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Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age
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What is "Painting 1.0?" One would think that somewhere, anywhere, in an ambitious exhibition like *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* an attempt would be made to answer that question with clarity and conviction, if only to anchor the curatorial pinpointing of "Web 2.0" (defined as the shift to user-generated content and increased interactivity) as the new thing that has made painting so interesting today. I don't imagine that the curators of this show—Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit—consider 1.0 to be the entirety of painting before the 1960s. That decade was a paradigm shift, but hardly monumental enough to fit all of painting before then into one gargantuan category. Instead, as is made clear in room after room and text after text of the exhibition and its catalogue, 1.0, for the organizers is modernist painting. What to do with all that came before it seems to be anyone's guess, and as this exhibition played itself out across all three floors of the Museum Brandhorst, its curatorial short-sightedness came more clearly into focus.

I traveled to Munich, this painting-rich city, while I was working on a text about the work of an emerging artist, Oliver Osborne. In an interview in 2014, he defined the "recent history" of painting as "from Ingres to [Michael] Krebber perhaps." His suggestion of such a span has stuck with me: first, because it reaffirms a broadening approach to art history that, as the 20th century has begun to recede, many painting students have embraced; and second, because it demonstrates that artists remain more adept than the rest of us at seeing the painting forest for the modernist (and, yes, postmodernist) trees. So, while I am sympathetic to the underlying premise of this exhibition, anchored to concepts/conceits like "the network" (it is provocative and useful but likely too timely), and as I acknowledge the curators' clear warning not to take their exhibition as all-encompassing (as if), in the end there were just too many missed opportunities and narrow agendas to accept the show as *the* expansive take on recent painting that has yet to be presented after a generation or two of curatorial dismissals and insufficient research.

Weathering a century of rhetoric proclaiming its demise (much of it, to be fair, artist-driven), it is to be expected that there would today be substantial painting since the 1960s that takes on "expression in the information age." After all, most painters engage the world in which they find themselves. What we need then from critics, curators, and art historians is more analysis of information in the expression age. Call it the long view.

The exhibition, which takes up the entire museum, is divided by floor into three sections, the first called "Gesture and Spectacle." The very first work, by Martin Kippenberger, comes off as tailor-made for its starring role as the "bad actor" of the gesture and spectacle of the exhibition overall. *Heavy Burschi* (1989 – 1990) plays the "heavy guy" perfectly as a life-like, tongue-firmly-in-cheek dumpster. Made of chipboard and Plexiglas, it contains numerous destroyed versions of Kippenberger's works made by his then-assistant Merlin Carpenter that were photographed to be presented as life-size reproductions, and key components of the overall work before the faux-originals were "destroyed." Here, almost as if by the grace of CGI, it has been inserted into a room occupied primarily by works from artists most well-known for complicating gestural painting after, if not alongside, abstract expressionism: to name just three, a sly Piero Manzoni (*Fiato d'ártista (Artist's Breath)*, 1961) a killer Niki de Saint-Phalle (*Tir (Shot)*, 1961), and, in the next gallery, an on-point and particularly fresh Robert Rauschenberg silkscreen painting (*Tree Frog*, 1964). The invasion of Kippenberger's "collapse" of painting, sculpture, and photography—made, it just so happens, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall—inserted it right off the bat into the DNA of the entire exhibition. The gesture paid off in terms of not only upending a traditional chronological presentation but also by being *the* work in the right place at the right time.

This magic didn't last, however. The third gallery, given the sub-head "Protest Painting," surveyed the terrain of how artists have used painting as a form of protest: ranging from photographic documentation of Adrian Piper's performance*Catalysis III* (1970), during which she walked through New York wearing a shirt with the painted words

“WET PAINT,” to Jörg Immendorff’s “paintings against painting”—*Where do you stand with your art, colleague?* (1973), to Louise Fishman’s especially poignant *Angry Paintings* (1973). Yet the inclusion of several later works by Jacqueline Humphries (each *Untitled*, 2008), “gestural” paintings made in the shape of protest signs, brought, the room and then the entire show, to an abrupt halt for me. To be fair, my irritation was magnified by my deep respect for Humphries’s work, which goes back to the late 1980s, and I think her work and the exhibition would have been better served by not putting it into such a curatorial box. A more apt choice might have been Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Forbidden Colors)* (1988), the only straightforward painting that he made. Its individual monochromatic panels present the colors of the Palestinian flag. (Maybe the curators couldn’t secure the loan?)

