

Janet Jones: 'De-stabilizing Abstraction'

University Art Association Conference, 2007

Panel: 'The Optical Outskirts of Abstraction' Chair, Associate Professor Michel Daigneault.

'De-stabilizing Abstraction' - Janet Jones

This is a two-part presentation:

- In the first part, I will trace abstraction from the 'endgame moves' of the mid-1980's referencing back to its critique of Greenbergian High Modernism. This section will conclude by my posing some questions about abstract painting in the present. Most pertinent for this panel: Is there such a thing as contemporary abstraction?
- In the second part of the presentation, I will discuss my own work as a painter that, in part, tacitly engages with this question.

In 2003, the painter Matthew Ritchie stated about abstraction:

"A few years ago somebody asked me, 'When did you go figurative?' There's this sort of ridiculous idea, it's a very silly idea left over from the twentieth century, that abstraction and figuration are legitimate poles. I've incorporated the two things from the very start and been fascinated by the idea that there is really no distinction. It's just a question of scale."

Part One

Fast Backward:

In 1985, the painter Sherrie Levine said, "My paintings are about death: the uneasy death of modernism". A number of articles from the early 1980's; 'Last Exit Painting' - Thomas Lawson, 'The End of Painting' - Douglas Crimp, 'Necrophilia Mon Amour' - Joseph Kosuth, began a period of mourning that was best reflected in the exhibition Endgame: recent painting & sculpture, ICA 1986. In painting, the death that was referenced was the demise of Greenbergian Modernism. The realization that it had been 'played out' signaled the end of the quest for 'purity' in painting. The linear progression of styles beginning with Manet and ending with Post Painterly Abstraction resulted in the "relative" elimination of illusionistic space, tactility, chiaroscuro and any vestiges of subject matter other than self-referential formalism. The binary relationships set out by Greenberg between avant-garde and avant-gardist art, between high art and kitsch and the exclusion of non-European, non-white, non-male from his canon of quality echoed the patriarchal, first world, colonialist attitudes of modernism. What remained was painting as an autonomous object, 'disinterested' in the social, the political, and as Charles Harrison noted in his 1986 article, Expression and Exhaustion: Art & Criticism in the 1960's, by the early 1970's, this painting was also devoid of both emotional and spiritual life. At best, it had become an unconscious simulacrum of its former self.

In 'Vitamin P' (2003) Barry Schwabsky in referencing Clement Greenberg, quite rightly points out the role self-consciousness played in Greenberg's conception of art, "In other words, Modernism took what was already implicit in classical painting and made it explicit, that is, it brought it to a more articulate point of self-consciousness". However, for Greenberg, the critic or theorist was self-conscious not the artist. The superior artist did not follow 'a program', the work naturally evolved from one's former work. In contrast to High Modernist abstraction,

Janet Jones: 'De-stabilizing Abstraction'

from the mid 1980's to the late 1990's abstraction was programmatic, conceptual and the artist highly self-conscious not of his/her own work but of the 'zeitgeist' of the time which included an in-depth critique of modernism and modernist painting. In these paintings, former Abstract styles and individual paintings were viewed as ready-mades to be borrowed not for their aesthetic or formal values but as signs to be read in relation to one another or juxtaposed with other imagery to create new meaning.

Greenberg believed that "The essence of Modernism lies in the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." During this phase of 1980' & 90's abstraction, that could be called conceptual abstraction, critique was employed not in the Greenbergian sense but as a means to critique modernism and modernist painting. Although, the abstract paintings or the forms of the paintings that were appropriated were well known, for example, Sherrie Levine's re-creations of Malevich and El Lissitzky, Daniel Buren's Stripes, Rene van Halm's Jack Bush; the audience needed an understanding of contemporary art and cultural theories to be able to decode the work. Once the decoding was done, much of the work was seen to be didactic, one-liners. Mark Cheetham's book *Abstract Art against Autonomy* (2006), is a good review of the abstract art of this period. He focuses on one installation by General Idea, their Infected Mondrians (1994).

