# PAINTING AFTER POSTMODERNISM
# BELGIUM – USA

by Barbara Rose

This exhibition intends to prove that painting as an autonomous discipline can still make fresh, convincing statements as a living, evolving and significant art form that communicates humanistic values in an increasingly inhuman, technology driven globally networked world. The idea that painting is dead, dying, or of diminishing importance is reflected in the novelties crowding commercial art fairs and the growing number of international biennials. But the idea that painting is no longer a living art is not new. Its initial mourner was the French academic artist Paul Delaroche. On seeing the first *daguerreotype* in 1839, he is said to have claimed, "from today, painting is dead."

Ironically, it was a photographer who defended the capacity of painting to endure. The historic first exhibition of the Impressionist painters, held in the studio of the portrait photographer Nadar in 1874, proved that photography did not kill painting, but rather that painting could redefine itself as a viable and progressive art form by concentrating on visible brush-strokes that call attention to variable tactile surfaces whereas all photographs share a uniform, slick printed surface. Today, ambitious painting confronts an analogous situation as fast moving pixilated imagery challenges its values and practices. Available to all, and not just to the trained and educated, digital technology appropriates, recombines, and recycles images in often surprising and novel visual combinations that create flashy, momentary, instantaneously consumed images that shock and awe. But reactions to these images, no matter how striking or gut wrenching, are short lived and fugitive.

Fine art that is durable, remains in museums and collections after its authors are long gone, requires a more lasting, profound, and transformative involvement. The same year Delaroche claimed that photography would replace painting, Stendhal dedicated his great complex and layered novel *The Charterhouse of Parma* to "the happy few." Today, serious artists making equally complex and layered works, requiring years of skill and training, confront the same lack of understanding that faced the Impressionists and Stendhal. In the context of electronically communicated mass culture, the face to face confrontation, and the extended amount of time required to digest, dense and multifaceted artworks are out of step with the standards of the dominant culture of instant gratification and easy entertainment. I have no idea whether in a hundred years their works will endure. This

exhibition is a wager that they will.

I began to think of presenting contemporary American painters together with their Belgian counterparts when I noticed that there were artists working in both countries to reinvigorate painting by expanding its parameters, as well as by building on its foundations, with a respect for fine detail and careful craftsmanship. The issue is not whether the work is abstract or representational, but rather on the type of space being created, and on the redefinition of imagery within that space. After visiting scores of exhibitions and studios in the USA and Belgium, I found that exciting new work was based on expanding the processes of painting as a means to evoke imagery that was not *a priori* and schematized, but rather provocative and open to individual interpretation.

The work that particularly interested me had variable texture that defines the surface plane as a tactile experience, a respect for chance and accidental occurrences, and awareness that these required structure in order not to collapse into incoherence. The struggle to keep painting alive and moving that began with Cézanne and Manet remains a battle against cynicism and nihilism. In 1918, the year World War I ended, leaving Europe in ashes, Marcel Duchamp once again tolled the death knell of painting in *Tu m'*, his farewell to the medium that bored him, but continued to interest such painters as Léger, Matisse, Miró, Mondrian, and Picasso. Three years later, in the Moscow exhibition 5x5=25, Rodchenko exhibited monochrome canvases titled *Pure Red Color, Pure Blue Color, and Pure Yellow Color*. He claimed that these were the last paintings that could be made, because they reduced the art to its essence: an uninflected plane of a single color representing nothing but itself. "I affirmed," he wrote, "it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation."

The context of this renunciation of painting was the triumph of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which called for new art forms dedicated to the Socialist ideal of proletarian usefulness and rejected painting as a bourgeois luxury. The death of painting—or at least of non-illustrational painting—is consistently born of a need to crush all forms of dissent from the

Joan Miró, *The Birth of the World*, 1925
Oil on canvas 250.8 x 200 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

dominant ideology. This is as true today as it was for Stalin and Hitler, who demanded that painting become propaganda for their totalitarian programs, causing a crisis for advanced European art. Today, art that refuses to become propaganda for social, cultural, and economic issues, or serve as easy decoration or fashion statement, is mainly marginalized as irrelevant, since it serves neither political ideology nor global markets.

During the upheaval of World War II, many European Modernists sought refuge in New York. When the war ended, most moved back to Europe, but their works remained in The Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum, where they inspired generations of American artists. The period between 1945 and 1960 was a golden age for painting in the USA. Even if there were few collectors, the government poured money into promoting the arts as a weapon in the Cold War. The CIA, usually without the knowledge of those being funded, paid directly or indirectly for magazines, books, exhibitions, and lectures celebrating the "triumph" of American art. Abstract painting, considered as a sign of American creativity, cultural freedom, and supremacy, was underwritten. Unsurprisingly, withdrawal of government support from the arts after the Cold War deprived American art of its hegemony.

