It isn’t, but it is.”

Rudolf Stingel, a conceptualist to the core, has made a number of paintings on canvas over the past two decades, but he has also presented industrial, sometimes stained, carpets as monumental modernist monochromes that he insists can only be read as paintings—paintings that inherently question what a painting should be.

Stingel’s carpets actually function more as interventions into surrounding architecture, in a manner related to the methods of the French artist Daniel Buren, who has installed his striped paint

ings and banners on walls, ceilings, windows, storefronts, and outdoor benches, partly to call attention to their environments, both physical and political. (His current exhibition, at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, addresses both the history and structure of Wright’s building.)

Richard Tuttle’s work also calls less attention to itself than its surroundings; Tuttle’s subject is perception itself. He is an illusionist who compels us to see what we might otherwise overlook. If he daubs paint on a piece of wood, for example, and hangs it near the floor, is that a painting or a sculpture?

Elizabeth Murray has been confusing that issue for some time. It’s not new. But, says Storr, who is curating Murray’s career retrospective for New York’s Museum of Modern Art later this year, “she’s the first person to deal directly with the topological surfaces of surrealist painting. She bends and twists and folds her paintings in ways we have never seen before and that no surrealist actually did. Her paintings have wonderful contradictions: the surface will come out and the image will go in, so that what you are looking at comes out from the wall as a volume and not just a surface.”

Laura Hoptman, curator of the 2004 Carnegie International, who also organized the exhibition “Drawing Now” for the Museum of Modern Art in 2002, says, “For me, the painters who are most interesting now are those who take the belief in painting to its logical conclusion—that is, toward a superidealistic abstraction.”

In this regard, she cites the “ugly, moving, little pictures” of Tomma Abts, a German-born painter now based in London, whom Hoptman included in the

International. “Her work is uncompromising,” Hoptman says. “It’s profoundly nonobjective. That means you think form and color in combination on a two-dimensional surface can be as meaningful as a story. It took 50 years to sweep away Barnett Newman’s crazy thinking that you could paint God. Now, in times of great existential turmoil, it comes back. That is very interesting.”

However significant abstraction is to curators, representational painting is what is currently driving the market, and most of it is quite traditional. Between the late 1980s and early ’90s, says **Matthew Higgs**, director of White Columns, New York’s oldest alternative art space, “artists like Pierre Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija rethought conceptual practice, and artists like Elizabeth Peyton and Peter Doig rethought traditional painting. Now, I think there is a strain of artists working conceptually with figurative painting.” But, Higgs adds, “there is also a new orthodoxy around representational imagery, and it seems to me, when something becomes orthodox, it’s over.”

Clearly then, when **Russell Ferguson**, senior curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, chose “The Undiscovered Country” as the title for a recent survey of representational painting at the institution, he had a very different view. “The idea of a complete break with the past—I don’t see much of that right now,” he says. “And I don’t think any of these artists find painting an unproblematic field,” he says of the show, which included Fairfield Porter, Vija Celmins, and younger artists like Edgar Bryan, Mari Eastman, Jochen Klein, and Mamma Andersson. “But they’ve worked through it to get where they want. If people thought it was a conservative show, they didn’t look at it carefully.”

Dan Cameron is one who came away impressed. “But the expanded definition of painting is something we need to take up,” he says. “I like it when Jeff Koons does his inkjet productions and calls them paintings. It takes nerve, but it challenges me to think of painting in a way I hadn’t before.”

So what makes a painting a painting?

“That’s one of the ideas I wanted to explore with this show,” Ferguson says. “But every time you come up with an answer, you can think of something to contradict it.”

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