Shaping of America: Medium-Specificity as Passive-Aggressive Resistance, 2020
By Vittorio Colaizzi

Although endless contention over what laws, procedures, and principles define this nation forms part of the American blueprint, Carrie Patterson and the other artists in this exhibition cannot have known the nature and extent of the cataclysms that would entangle us when they embarked on this project. Nevertheless, this exhibition of painters that boasts divergent processes and idiosyncratic connections to nature has become more urgently relevant, not less, in the face of threats to justice and civil society brought about by unbridled capitalism, white supremacy, and the state-sanctioned terror of police brutality, all in the midst of a pandemic that disproportionately affects the poor and people of color. Since I was asked to contribute an essay to this exhibition, the condition of crisis in America has compounded. Questions about what counts as American are integral to political debates, which often center on entitlement to legal protections. These abstract concepts have played out in concrete terms at the border, in legislative and judicial chambers, in hospitals, and most recently in the streets, as every thoughtful person now evaluates her or his culpability in perpetuating a racist and classist system.

Anxiety over art's duty or capacity to affect political change seem to be ingrained within modernism itself, as its history contains numerous examples of the drive to shed reference and achieve art-for-art's-sake autonomy, but also to participate in worldly events. In the 1960s and 70s, some critics castigated Black abstract artists for seeming to capitulate to establishment taste when they abandoned legible iconographies, but artists such as Melvin Edwards, Felrath Hines, Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten, and many others found abstraction to emblematize and actualize the liberation so sorely needed then and now. At this late date, abstract painting is still sometimes considered conservative, but in fact no approach or medium has escaped marketability or academic reification, and so whether and how conservativism or radicality are valid measures depends on the way an artwork relates to the wider sphere of human experience. This occurs on planes other than that of picturing.

By positing the landscape as not a fixed picture but a worked-through experience according to the painter's own painstakingly developed methods, the exhibition calls for an imaginative and thoughtful viewer who looks for something other than confirmation of one's own demands. Shaping America: A Painter's Perspective challenges our habit of measuring the world for division and use, and, as its unapologetic subtitle suggests, to vicariously and empathetically rehearse the varied processes of the artists who, as Patterson puts it, "translat[e] lived experience into abstract painted form. . . ." This is an endeavor that occurs within relatively traditional confines of the media, without the often effective but by no means compulsory elements of collage, assemblage, video, and installation with which some painters have augmented their practices over the last century. This is a show of, if we can use the term in a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic way, pure painters.

Medium specificity was once an appealing if abstract concept that defined a focus on those aspects that set one's work aside from other, competing or distracting elements. The backlash against modernism and specifically the criticism of Clement Greenberg made this idea anathema or at least quaint. Its

renewed, relaxed form now models commitment and analogizes the agency one can take over one's environment.

After the poststructuralist critique of the author and feminist and postcolonial criticisms of the possessive gaze, a new subjectivity has returned that does not suppose itself to be universal, but which weaves together particularities of economics, gender, race, and locality. This subjectivity, empowered as to personal choice within this constellation of factors, is on display here, exercising its authority, not over the land or of other subjectivities, but over its own self-realization. This is especially urgent in the face of an administration that denies selfhood, citizenship and humanity to women and people of color. Therefore, the entitlement to "shape America," by which these artists insist upon a malleable, that is to say, improvable, identity to our country, is deeply threatening to those who hold that the United States is a white Christian nation bent on dominating and eradicating difference.