In the early 1960s, with the aim of democratizing art, "Pop" artists turned their backs on abstraction to employ familiar imagery, signs, and symbols of popular culture requiring no education to understand. The rationale that Pop Art was a critique of commodity culture quickly turned in on itself when the masses embraced its graphic imagery and simplified poster like legibility, which has more in common with the two dimensionality of printmaking and advertising art than with the complex space of painting. However, the popularity of Pop images did gain attention for painting. This changed in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, when once again it became fashionable to denounce painting as an irrelevant relic of bourgeois culture. In this climate of political correctness, museums and galleries rushed to embrace forms

Werner Mannaers

of "radical art" that illustrated various ideological platforms.

A further attack on painting as a form of retarded decoration was launched by literalist, anti-illusionistic Minimal Art, which unlike the vacuous, bright, and shiny surfaces of Pop Art had a philosophical grounding in phenomenology and *Gestalt* psychology. Then in the highflying 1980s and 1990s, *nouveau* riche collectors gorged their famished appetites for garishness on Neo-Expressionist figuration, to the point of elevating *graffiti* as painting. With fine art clearly losing ground, and the happy few becoming ever fewer, museums, increasingly dedicated to enlarging paid attendance, and most galleries, whose purpose is profit, favored easily consumed popular styles. The result was that the difference between high and low art was gradually but consistently erased, beginning in 1990 with The Museum of Modern Art's *exhibition  High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*. Suddenly, art had a huge popular audience in New York, but the center of painting had been displaced to Berlin, where a postwar generation including artists Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lupertz, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter redefined—in contemporary terms—the painterly, expressionistic style characteristic of German art. Again, government support, including fellowships and costly international exhibitions, such as *Berlin's Zeitgeist* in 1982, played a huge role in promoting a national style as a symbol of cultural, as well as of political re-unification.


Xavier Noiret-Thomé

Their monumental painterly work, however, was disregarded by the dominant American art critic of the post-World War II era, Clement Greenberg, the hero of a generation of critics trained as art historians in the leading universities of the USA. The importance of Greenberg as a tastemaker cannot be overstated. A brilliant writer and a powerful, domineering personality, Greenberg's lean and elegant style immediately seduced readers. Among his first essays, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, published in the *Partisan Review* in May 1941, argued for the supremacy of abstract art as a means to maintain the purity of

painting by distinguishing itself from the other arts.[1]

Isolating the unique properties of a medium to preserve its purity became central to Greenberg's critical judgments. The struggle of the avant-garde thus became the fight to escape from literary subject matter. In his reviews in The Nation, for which he wrote weekly from 1942 to 1949, he insisted that in order to remain "pure" and uncompromised, painting must be addressed to eyesight alone. Subject matter was a primary distraction, but so was any inference of spatiality. Toward this end, all traces of the hand were to be expunged in favor of instantaneous retinal impact.

For Greenberg, Jackson Pollock's poured and dribbled "all-over" paintings created a disembodied, optical web experienced exclusively in visual terms. Rejecting the gestural style of Willem de Kooning, trained in Amsterdam's highly reputed Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten to appreciate the painterly styles of Rembrandt and Rubens, Greenberg hailed Pollock as the master of the future, not the past. For the next fifty years, Greenberg pursued this argument, convincing his growing group of admirers of its ineluctable truth.

In Europe, on the other hand, especially in Belgium and the Netherlands, the example of painterly painting based on visible brushwork was part of their own historic tradition, which continued to be taught in the fine art academies at a time when Americans were obsessed with newness. However, painting was also being attacked in Flanders by the Belgian art historian an Hoet, who like Greenberg, was a failed painter attracted to power strategies. If Greenberg was called "the art czar," Hoetnz was known as "the pope of art," whose mission was to marginalize paintings in favor of installations and new technological media.[2]

Obviously, as an American, I am more familiar with Greenberg's interpretation of Modernism than I am with the texts read by Belgian artists. My impression, however, is that in Belgium—due to its rich and deep-rooted heritage in the art of painting—artists

[1] The original 1766 essay Laocoönis a study of the limitations of painting and poetry by Gotthold Lessing, who insisted painting and poetry each have their own distinctive character. Irving Babbitt's 1910 *The New Laokoön: An Essay on Confusion of the Arts* continues to explore Lessing's distinctions between artistic mediums even more extensively.

