Hungry Eyes

by Monica Tap

The idea for *Hungry Eyes* arose from the observation that these days abstract painting has taken to feeding on a great variety of sources, histories, and influences. Abandoning the restrictive diets of mid-century Formalism, current abstraction tucks in with gusto, absorbing all manner of things into the infinitely mutable space of the canvas.

Drawing attention to the practices of several early- to mid-career artists in New York and Toronto, the exhibition was organized with a few basic assumptions in mind. First, that painting maintains its vitality by absorbing into itself "impurities" from the outside world; second, that *colour* in abstract painting can serve to locate a work in time, and that the palette employed by most of the artists in this exhibition is particularly resonant of the early 21st century; and third, that the material limitations of paint on a flat support afford important conditions for experimentation and freedom. The artists in *Hungry Eyes* share a concern for the possibility of beauty in abstract painting, an interest in the craft of painting, an understanding of and respect for the tradition in which they work, and a keen awareness of the moment in history at which they find themselves. The appetite of the exhibition's title refers as much to the viewer as to the artist. It speaks to painting's undiminished capacity to provide nourishment and sustenance, even in these hyper-visual times.

I've been meaning to tell you....[1]

> ...painting has continued by being continuously corrupted: by being made impure rather than pure; by being made ambiguous, uncertain and unstable; and by not limiting itself to its own competences. Painting has kept going by embracing rather than resisting that which might extinguish it..."[2]

In 1960, Clement Greenberg famously insisted that each discipline must attend to its own parameters[3] , which for painting meant its flat surface and colour. Out with narrative, out with

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[1]Carmen, Eric. "Hungry Eyes". Lyrics@Yimpan.com (http://:www.yimpan.com) 18 May 2002. The section headings in the text quote the opening verse of Carmen's song, which was the title track of the 1987 hit movie *Dirty Dancing*.

[2]Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. Reaktion: London, 2000: p. 100

[3]Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting" in *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* [The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4], edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1995: p. 85. Greenberg's words were "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, 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."

imagery, out with the theatrical, the poetic, the personal, the political, the referential, the reverential, out especially with the decorative ...(out, out, damned spots!) The post-Painterly Abstractionists championed by Greenberg, such as Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, sought to distill painting to an ever greater purity. But a funny thing happened: concurrent with Formalism's puritanical purge of content, Pop Art threw wide the doors to kitsch, text, media and the general cacophony of the world. Abstraction's fate was sealed when Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg beat out Morris Louis as the representative of advanced American art for the 1962 Venice Biennale.

"Novelty art", as Greenberg disparagingly named it, had won. Serious painting—by definition, abstract—came to see itself as a refuge from all that Pop so giddily embraced. It sought to create a universal language of pure opticality—a language to address the disembodied eye—self sufficient, content-less, restrained, and timeless. The very idea of a universal language—whose form was abstract painting, no less—was, in later decades, roundly attacked by post-Modern artists and critics. Their stern critiques and ironic jabs would lead almost—but not quite—to abstract painting's death by deconstruction.

The hungry eye sees things afresh. Restless, embodied, and defiantly of-this-world, the hungry eye has a big appetite and extravagant taste. It's looking for a way out of the dual impasses presented by Modernist puritanism and post-Modern deconstructivism.

I've got this feelin' that just won't subside...

It's a provocative irony that the way forward for abstract painting points simultaneously back to its history and origins. The reductive purity associated with Greenbergian Formalism is but one small part of a long tradition that is, upon examination, anything but unspoiled.

First, the term itself: "ab-stractus" literally implies the result of an act of withdrawal or turning away.[4] On the one hand, this can mean to abstract *from* (nature)—to reduce, to essentialize, to purify. On the other hand, an "abstraction" need not be abstracted from the visible world at all—an abstraction can instead be an attempt to record visually that which has no pre-existing form. Mathematical concepts, spiritual ideals, and mystical systems fall into this category. By definition, neither of these alternatives is "pure"—one takes as its starting point the visible world, the other the world of ideas or spirit.

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[4]Rachman, John, "Another View of Abstraction" in Benjamin, Andrew (ed.). *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts: Abstraction*, No. 5, 1995: p. 19

The latter proved especially significant in the development of abstract art. Pioneered almost a century ago by the European painters Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, abstraction's apparent freedom from the world of appearances was closely tied to notions of spirituality, mysticism and idealism. Kandinsky's ideas on abstraction had their basis in his close reading of theosophical writings, notions which he developed further in his influential text, *On the Spiritual in Art*. Popularized ideas about a geometric "fourth" dimension—the dimension in which space and time became unified—were essential to the art of Malevich. Mondrian, too, was a strong adherent of Theosophy. His use of contrasting vertical and horizontal lines and primary colours plus black and white had its basis in a system of opposites (male/female, light/dark) that he employed as equivalences to evoke the harmonious unity of opposites.[5]

In pre-war America, on the other hand, abstraction initially grew out of landscape painting, with artists nevertheless striving to reveal the mystical qualities understood to reside in nature. Theosophy, the occult, and ideas around the fourth dimension inform the works of Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe. Canadians such as Lawren Harris and Bertram Brooker were also believers.