Although all the paintings tend to the abstract, they vary richly. Legible representation, either of isolated entities or coherent space is present, as are vigorous gestures that contrast color, texture, direction and scale, amounting to a polemical insistence on the pictorial sufficiency of these elements. In still other works, hard-edge yet gradated facets seize the plane while expanding into fathomless depths. Together these approaches reject the notion of a singular or "normative" esthetic paradigm that would render others ancillary or irrelevant. Amid the pluralism of our era, critical and curatorial models have emerged that privilege networks of citation over artists' decisions about incident and distinctions. The networked condition David Joselit dubs "transitive" in his 2009 essay "Painting Beside Itself" renders each painting an interchangeable node within an ensemble, present or implied, while "atemporality," the conceit of Laura Hoptman's 2014 survey of painting at the Museum of Modern Art, pre-empts the possibility of ambitious engagement with painting's historical forms in favor of a chic and disaffected pastiche.1 Isabelle Graw presents an false dichotomy between "painting that repudiates its supposed essence [and] one that keeps within its allotted boundaries and has unbroken faith in itself."2 If, according to Graw, the most interesting painters (such as, in her estimation, Martin Kippenberger and Jutta Koether) are ones who have "incorporated the demands of the critique of painting into their practices and internalized the lessons of Conceptual art and institutional critique, rejecting the notion of a purely immanent and unambiguously circumscribed painterly idiom,"3 then one cannot do one without the other; one cannot responsibly paint without distending and hybridizing one's practice. "Painting per se," as Merlin James put it,4 is hopelessly retrograde.

Contrary to this new orthodoxy, all of these artists propose form rather than allowing it to be determined by a matrix of visual culture. They don't report through collage or sampling, but commit to relatively, but not absolutely traceable procedures. Each artist takes a leap between what she sees and what she does. Representation is itself a process of abstraction, wherein visual elements bleed into a productive feedback loop of perception and form-giving action. In her exhibition material, Patterson stresses the multiplicity of possibilities—each work can be "parts of a whole," or "many places rather than one place." In invoking Louis Dodd, Patterson points out the broad themes one may derive from specific and local subjects. Life, death, yearning, and displacement emerge not only from a sunlit wall but through a carefully placed mark or arrangement of shapes, because they are evidence of decisions.

Patterson cites the book The Shaping of America by geographer D.W. Meinig as the inspiration for this gathering of painters. In particular, she was struck by the idea that "landscape" is reconfigured according to the position and assumptions of the perceiver. Not only is this a perfect analogue for the work and experience of the painter, but it is also a license and imperative for the viewer to actively construct coherence and meaning out of that which is before her. For all their deliberate technical knowledge, these paintings are, in a way, unfinished, in that they are constellations of provocation that rely on the viewer to bring them together in her own eye and mind, to ask: What does this suggest? How could this relate to a lived experience? From what processes would this result? What effect does this part have on that? And so on. Rather than serving up a tidy and direct package that ties image and meaning into an unproblematic whole, these painters' immersion in their crafts disconnects the terms of signification and opposes the calcification of meanings so necessary for a fascistic social order. In Patterson's work, modular, layered colors and gestures are indicative of experiences of space and time. The gesture is measured in dialogue with geometry. She balances, or rather collides, indications of rigor and abandon, such as measured segments sometimes painted and sometimes inherently colored, which subdivide almost entropically, as well as the lavishly applied strokes, whose energy reveals on closer inspection a practiced and internalized prowess with the subtlest variations of her tools and materials. These dichotomies collapse and blend, as known categories withhold their pseudo-intellectual comfort and the viewer is left to experience, rather than evaluate.

A similar dialectic, albeit more lyrically deployed, is at work in the paintings of Cecily Kahn. Here more miniscule marks cover the surface, which intimate an architectonic yet scintillating tableau. Kahn sets up and then crosses borders with layers of color that suggest interwoven vines, dappled sunlight, and running water, but nothing so much as paint worked with care and attention.

Janis Goodman brings front and center the invention that is endemic to paintings of nature. They are always already constructions, so she asserts this quality of constructed-ness through wild caprice, always within a well-defined visual idiom. There is something nostalgic, harkening to nineteenth century romanticism with an almost sci-fi twist and not a little surrealism in her floating forms. Importantly, they show the abstraction of representation, because they are not, as a quick glance suggests, clouds, trees, nor bodies of water, but instead improvisational forms upon colored grounds that take advantage of the organic possibilities of both the medium and this realm of images.