[2] Jan Hoet is revered as the founder of S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent's contemporary art museum. In 1992, he gained international attention as director of *Documenta 9* in Kassel, although it was not necessarily positive. In The New York Times, Michael Kimmelman wrote "Documenta 9 is the biggest, costliest version yet of the behemoth of contemporary art exhibitions.... It is also a dud of the first order." Also in the *The New York Times*, Roberta Smith called it "an enormous, shapeless mass of artworks," commenting on the lack of any standards or focus.

continued to be educated in practical skills, even when they were rejected by cultural impresarios like Hoet, who dominated recent Belgian art as much as Greenberg served as a gate-keeper to success for English speaking artists.

In the USA, artists were not scorned as painters, but rather as heretics from Greenbergian dogma. In Belgium, Hoet, easily as powerful a tastemaker as Greenberg, used his political connections to expunge painting altogether in favor of conceptual installations and technology based media drawn from the distant corners of the world without respect for quality or durability. Hoet concentrated on actions, not words, making his mark in a newly prosperous Europe, whereas Greenberg made his arguments in print and in lectures throughout the English-speaking world.

For Greenberg, "the travesty that was cubism" was that it remained a spatial art demanding the elimination of color contrast in order to suggest sculptural volume. "The cubist painter, "he wrote, "eliminated color because, consciously or unconsciously, he was parodying, in order to destroy, the academic methods of achieving volume and depth, which are shading and perspective, and as such have little to do with color in the common sense of the word."[3] Greenberg's emphasis on flatness as the *sine qua non* of advanced painting became a formula for aesthetic correctness. By simplifying what he well knew was a complex argument, Greenberg reached an audience of newly minted collectors who could understand "flatness" as fast as they could assimilate the immediate, instantaneous imagery of the simplified, bright, flat "Color Field" painting that he championed beginning in the 1960s.

During that decade, Greenberg's essay *Modernist Painting* became canonical in its definition of high art as purified of all sensory responses other than its exclusively optical essence, because—according to him—opticality is that which distinguishes painting from the other arts. For Greenberg, to achieve purity, Modernist painting should focus exclusively on the material definition of canvas as cloth and of paint as liquid, abandoning illusionistic devices, such as shading and perspective, used to indicate a constructed or imagined space.

In 1964, Greenberg organized the exhibition *Post Painterly Painting* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, insisting that what was new about recent painting was its emphasis

[3] In *Modernist Painting* Greenberg defined "Modernism" as the period in art roughly from the mid-1850s until the present that displayed a self-critical tendency in the arts. The article was originally given as a radio broadcast in 1961 for the Voice of America and then published in 1961 in *Arts Yearbook 4.* It was later reprinted in 1965, 1966, 1974, 1978, and 1982.

on brilliant color over physical gesture. The artists selected, according to Greenberg, shunned thick paint and tactile effects in the interests of optical clarity. It is true that following Pollock, many younger painters abandoned conventional paintbrushes, which emphasized the tactile stroke. Included in the show, Walter Darby Bannard was among the first to renounce the paintbrush in favor of squeegees, rakes, and brooms, which he used to apply mixed media and gels that thickened the surface to literal relief.

Larry Poons, whose early paintings of highly colored stained fields punctuated by dots and ellipses of contrasting hues that corresponded to Greenberg's criteria, declined to be included. Originally a student of composition at The Boston Conservatory of Music, Poons began painting as a geometric ab-stractionist with compositions, like those of Ed Moses' early works, which recall those of the Fleming Vantongerloo and the Dutch Van Doesburg, both proponents of the Neoplastic group De Stijl. Abandoning the color fields of his dot and ellipse paintings in the late 1960s, Poons began flinging paint across his canvases, controlling thick layers of pigment with expert dexterity. Gradually, his pictorial surfaces became increasingly emphatic as he loaded them with inert materials that create three-dimensional relief.