These were essentially repainted Mondrians' on foam core, minus their hand-made look, with sections of the paintings changed to green, and set on a ground of AIDS wall-paper. Thus the 'purity' of the Mondrians' were consciously 'Infected' both by the AIDS connotation and by the replacement of yellow by green, a colour that Mondrian equated with nature and a lack of formal 'purity'.

During this period, the importance of the original, individual style, and expressivity were left behind for a collaging approach that had more to do with early digital imaging techniques and advertising images than early 20th century

Janet Jones: 'De-stabilizing Abstraction'

collages by Picasso or Braque. In this collage approach, representational images or sections from an abstract painting could be sampled, re-painted and placed together. Initially these painted collages, for example the paintings of David Salle, retained a segmented and geometric structure, recalling advertising lay-outs, Synthetic cubism or the 'all at oneness' of multiple windows on a computer screen. But gradually the multiple inserts became biomorphic and less traceable to their sources. Jonathan Lasker's paintings retain the final vestiges of this approach.

By the mid-1980's, painters such as Peter Hailey, Sherrie Levine and Jack Goldstein, known as the *Picture Painters*, began to paint using simulations, already mediated representations, as their starting point. This was not a new process, Andy Warhol began his paintings from found media photographs, never meeting the people he represented. But the kind of simulated images the Picture Painters chose to paint might appear to be abstract. Through their choice of source material, they highlighted both the nature of the initial source material and the 'impurity' of their abstractions in relation to modernist abstraction, consciously over-turning medium specificity. Since then, painting has been 'infected' by simulation, in the form of 'the look' of photography, video and digital media.

Leading Up to 'Now'

The most used word right now in relation to painting is hybridity. Employed within one painting, the segmented collage approach of 'conceptual' abstraction is an early form of hybridity. This form calls attention to its hybridity by keeping the distinct images or samples separate within the composition, the interrelationships creating the meaning. This 'calling attention to' or "pointing out" as a compositional device has gradually become supplanted by a more seamless approach in which the diverse sources merge into one composition. In the earlier paintings, the samples were juxtaposed to lead to quite defined conceptual ideas.

Janet Jones: 'De-stabilizing Abstraction'

Now, as the sources merge they open up meaning to a 'constellation' of possibilities. However, hybridity not only refers to compositional strategies. Postcolonial critiques of modernism prompted the acceptance and integration of non-western or non-Eurocentric styles of abstraction. Right now, this 'in-betweenness', this mixing of cultural styles, appears acceptable only for those artists who are themselves straddling cultures, in part because of the stealing of what was termed 'primitive' art by early abstract painters.

The 'Picture Painters' self-consciously employed mediated images as their starting point for painting, subverting the medium of painting and the hand-made, through their references to technology. Recalling McLuhan's 'the medium is the message', they undid high modernist medium specificity, this 'move' in itself becoming a primary part of the content of their paintings. Now, painters no longer differentiate between mediated and unmediated source material, the gap between 'the real' and the simulated is unimportant and perhaps not even recalled, as a dazzling array of images mix in our minds.

The twentieth century debate between abstraction and representation now seems simply meaningless when any representational image can be made instantly abstract. This process occurs not through a complex analysis of structure, a desire to understand the 'essence' or universality of forms, or communicate emotion or spirituality but as a predetermined digital 'effect'. These 'morphings' can be created, used and sampled in the same way as all other images. The underlying utopian beliefs of 'pure' abstraction have, as well, been discredited. Abstraction remains, one possibility combined with many others, one layer of a painting, one way of imagining and presenting the 'unpresentable'.

Part Two

Artist Presentation:

Janet Jones: 'De-stabilizing Abstraction'

Focusing on the spaces of cyber-cities, contemporary cities such as Toronto, NY, Shanghai & Tokyo, which are overlaid with the virtual spaces of digital images, this artist presentation will examine how in my own painting practice I attempt to visualize this new immersive and destabilizing spatial experience. Referencing, but revisiting the 'Situationist' city, 'feminist geography', and the techno-sublime, I will explain my process that blurs the boundaries between painting, digital photography, film and performance.

Reflecting on the history of Greenbergian abstraction in painting, I will consider how 'disinterestness' and relative 'purity' have given way to engagement, media hybridity, and the interfacing of figuration and abstraction in my painting practice.