Like Goodman, Dierdre Murphy reflects on the conventionality of representation through meticulous focus on and deliberate isolation of elements. However, unlike strategies that emerged in the 1980s that often amounted to mannered jeremiads on the supposed bankruptcy of visualization, Murphy insists on the poetic feeling inherent in her subjects through carefully considered compositions that bear an almost medieval artificiality. Her paintings' tenuous, searching, but not quite palpable relationships between birds, flowers, abstracted lines of force, and cloud-icons amplify their potential meaningfulness, which the viewer must ultimately fullfil.

In the wake of high modernism, some critical circles clung to a linear paradigm, actually expecting photography to supersede painting as the dominant mode by which imagery and ideology would be

disseminated and critiqued. Hand-in-hand with this development was to be an evolution past any regard for manual craft. As David Reed has pointed out with the lurid yet apt metaphor of the "vampire's kiss,"5 painting has instead assimilated photography's modes of envisioning the environment. Rather than a blanket transformation, painting often challenges these aspects of photography within its frame by means of its own tradition of embodied emotional registers.

All of this plays out in the work of Jennifer Anderson Printz, as she embraces photographic imagery of the natural environment—specifically, the sky above her home in Virginia, and deftly and selectively works over these images with graphite and paint. Her work is, in a way, a diagram of abstraction itself, as it charts her visceral but, in a conventional sense, irrational reaction to a visual stimulus. Painters will understand this perfectly: filled with aesthetic emotion, but unsatisfied by the prospect of a pictorial copy of the scene of the clouds before her, Printz follows the pull of the medium in relation to the format, expressing atmosphere, time and movement, maybe even fragrance, and in the process blurring the hackneyed categories of geometry and intuition.

The terrible hazard of categorization, whether "gestural," "geometric," "figurative," "constructivist," "surreal," or any facile combinations, will inhibit vivid perception of these artists' actions upon their specific works and the traditions they choose to engage. Recent exhibitions by Pat Passlof, Mildred Thompson, and Joan Thorne have shown the unending possibilities of that which has been unfairly dismissed as the exhausted idiom of gestural abstraction, which remains as individualized as a player's touch upon an instrument. For Pamela Cardwell, a crepuscular density gives way to a pervasive but often hidden light. Vine-like tendrils painted with a medium-sized brush span considerable distance in a composition and sometimes enclose areas that are filled in with a range of mellow or searing color. Cardwell raises the contingency of form to an almost alarming pitch as near-geometric forms begin to congeal but hold back, refusing the comfort of the known. In this way the promise of midcentury abstraction remains vital, active, and tantalizingly out of reach. Kayla Mohammadi also traffics in the impalpable. Intimations of deep space co-exist with patterns that recall modernist tenets of medium specificity, with neither fealty nor bitter irony. Mohammadi instead paints an atmosphere of pleasure, one that we might again inhale or feel on our skin, even as we become acutely conscious of her paintings' abstract constructive elements and hence their intellectual distance from, though not opposition to, sensual abandon. She paints the complex cultural inheritance of painting, to which the west is becoming ever more mindful, as well as the medium's embedded desire for raw experience. This experience is neither promised nor owed; it simply remains a possibility. Amid her lose but rugged compositional structure, an emblematic angle or a shift in color feels as monumental as the heroic gestures and chiaroscuro of centuries past. Mohammadi makes a stand for the meaningfulness, not the symbolism, of composition itself.

Composition is also at stake in the work of Ying Li, and she draws her compositions out of the chaotic happenings of nature as well as her own generous and often oppositional marks. The tension, and indeed the drama that emerges in her work contradicts the story of modernism that culminate in minimalism, where all drama is resolved in a statement of formal wholeness. Of course, Li's paintings more directly reference an impressionist tradition, filtered through post-war abstract gestures of both

the American and European variety. It is notable that her background in both contemporary realism and traditional ink painting gives her great facility with many styles, but instead of performative virtuosity, she has selected what is arguably, if one can forgive a certain ideological inconsistency in this essay, the cutting edge in painting today, i.e., the re-direction of historical pathways thought to be closed into spectacular and ecstatic scenes that emblematize materialized thought.