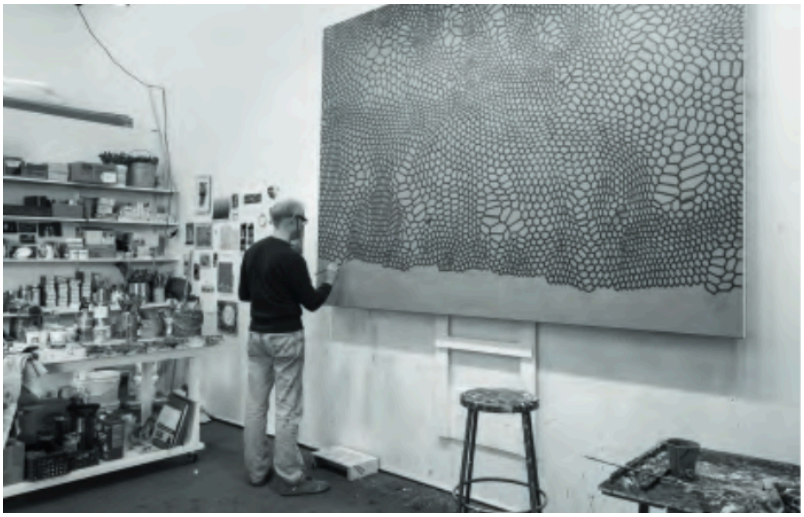
Melissa Kretschme

In the early 1960s, both Bannard and Poons were lauded as Minimalists; by the end of the decade, they were creating literal pictorial surfaces that were as textural as they were optical. In Poons' case, the material relief of the surface became increasingly pronounced, to the point that shadows accumulated in crevices thus producing *chiaroscuro*. Their concerns with tactility and surface texture pointed to a direction that advanced painting would begin consciously to pursue. In the late 1960s, Greenberg's insistence on absolute flatness was also challenged by geometric painters like Ron Davis and Al Held, who invented ways of using perspective, the basis of illusionism, in a self-contradictory manner that subverted any reading of space behind the picture plane.[4] At the same time in France, the Supports/ Surfaces group was deconstructing painting into its constituent elements by detaching the canvas from its supporting stretcher.

[4] In my article *Abstract Illusionism*, published in *Artforum* in October 1967, I discussed how it was possible that forms of illusionism can be reconciled the preservation of the integrity of the picture plane if they are contradicted. This turned out to be prophetic. A number of the painters in this exhibition use orthographic drawing, two-point perspective, and other illusionistic devices that combined with painterliness create a new kind of pictorial space.

Beginning in the 1980s, Greenberg's purist dogma was challenged on all fronts. European critics, such as Achille Bonito Oliva, first used the term "Postmodernism" to champion Italian Transavanguardia painters, who mixed historical styles in pastiche figuration. Frederick Jameson characterized Postmodernism as a breakdown of the distinction between "high" and "low" culture by appropriating the kitsch imagery of mass culture in quotations and reproductions. If, in the 1930s, Greenberg exposed the antithesis of kitsch and the avant-garde, a half century later, Postmodernism now made it possible to identify the two.

By reshuffling and recombining period styles with Digitally reproduced imagery, Postmodernism divorced painting from the first-hand experience of surface texture. Yet some artists were able to create new forms by reintroducing the hand in operations based on chance procedures that produced painterly effects. Sigmar Polke, for example, inaugurated a style by mixing reproduced images with abstraction, thus changing the nature of pictorial space. Gerhard Richter proved that automatic techniques for applying thick pigment could produce interesting surfaces without compromising flatness. Their influence quickly spread beyond Germany as their work became known in both Europe and America. In the USA, Greenberg's disembodied abstraction—addressed to eyesight alone—collided with the desire on the part of ambitious artists to retain the wholeness of the aesthetic experience made available by the Old Masters in their fusion of the haptic or tactile quality of sensuous painterly surfaces with the optical effects produced by bright color emanating light.



Paul Manes

The first major defector from Greenbergian orthodoxy was Poons, who began spilling heavy coats of thickened pigment, layering surface upon surface, until a relief high enough to casa shadow was built up. In the academies and the art magazines, however, remarkably few challenged Greenberg's definition of painting as addressed to eyesight alone until Carolyn Jones, in a massive attempt to debunk

Greenberg's thesis, published *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* in 1990.

As Jones' title suggests, her target is the notion that painting, in order to progress, had to define itself as a purely "optical" art. However, she takes the discussion far beyond the realm of art to identify opticality as an expression of emotional and physical alienation with political consequences far beyond aesthetics. Inspired by the French theorist Gilles Deleuze, she argues that space becomes tactile once it is part of a holistic experience involving all the senses, whose fragmented components can be assembled in multiple combinations.

One need not give tactile or haptic response the revolutionary task of sensual and political liberation to argue that Greenberg's views do not correspond to the fullness of the visual experience, which includes the tactile or haptic elements of texture and surface. Writing in the late nineteenth century, the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl claimed that knowledge regarding the individual unity of objects is only available through the sense of touch as subjectively intuited. Riegl introduced the notion of "tactile" or "haptic" vision or seeing, in which the contributing role of the hand and touch to perception is synthesized and emphasized. According to Riegl, the "optic," or the visual, only perceives colored planes. It is the more complex "haptic" perception that delivers a full sense of objective Materiality.[5]

There was a more immediate opposition to Greenberg's demand that painting be a purely optical experience in art that prioritized the concept over the pictorial. Conceptual Art, always strongly present in Belgium, became popular in the USA as well. Marcel Duchamp, who actually lived in New York, attracted attention to his ironic ready-mades by creating a new version of the *Boite à Valise* , literally a box in a suitcase, a portable miniature monograph that contained sixty-nine miniature reproductions of his work, including many of his iconic *objets trouvés*. In 1964, he added the multiple *Air de Paris* (50 cc of Paris Air), a glass ampoule presumably filled with genuine Paris air.[6] It was as if he had anticipated the invasion of French art theory that transformed American academic art discourse.

