

Pouring It On: Robert Sagerman “Pouring it On” at UMass Amherst Catalog Essay

Pouring it On gives us the opportunity to examine how both of these statements from over sixty years ago can, in the context of contemporary painting, coexist rather than contradict one another.

The gestural abstraction as practiced in Abstract Expressionism became so closely aligned with expressive qualities that it has taken nearly five decades to grasp that a gestural mark could function as something other than an expression of feeling by an artist with an outsized ego or stand in for a Post Modernist or Post Post Modernist critical comment. Obscuring gestural abstraction for the later half of the 20th Century as a valid mode of art making was the coincidental association of gesture with “white male artists who make very large paintings” and thereby misguidedly connecting gestural painting with the socio-biological identity of the artist and politics of race and gender in the art market. So in recent decades, artists working within gestural abstraction were considered either invisible or misread as suspect and likely retrograde. Much of contemporary art has witnessed the dominance of criticism and theory, to the subjugation of form and material. This exhibition opens up the possibility of revisiting the Dionysian side of us that has advanced periodically to the fore in the last several hundred years. The paintings assembled here give us the sense that to make them, the artist had to leave an incredible mess on the studio floor. They engage in possibilities of excess, indulgence, and obsession.

While much contemporary painting relies on narrative and representation for metaphor, gestural abstraction necessarily foregrounds the mark or gesture as its metaphor. To comprehend such a work, the viewer has to first of all apprehend the marks, their method of application, their feel and intention, before grasping their meaning.

This current exhibition gives us the opportunity to make a careful reading of new and fresh images produced within the contemporary context, and offers a complex and nuanced picture of the vitality of the current scene.

The artists seem to have a symbiotic relationship with material. Marks are as much the product of the movement of the body as the predilection of the paint itself. The artist, while not leaving all to chance, engages in a dialogue with the material. He/she shares authority with the material, using its liquid presence as an expressive device and taking advantage of the give and take of fluidity and gravity.

Gesture often fractures the surface and results in a kind of torn visual plane, as if it is a collaged space. Color and material tempt our emotions, inviting indulgence and excess.

Cathy Choi pours layers of acrylic and resin on her canvas, creating a luminous surface of fluidity and movement. The quantity and excess of material discharged onto the canvas are restrained in a kind of undertow. She engages in a conversation with the material, more or less as an equal partner. The resin and acrylic flow inevitably to the bottom, gravity asserts itself, and the point of termination bends light—perfectly. The total effect is that, within the limitless reservoir of color and light, we have serenity in abundance.

Informed by his degrees in Painting, Art History, and Religious Studies, Robert Sagerman discovers the meditative dimensions of emplacing paint on a surface. The strict structure allows profuse paint application and maximum saturation of color. This explosion in front of the surface is excessive, or would be, were it not for his process. Individual color blobs, squeezed onto the surface and terminating in pointy extensions, are almost fluorescent. His work focuses on the materiality of paint with the effect of transcending it and transforming it into a metaphysical event.

Richard Allen Morris presides with senior status as the oldest artist in the show. Of everyone, he perhaps most naturally, and with greatest ease, integrates his intention such that each gesture, color, and content function together flawlessly. His works are the smallest in the exhibition and are executed with the most economy of effort. The clarity achieved in his thick impasto abstractions speaks directly to what is both obvious and obscure.

Jacqueline Humphries brings the same directness to her marks as does Morris, but at a much larger scale. Her paintings are large, but the gesture is gauged to the size of the hand and arm. Her work establishes an environment that is a conversation between the gestures and the spaces of their absence. Life rushes by, documented in the change between dry and liquid marks. Color is an interrupter with poetic effect.

The frenetic movements in Jill Moser's paintings have a habit of turning in on themselves, creating an internal energy not unlike that of a molecule as imagined by high school science. Intensely colored marks bond to each other in a powerful attraction of forces that cannot escape. They swirl on the axis of their application, unchecked by rational thought.

Each work has a kind of spine holding it in space, reminding us of the basic stuff from which we are made.

Bret Slater, the youngest artist of this group, perhaps best captures the enigmatic quality of this exhibition by stating that paintings exist as "inanimate beings with living souls." His color is unmodulated, flat, but its surface is palpable, almost sculptural. Animated edges and shapes seduce with their color. While borrowing everywhere from recent history, it is of no use in grasping his work.

The work of David Reed most clearly ties this show to the tradition of New York abstract, expressive art without being bound by its past. His surfaces seem rational and forthright, juxtapositions of large monochromatic gestures. Each movement is clearly articulated and poses on the surface without reworking or second-guessing. His color is vibrant and clean. Along with the other work in the show, his painting points a way to the future for abstraction in which the material of paint is palpably present, an equal participant in the conversation.

In the end, theory is not much help in approaching this show. A viewer has to take each piece on its own terms. Each work gives us what we need to experience it, but don't expect to remain cool and detached. One could come to this exhibition and feel everything from the frenetic to the serene. One could sense an engagement with the universe or a retreat to within, as Mark Rothko might. Or one can look at this exhibition as Ad Reinhardt and conclude that it is just about the gesture and color as it is applied, that's what it really is.

But fortunately, we can do both without having to choose.

—JEANNETTE COLE