Humphries is a perfect example of a painter who has made work that skillfully and mindfully contributed to the premise of this exhibition by expanding rather than limiting the terms of her work *as painting*—I’m still waiting for a major group painting exhibition that will examine that approach. And, alas, she wasn’t alone. Kerry James Marshall’s work suffered a similar fate in the last two galleries of this section, titled “Hacking the Code.” *Buy Black* (2012) packs an effective punch with the text of its title in neon, but Marshall’s long-standing commitment to the staying power of figuration was sorely missed.

That said, “Eccentric Figuration,” the second section of the exhibition was the most successful. I found the placement of Ree Morton’s major installation *Signs of Love* (1976) across from Frank Stella’s exuberant *Newells Hawaiian Clearwater*(1976) at the entrance to be among the most meaningful juxtapositions in the show: both three-dimensional, both resolutely hybrid in material and association (abstract *and*figurative), and both demonstrating the “pluralism” of their time. Recast from Lucy Lippard’s influential term “eccentric abstraction” from 1966, the reversal of looking at the expanding parameters of painting from that time through figuration (as distinct from representation) was compelling. Here, again, a room of 1960s works by Eva Hesse, Joan Mitchell, and Cy Twombly reinforced rather than contradicted the body as a source of loaded materiality, and, most importantly, again, gesture, particularly when followed by a packed room that brought together objects and canvases from 1968 to 1984 by Paul Thek, Lynda Benglis, Philip Guston, Harmony Hammond, and Georg Baselitz. Although the situational differences between, for example, the plastic pour of Benglis’s floor-based *Rumpled Painting/Caterpillar* (1968) and the pictorial stylization of Guston’s *Head* (1977) are crucial to their work as well as the debates that were taking place at the time, it’s hard to deny that the diversity of corporeality in the room has fueled painting pretty equally ever since.

Despite being overhung, the mashup in the next, much larger room did demonstrate the impact of this history by jumbling up work by seventeen artists, starting with a Lee Lozano from 1962 that conflates body parts and orifices with a gun, and ending with a perfectly goofy Amy Sillman painting called *Nose Job* from 2014 – 2015. The room proved a point made by Marlene Dumas in 1993: “[Painting] circulates and recycles time like a wheel that turns.” (Of course, her work wasn’t included, likely it’s not “2.0” enough.) Joan Jonas’s video, *Left Side, Right Side* (1972), played well with three refreshing 1990s Mary Heilmann’s, as well as animations by Sadie Benning (*The Baby*, (2003)), and Sillman (*13 Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, (2012)), not to mention a couple of Maria Lassnig films from 1973 that were positioned across from four of her paintings from 1969 to 1996. (Because of the size of the show, several worthy artists have been given what amount to mini-surveys; unfortunately others have not, so it comes off as a little too market driven.)

The exhibition’s script was flipped with section three, “Social Networks.” Rather than starting again with another historical presentation, here one entered into the largest room of the museum into an open cacophony of “expanded” painting tropes, most quite recent: a sprawling, 2009 Guyton/Walker installation made of paint, ink-jet prints, drywall, paint cans, etc.; eight Seth Prices (2004 and 2006) made of ink-jet prints on canvas, and one vacuum-formed piece; Ei Arakawa and Shimon Minamikawa’s entertaining video, *PARIS ADAPTED HOMELAND episode 6* (2013); and several collaborative Frankenstein-Monster-like works by KAYA(Debo Eilers & Kerstin Brätsch) (all 2015). It was tempting to take it all as one big antisocial network, even after moving through the smaller galleries in the back where history returned with a vengeance: appropriation art; the impact of Cologne in the 1980s and early 1990s; the formation of the feminist gallery A.I.R. in New York in 1972; the “Capitalist Realism” of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Konrad Leug and Manfred Kuttner; and, finally (or to start all over), Warhol’s Factory.

By reversing the flow, the curators not only reminded me of Marlene Dumas’s proclamation used above (the next line of which is, “Those who were first might well be last”), but also, in the end, exposed the limitation of thinking about painting in terms like “2.0.” The best offense against this latest curatorial defense was found in the most painting of paintings, installed and almost lost amidst the visual chatter but clearly not ignored given that it was used to advertise the exhibition. *Beer Garden with Ash* (2009), by Nicole Eisenman, was quietly hung over at one edge of the room. It was as if it were taking in everything around it, all the while being 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries all at once, more than ready for the next big idea to come along.

http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/02/artseen/painting-20-expression-in-the-information-age