[5] In *Late Roman Art Industry*, Riegl wrote: "Since space cannot be individualized in a material shape, it could not become a subject for artistic creation. In fact, (deep) space needed to be suppressed as an obstacle to the understanding of absolute individuality. It was for this reason that Antique art ignored the third dimension of depth and represented objects as on the tactile plane, with foreshortening and shadow suppressed."
[6] The original, made in 1919, a year after he bid goodbye to painting, which was part of the Arensberg Collection, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was broken but replaced.

In *French Theory*, Francois Cusset thoroughly documents how French theory triumphed in the USA.[7] The English translation of texts by Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard in the late 1970s and 1980s caused a sensation. In seminars, conferences, mag-azines, books, catalogues, and above all, academic publications, French Poststructuralist authors popularized theories of power, discipline, and difference that could be applied to the arts as well as to society. Enamored with the intricacy of their novel ideas, American academics embraced Poststructuralism, often in the service of politicized agendas that ranged from affirmative action to attacks on Capitalism and Colonialism. In an inadvertent admission of the limited utility of such arcane analysis of art, in 2001, Sylvère Lotringer wrote in *French Theory in America* that the first book of French theory was John Cage's 1981 *For the Birds*— not realizing, apparently, that Cage had borrowed the title from Barnett Newman's famous dictum that "aesthetics is for the artists as ornithology is for the birds."

Thus theory supplanted iconography as a discipline for the initiated, inspiring academic art in the way that the Renaissance philosophers provided subject matter for Mannerist artists. Spawning an industry of elaborate decoding, Poststructuralism and semiotics provided possibilities for a variety of political and social agendas. In ever expanding graduate fine art programs in the USA, conceptual theory replaced training in materials and techniques, and "deskilling" became an avant-garde attitude.

Meanwhile, serious painters were seeking alternatives to Greenberg's disembodied abstraction addressed to eyesight alone. Realizing that this narrow doctrine collided with the desire to retain the wholeness of the aesthetic experience made available by the Old Masters, they focused on the haptic quality of sensuous painterly surfaces, as well as on the optical fusion of color and light, by experimenting with new kinds of materials and a variety of techniques analogous to the physical processes that the Surrealists used to evoke surprising images. Paintbrushes were abandoned for rags, sponges, mops, and spray guns. Stencils were used to mask areas that once removed did not depict images but left contoured shapes whose edges were not drawn but emerged from the process.

Permitting the process of paint application and removal to provoke ambivalent and multivalent forms was the antithesis of the preplanned serial imagery of Color Field painting. Such automatic processes, invented by the Surrealists, particularly Max Ernst, elevated

[7] François Cusset, *French Theory*, translated by Jeff Fort with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

chance and accident to the same level of importance that Pollock had assigned to it in his poured paintings. Greenberg's antipathy toward Surrealism, especially to its narrative, literary imagery, and its depiction in illusionistic space, was well known. In addition, the generally positivistic bias of the American mind was hostile to its fantasy. For this reason, it is often forgotten or obscured that Pollock's radicalism was based on his adoption of the Surrealist notion of automatism. Yet it is precisely the revisiting of Surrealist techniques, and even in some cases, the irrationality of dream imagery with its intimation of a vague, amorphous, cosmic, or mental space that animates some of the most exciting new painting.

Surrealist automatism relies on the free and uncensored play of the imagination. Pollock was very aware that uncontrolled accident could easily collapse into chaos; his technique in the poured paintings required a total integration of body and mind that he had as long as he did not drink. He struggled to structure the accidents that pouring created in his labyrinthine images. There are many reasons given for why, in 1950, Pollock gave up the "signature" style that made him famous. Lee Krasner's assertion that he did not want to repeat himself probably makes the most sense. Because his hand and body were no longer as steady as they were when he was sober—he began drinking again in the Fall of 1950, after three years of abstinence—the issue of control became paramount.

