



Are you bored yet? You should be. If not, you're in the wrong branch of showbiz. Ladies and gentlemen, we are currently experiencing a phase of chronic conservatism in contemporary art making. Art hasn't been this retrograde since school of mud figurativists Leon Kossoff, Lucien Freud and the lads declared a 'New Spirit in Painting' in 1981. Not since Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente turned the clocks back to the '50s with the-bigger-the-canvas-the-more-it-means-something neo-Expressionism and pyjama-clad machismo. Some of you reading this might disagree, in which case I will meet you outside in ten minutes with my sleeves rolled and daisy dukes up. Form an orderly line.

All our biggest Modernist fantasies – or nightmares, depending on which brand of turpentine you drink – have come back to haunt us. Over the past decade, television and the movies rebooted the zombie, while contemporary art reanimated abstract formalism. Somewhere in the vaults of New York's Museum of Modern Art a voodoo doll of Clement Greenberg is lying in a temperature-controlled casket, its beady little eyes glowing red, green and blue, remotely directing young artists from Brooklyn to Melbourne to resurrect colour field painting, wake geometric abstraction from the dead, reify De Stijl, reset Minimalism, and incant spells in a monochrome monotone about 'process' and 'performative production.'

Don't believe me? Count 'em! Tauba Auerbach, Joe Bradley, Henry Codax, Matt Connors, Sarah Crowner, Nicolas Deshayes, Sam Falls, Mark Grotjahn, Wade Guyton, Daniel Hesidence, Scott Hug, Xylor Jane, Sergei Jensen, Jacob Kassay, Thomas Kratz, Rezi van Lenkeld, Charles Mayton, Diana Molzan, Alex Olson, Sam Prekop, Dan Rees, Anselm Reyle, Bernd Ribbeck, Julia Rommel, Pamela Rosenkranz, Josh Smith, Joshua Smith, Lesley Vance, Ned Vena, Sam Windett... Shall I go on? Honestly, I will go on. Someone please stop me.

In some ways I can't really blame the old guard out there still making this stuff: Carmen Herrera, Ellsworth Kelly, Imi Knoebel, Michael Krebber, Olivier Mosset, Gerhard Richter, Robert Ryman, Frank Stella,

Rudolf Stingel, Heimo Zobernig – old enough to know better, perhaps, but too old to let go of long-held arguments and struggles. Perversely, I'll even admit to occasionally enjoying the odd moment of palate-cleansing minimal-lite, but for the most part what is depressing is the readiness of a younger generation to salvage such formalism from the wreckage of the 20th century. Call me old-fashioned, but I always assumed that if you had an imagination you were under some obligation to use it. I remember a painter friend once arguing that what attracted them most to their medium was that there was so much potential for what could be done on the canvas – the limit was only your materials and mind. Given the tools available to artists today, from CGI applications to 3D printers, does making a monochrome really feel like a vital thing to be doing?

David Geers tries to get the measure of today's formal conservatism in 'Neo Modern', an essay published in *October* last year. He puts forward a number of plausible reasons: 'a generational fatigue with theory; a growing split between hand-made artistic production and social practice; and a legitimate and thrifty attempt to "keep it real" in the face of an ever-expansive image culture and the slick "commodity art" of Koons, Murakami, and others.' He suggests it might signal 'a nostalgic re-trenchment on the part of an art world threatened by technological transformation and economic uncertainty that now undermine its hierarchies and claims of cultural precedence.' Geers also picks up on the eclecticism of today's neo-formalists – a range of influences from modern art's back pages, all now existing in the same time period, levelled out, flattened into a museum of surfaces: Constructivism, Arte Povera, Action Painting, you name it, we'll make it..

Speaking at the New Museum, New York, recently, the creator of the 'Mad Men' TV series, Matthew Weiner recalled the episode in which a handful of staff take a peek at the new Mark Rothko painting their boss, Mr Cooper, has recently bought. Weiner said that 'there was some controversy in the writers' room about the depth of that conversation.' They weren't convinced



that anyone would have a deep conversation about an abstract work of art. 'They do in front of a Rothko' argued Weiner. Can the same be said of today's advocates of abstraction? Possibly, but in today's pick-n-mix culture of rearrangement, built by the curatomaton class, that's not necessarily a convincing argument for the work existing in the first place. More often than not today, formalism is a transparent container; ready to be filled with any color you like, conveniently recoded with whatever referential flavors suit the moment. See those serial monochromes over there? They are all the same shade of creamy white as the cover of Joy Division's 'Closer'. You would like to know about the plain oblong on the floor? Why certainly: it is made out of fibreglass sourced from Gettysburg, and is the same, precise weight as the buffet lunch Abraham Lincoln ate on the day of his famous post-battle address there, thus imbuing this oblong with the gravity of US history. Either that, or explanations are given in crypto-fetishistic terms of 'formal qualities'; tracing the tender sweep of a brush, or admiring the impeccable flatness of touch, like wine-tasters comparing a Sauvignon Blanc against a Pinot Grigio, only without the fun of getting drunk.

I buy Geers' assortment of psychological diagnoses for artists beating the retreat into abstraction, as there are many who are averse to the new formalism who would be content to just blame 'the market', arguing that artists are only slathering canvases with single colours and drawing neat triangles because it's easy to sell something that's 'decorative'. I call bullshit on that line of lazy buck-passing. Dealers and collectors are one part of a bigger integrated system of trade and value creation. Blame must be laid at the feet of curators who persist in rewarding this work with exhibition opportunities in biennials, kunsthalls and museums. The burden of responsibility has to be carried by critics who want to write about this work, and magazine editors who commission them to do so. Then there are those at work in the academies whose tastes and interests feed into journals and museums, the ones

whose PhD theses about Agnes Martin's late work or Ad Reinhardt's juvenilia get translated into ideas for shows that, under pressure to 'justify' themselves, require the dragooning of MFA-and-barely-legal monochromists to make it 'relevant' to 'the discourse'. (Always 'discourse' with the definitive article, as if it is some vengeful god, or angry tribe, requiring placation.) And there are the teaching staff on those MFAs, failing to nip the new mannerism in the bud, instead churning out graduates whose work might, at best, have been marginally interesting to five people in SoHo in 1972. (Which of the work considered canonical today was itself; art made by a small group of people who became protagonists in a history that has become self-celebratory, its influence reinforced by the repeated assertion that it was influential.)

Yet – if I may make a maddeningly contrary switcheroo and come to painting's defence for a sec – abstraction is scarcely the only art form that can be branded 'decorative'. Conceptual photographs with neatly typed explanations look pretty in your study. The feel-good factor from taking part in a piece of socially-engaged art looks gorgeous on your conscience and the light falling on your face during a dance performance in an uptown museum makes your skin glow beautifully. As a medium, painting is not the problem. Painting is only a problem for people who dislike painting. The problem is that contemporary art is running out of history. The spin cycle is speeding up and art is in the period of high retro. When historians come to look at the art of 2013, they will find exhibitions and performances being re-staged, and work that looks like it could have been made in 1913, 1953 or 1973; the pan-temporal simultaneity of an insecure image culture. They will find a generation that failed to understand its present, because it was too busy poking through the past.

Abstraction: you know it's the smell. Bring out yer dead! Bring out yer dead! I need a new thrill.



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THRILLOCHROMES