Through her collaboration with scientific methods of mapping and imaging natural phenomena, Rebecca Rutstein's paintings grasp for truth, certainty and grounded-ness. As planes, morphing grids, and more free-form painted areas proliferate, this certainty recedes, but the work is not fallacious or misguided because of this. Rather, this searching quality, present in all of these painters, is a source of sensitivity and indeed authority, because it shows a tolerance for and a visual orchestration of contradiction. Rutstein evokes digital space through her torqued and stretched grid, but the manual and intimate register, now especially valued because of its scare-ness, is also inextricably woven into her vision. We must also remember that the grid, often outlandishly elaborated, pervaded experimental drawings of the renaissance, from which perspectival studies emerged. So while Rutstein's work therefore ruminates on the history of domination that accompanies any thorough visual plotting-out, the obfuscation that occurs functions as resistance, as mystery blots out our vision but invites vicarious touch.

Vicarious touch is also emphatically present in the work of Kendra Wadsworth, whose painting and drawing accompanies a practice in ceramics. This heightened consciousness of the material as earth-borne and earth-bound shows in her treatment of the painting-surface as a receptable for both building and excavation, wherein a kind of fantasy architecture emerges. One is invited to imaginatively inhabit the interstitial spaces created between the layers charged by her aesthetic intent, and to find there an idealized expression of creativity. The horizontal rhythms that appear are never rigid, but act as a vehicle for improvised variations, almost like a daily ritual.

The painter Marina Adams has recently compared the tenacious resolve and embrace of failure and dead ends that comprise a painter's practice to grassroots political action such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.6 Like painting, the success of these endeavors cannot be measured in news cycles, market trends, or the proceedings of academic conferences. It feels tedious and quixotic to write in defense of painting, but so is it to rage in defense of justice. I am reminded of an internet meme: "I can't explain why you should care about other people." Beautiful and incisive texts abound by Laurie Fendrich, Merlin James, and others that nevertheless feel written for support groups. I would like to think that each painting today is an argument, successful or not, for the specific experience it provides, and an example of the rewards of sustained attention to the constraints of a medium, including its stillness, flatness, and inescapable illusion. Encountering any one of them calls for a taking into account the subjectivity of the painter, not as a monolithic or all-consuming force, but as an additional consciousness to oneself, a challenge of otherness.

The attention for which these painters call requires a viewer who will give herself over to a mode of looking that differs from the instrumental, acquisitional, and goal-directed mindset that advanced capitalism fosters. When we don't demand to see our own narcissistic image reflected back at us, to be

re-told stories we know, but instead leap into unknown sensations, we stand a chance to break the dulling grip of administered life, from which even the Democrats won't save us.

1 See David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," October 130 (Fall 2009): 125–34, and Laura Hoptman, The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).
2 Isabelle Graw, The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 157.
3 Ibid, 46.
4 Merlin James, "Painting per se," lecture transcript, Cooper Union Great Hall, New York, 28th February 2002. https://www.mummeryschnelle.com/pdf/Paintingperse.pdf Accessed June 2015.
5 David Reed in Arthur C. Danto, Isabelle Graw, Thierry de Duve, David Joselit, Yve-Alain Bois, David Reed, and Elizabeth Sussman, "The Mourning After," Artforum v. 41, no. 1 (March 2003): 268.
6 "In the Meantime: Marina Adams. Interview by Arthur Peña." https://salon94-site.s3.amazonaws.com/exhibitions/marina-adams-2/In-the-Meantime_Marina-Adams.pdf?mtime=20200721132002 Accessed August 2020.