This is obvious in Pollock's controversial 1952 painting *Blue Poles* , in which the spinning webs are finally organized around diagonal dark blue diagonals, which anchor and structure the sputtering markings and the interwoven paint trails. The painting shows evidence of subsequent revisions done over a period of time, employing, among other tools, glass-basting tubes normally used in cooking, fragments of which created the densely pigmented surface, and were found impregnating the paint.

The variegated surface of *Blue Poles* incorporates so many divergent materials that it is literally raised to a physical relief, making it hard to assert that the painting was addressed to eyesight alone. There is a precedent for such an emphasis on tactility in the paintings of Miró. A case can be made that he is the most radical painter before Pollock. Certainly, Pollock learned a great deal from Miró's technique of uniting

Joris Ghekiere

emphatic surface with fluid, ambiguous, and immeasurable space. Miró had invented a new kind of amorphous pictorial space in which solid shapes, symbols, and written phrases float, not evoking
the silhouetting of figure against ground typical of Cubist derived styles.

Miró claimed that he wished to "assassinate painting." What he accomplished, however, was the opposite. He balanced spontaneity and automatism with meticulous planning to achieve works that embedded depicted signs and calligraphy in an abstract space. In 1948, Greenberg published a brief monograph on Miró, which he revised in 1950, a copy of which was found in Pollock's library, inscribed "For Lee and Jackson, s ever Clem 13 October, 1950."[8]


Bart Vandevijvere

Miró's influence on Pollock, beginning in the mid-1940s, is widely acknowledged. However, Miró's concept of automatism as a means to experiment with materials and techniques, allowing the image to emerge from the process, anticipates the frontiers of serious painting today.[9] Among the Surrealist techniques åemployed by these artists are aerography, using stencils, employed by Joris Ghekiere and Ed Moses. Martin Kline's method of dripping liquid wax may be seen as associated with the Surrealist technique of *coulage.* As the material cools, it takes on what appears to be a random form, though the physical properties of the materials involved may lead to a conglomeration of disks or spheres. The artist may use a variety of techniques to affect the outcome. His variegated and raised surfaces sometimes are constructed of collaged sections. Ed Moses uses decalcomania in which areas are covered, and un-covered, or else pigment is applied over a painted surface so that it spreads and shrinks like an irregular blot as it dries. The aim of using such unpredictable procedures is to break traditional patterns in

[8] Francis V. O'Connor, E. V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock* catalogue *raisonné*, volume IV. The first edition, published in 1948 by Quadrangle Press, was one of two monographs by Clement Greenberg. The other was on Henri Matisse.
[9] Describing Joan Miró's 1925 cosmic masterpiece, *The Birth of the World*, William Rubin referred to it as the most daring of the artist's improvisational paintings of the 1920s. This spontaneously executed, deliberately non Cubist type structure of alternating expanses of indefinite space with precise images in a painstaking, precise style anticipates the "warped space" with its indefinite depth, characteristic of painting after postmodernism.

order to create multivalent and original forms that have no explicit or specific definition.

Like Miró, the painters in this exhibition do not preconceive and depict shapes, but rather allow them to emerge from the process of creation. Describing his method of organizing chance improvisation with stable structure, often combining linear looping and flat contoured shapes, Miró remarked, "The works must be conceived with fire in the soul but executed with clinical coolness." He permits spills and blots to evoke pulsating forms. Miró's paintings may look casual, but the disposition of elements is like in those of the Old Masters. He causes the eye to travel across the surface along axes and paths that visually link form to form. Miró challenged and threatened the Cubists:"I shall break their guitar." And indeed, with his fearless experimentation, one might say that Miró certainly did.

Given what we are seeing today, Miró may well have been right. His new method of working involved loose brushing, spilling, and blotting thinned-down, liquefied paint in conjunction with cursive, automatic drawing punctuated with shapes that were frequently vaguely geometric. The sense of an immeasurable cosmic space is common to the imagery of a number of the painters in this exhibition, both Americans and Belgians, such as Walter Darby Bannard, Joris Ghekiere, Bernard Gilbert, Karen Gunderson, Lois Lane, Paul Manes, Werner Mannaers, Marc Maet, Bart Vandevijvere, and Jan Vanriet.

As far as André Breton was concerned, Miro's painting *The Birth of the World* was as revolutionary and important as Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avigon*. Describing it, William Rubin, then Chief Curator of The Museum of Modern Art's Painting and Sculpture collection, characterized it "as in many respects the most radical painting executed between the two World Wars." Executed in a spontaneous, painstaking, and precise style, its deliberately non-Cubist type of structure, composed of precise images in alternating expanses of indefinite space, anticipates the infinite depth characteristic of painting after Postmodernism's "warped space." Executed in Montroig in the summer of 1925, *The Birth of the World* is a visionary masterpiece whose imagery prefigures recent astronomical discoveries of black holes and dwarf planets. Bought the year that it was painted by the Belgian collector René Gaffé, it was exhibited only once, in 1966, before The Museum of Modern Art acquired it in 1972.

Pollock's black and white works of the 1950s recall how Miró coaxed form from spreading linear trails. In Pollock's black and white paintings, Bernice Rose explained: "The mark, the paint that thins and thickens, may simply be line; or it may describe contour; or it

may be positive or negative, form or shadow, and here Pollock realizes the possibilities of black as color. This is a new kind of figurative drawing, one in which figuration is integrated into the allover field through a subtle balancing of descriptive and nondescriptive, of 'contour' and calligraphy, so that the notion of form in volumetric space is eradicated."[10]

The manner in which the artists in this exhibition actually work is often a mystery because of the number of different techniques that they employ to apply and remove paint. Each artist has a personal style that is not a brand, but a means of expression. Some of the Surrealist techniques adapted by them include erasure and masking. The aim of using such unpredictable procedures is to break traditional patterns in order to create multivalent original forms that have no explicit or specific definition. Bart Vandevijere uses a form of *grattage*, in which paint is scraped off the canvas to reveal underpainting. Mil Ceulemans' and Larry Poons' paintings often present liquid pigment dripping up their pictorial surfaces, thus indirectly referring to Surrealist experiments defying the gravitational flow of paint and adding further ambiguity to any grounded orientation.

These are not what Greenberg referred to as "one shot" paintings, executed so quickly that they are finished the moment that the single coat of stained color dries. On the contrary, each painting is worked on over a period of time, its composition assessing and reassessing the balance, seeking equilibrium through subsequent retouching. Each part has to function successfully within an integrated surface. This is the challenge that Cézanne gave himself, constantly reviewing and readjusting his paint patches and their closely valued colors until he achieved the desired equilibrium over a period of time. Although most of the artists in this exhibition are abstractionists, I do not see their work as nonobjective. They fight to create order, rather than imposing any ideal, *a priori* scheme. Instead of resorting to the Platonic geometry of Nonobjectivism, these artists play with varieties of representation that are more or less abstract, depending on their individual style. Like Miró, they balance physical spontaneity with meticulous detail and structural elements to achieve finished works balanced through Cézannesque adjustments of the whole of the composition.

[10] Bernice Rose, *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1980, P. 20.

Matisse taught his students that Cézanne "is the father of us all." This is as true now as it was a century ago, because Cézanne, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out in his famous 1945 essay *Cézanne's Doubt* , depicted not certainty, but doubt. His compositions achieve coherence through many revisions done over a period of time, requiring adjustments and intense self criticism, thus making the viewer aware of his painting process and of his painting's personal history. Cézanne's images are not static; they are in a constant state of flux as they struggle for balance and equilibrium. In a similar sense, the paintings in this exhibition reveals a struggle for an elusive and hard won stability. In this context, Jan Vanriet's choice of Cézanne's bathers as a theme to be studied and reconsidered is logical.

Mil Ceulemans, Xavier Noiret-Thomé, and Bart Vandevijere may remember Mondrian, but their squares and floating planes are hardly those of Utopian Neoplasticism. All create images; they may use geometry, but not in the service of a perfect Platonic ideal order. In some cases, architecture is evoked; in others, figures are suggestive, but nonspecific. Rather than resort to the Platonic geometry of Nonobjectivism, these artists play with varieties of representation that are more or less abstract depending on their individual style. They balance the kind of spontaneity and automatism encouraged by the Surrealists with meticulous detail to achieve finished works that, because of their precision, have the appeal to interpretation of representational art, despite their considerable and often high degree of abstraction.

Walter Darby Bannard

Unquestionably, Miró invented a new kind of pictorial space, immaterial and indefinable, that is once again of interest. Walter Darby Bann He referred to it as the space of dreams. In his painting *Ceci estla couleur de mes rêves*, a sky blue paint blotch is labeled Photo. The scumbled blue patch, coincidentally , has a texture that no photograph could capture. What irony could be more to the point? A dream cannot be photographed; it remains as pure sensation, a reminder of deep feelings and memories. Indeed, some of the artists in this exhibition, like Karen Gunderson, Lois Lane, Marc Maet, Paul Manes, and Jan Vanriet, create poetic fantasy images that suggest dreamlike apparitions. Nonspecific, and sometimes troubling associations, disjunctions of scale, also induce a dream state that is not related to the every- day perception of objects in the world, and thus become ghostly visions. For example, Jan Vanriet's painting *Women in the Forest*, Red, appears abstract, until on close inspection, one realizes that the scene is of a Holocaust mass murder. The beauty of the color and delicacy of touch is a shocking contradiction to the actual narrative content of the work

Minimal reductiveness can now be seen for what it is: a transitional step in the history of art, one necessary in order for painting to gain new freedom in favor of the play of the imagination. This new kind of pictorial space is allusive and not literal. The picture plane is recognizably flat, but on it, or in it, floats any number of individual visions of a space that is neither that of the academic illusionism of the past, nor that of painting as a strictly literal object. New interpretations of texture and space, with their connotations of both tactility and metaphor, obviously vary from artist to artist.


Jan Vanriet

The artists in this exhibition work alone, slowly and painstakingly, revisiting their compositions many times. Their works are made in a slow process and require time to be

digested by the viewer. They slow down rather than accelerate time. What they have in common is a syncretic attitude that conserves that which remains vital from the art of the past by analyzing and distilling the essence of the pictorial. Some deal with the issue of texture and the haptic in a more concrete materialist way, constructing surfaces into literal relief, like Martin Kline and Larry Poons, or in the case of Melissa Kretschmer, gouging out a linear structure from layers of laminated plywood. These Americans are more clearly influenced by Barnett Newman's banded structures and Pollock's all-over compositions than the Belgians, who have reference more directly to Mondrian. The elimination of figure–ground relationships is accomplished by creating a space in which forms seem to float defying gravity, whether it is by being caught in Paul Manes' extraterrestrial netting, or by floating out in front of Werner Manners' elaborately embroidered stippling, disrupted by flat geometric shapes that seem to hover over the picture plane by means of some magical magnetism.

Bernard Gilbert, Lois Lane, Bart Vandevijere, and Jan Vanriet use white in a way that causes light to beam into the viewer's space. Their works are also notable for using images that suggest illusory visions that evoke nonspecific and sometimes troubling associations. All the artists in this exhibition are united in their willingness to accept accident and chance, as well as to stabilize uncertainty and hazard with structural elements. It is this mediation between control and its precincts of stability that is a picture of the world today.

These painters can in no way be conceived as nonobjective. All create images. Their palettes are extensive, although as in Pollock's paintings, both black and white may appear as colors to be contrasted with the spectrum. Chromatic explorations, which emphasize the potential of unblended colors to respond to one another, radiate brilliant sparks of light in the paintings of Walter Darby Bannard, Bernard Gilbert, Joris Ghekiere, Martin Kline, Marc Maet, Paul Manes, Werner Mannaers, Larry Poons, and Bart Vandevijvere. Fascinated with color and light, and because the Old Masters painted by candlelight and not daylight, Poons has created a "cave," an indoor space with only artificial light. Inside the cave, he is surrounded by standing and unrolled canvas that encloses him like a cocoon, so that he can be "in" the painting like Pollock.

Rhythm also plays an important role in these artists' work. When I questioned them, all responded that they listen to music, whether classical, jazz, or country, and often when they work. Trained as a composer, Poons is equally involved in Beethoven and Bach as he is in American country music, which also interests Walter Darby Bannard, Paul Manes, and

Werner Mannaers. Bart Vandevijere often paints listening to the compositions of Rothko's friend, Morton Feldman, which Poons also knows well.

Trying to look for common denominators, I was struck especially by a new conception of pictorial space that may be described as cosmic, dreamlike, or poetic, that is above all imaginative and not tied to the images of this world. Like Stendhal, these artists use layering to create complex spaces that are, however, different from those of the Old Masters. Literal flatness may be signified, but there is nothing literal about the imagery evoked by these highly imaginative paintings that describe worlds that we may never inhabit, but free us of the mundane, the factual, the familiar, and the banal vocabulary of most of what is designated as art today, which never ascends us to the poetic, the metaphoric, or the universal.

In his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson defines the *élan vital*, or "vital force," as a means of self-organization and spontaneous evolution. Bergson's *élan vitalis* the anti-thesis of Freud's death instinct. In the works of these artists, there is no stasis or symmetry—the attributes of a funerary art. Their images are not earth bound, but seem to float in an ethereal scrim. With fantasy, imagination, and sometimes with that is never cynical nor ironic, each constructs a private world that the viewer is invited to enter and contemplate. Their energy and tangible, physical work affirm a life force that resists the pull of deadly entropy. The world they picture is imperfect, unstable, unpredictable, and always in a state of precarious balance and flux, navigating collisions, breaching limitations. Their ambitious singular works in no way constitute an organized movement, but rather, individual strategies for survival. Like all authentic art that endures, they picture in some way the world as it is for the artists who live in it.