A few decades later, American critic Harold Rosenberg reformulated the idea of purity as freedom not only from recognizable image, but also from value: political, aesthetic, or moral. He saw in the gesture of Abstract Expressionism the mark of liberation and authenticity. The canvas, he stated, was now "an arena in which to act" resulting not in "a picture, but an event."[6] This new purity, however, itself owed a considerable debt to the art and ritual of Native Americans, the ideas of Zen, and Carl Jung's theories of archetypal form. Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb were avid students and avowed practitioners of a deliberately spiritual, universalizing art firmly grounded in these "outside" concepts.

Pop artists and, subsequently, Minimalists would have no part of this. In their critiques and scathing send-ups of mid-century abstraction, they succeeded in irrevocably equating the look of abstraction with the idea of purity—an inflated balloon of an idea which they repeatedly gloried in bursting. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, as well as Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and Daniel Buren (among others on both sides of the Atlantic) poked away, holding target practice on the sacred cows of abstract art. And yet their use of apparently abstract means to lampoon abstraction ironically expanded the very territory

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[5]Tuchman, Maurice. "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art", *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986: p. 21

[6]Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters", *Art News 51* (September 1952): p. 344

under siege. Abstraction gradually mutated to include everything from narrative to humour, from the media to linguistics, from traditional textiles to new technology. Abstraction had the last laugh.

In the 1970s, Pattern-and-Decoration artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff fought to reclaim non-ironic content for abstraction. By embracing beauty and the decorative handicrafts historically associated with women's work, they furthermore sought to create a space in abstract painting for a feminist voice. They were quickly trumped by the deconstructivist artists who arose in the 1980s. "Neo Geo" artists like Peter Halley paradoxically lost no time in reconstructing the air of "cool detachment" required of all *truly* serious painting. One by one the components of abstraction were held up for ironic commentary: gesture, composition, colour, balance, serenity, dignity. This critique, like others before it, relied on the capacity of painting, and abstract painting in particular, to roll with the punches. Jonathan Lasker deconstructed and then reconstructed the grammar of abstraction and then used it to make new paintings, in oddball, confectionary colours. David Reed codified the gestural brushstroke, and cast it in the cool light of the cathode tube. The works of Fabian Marcaccio, Lydia Dona, and Alan McCollum invoke a similar kind of endgame *ennui*.

I look at you and I fantasize/ Be mine tonight...

> Abstraction was supposed to play a fatal if heroic part in a drama through which painting exposed and exhausted all its formal possibilities, leaving it with no other game than an endgame.... (B)ut it is not necessary to see it as a marker en route to extinction—instead of as an untimely point in a complicated history, *which goes off in several directions at once, redistributing theories of what comes before it, and what may yet come after*.[7]

It appears that, at least for the moment, the endgame is itself over. Current painting does not seem to be tied up in knots about anything, really. Gone even are the finely calibrated cynicisms of deconstruction. Curator Lars Bang Larsons claimed for "appropriation artists" the status of the "last generation of painters who possessed a common concern.... (By) narrowing down artistic mimesis to the area of already existing signs, they (...) accept(ed) the distinction between what the modern cultural economy defines as art and what it does not."[8]

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[7]Rachman, John, "Another View of Abstraction" in Benjamin, Andrew (ed.). *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts: Abstraction*, No. 5: p. 16 (my italics)

[8]Bang Larsen, Lars. *Display*, Lars Bang Larsen and Mikael Anderson, The Charlottenberg Exhibition Hall, Copenhagen, Denmark, 12 September-19 October 1997. Exhibition catalogue (trans. Dan A. Moorstein): p. 14

But much of the newest painting no longer bothers with such distinctions—instead, with almost Rabelaisian relish, it eyes all comers as fresh meat.

Painting, having digested the critiques and swallowed whole the critics, finds itself in possession of a huge surface and an unabated appetite. As Amy Cappallazo engagingly wonders in the introduction to *Glee: Painting Now*, "Is it my imagination, or does it seem that painting, particularly abstraction, has moved out into a new phase of self-awareness, confidence, entitlement?... (A)bstract painting, perhaps the most serious and headstrong form of the visual arts, can't take your call right now because it's out having a good time."[9]

The resulting enormous stylistic pluralism with which we are faced is both exhilarating and daunting. Does this surplus of quantity (of options) signify the end of quality? Is pluralism simply permissiveness by a nicer name? If there is no one true path, then how does one know that one is headed in the right direction? (As the old saying goes, "If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there.) On what does one base one's judgements?

Philosopher John Rachman's statement at the beginning of this section offers one possible response to this quandary. He reminds us that post-Modernism differs significantly from Modernism, in that, unlike the single-file progression of the latter (neat and orderly despite occasional bursts of leapfrogging and cutting in), post-Modernism is represented by a rhizome, a web, a network—multi-dimensional, messy, complex, non-hierarchical and moving simultaneously in any number of directions. Given this shift in perspective, perhaps we need to consider if we are indeed still asking the right questions. Perhaps, as Rachman states, by abandoning the endgame, painters can make possible a renewed engagement with *both* the past and the future. Their choices of which loose threads from the Modernist enterprise to pick up, of which elements from outside of art to welcome into the fray, of how to navigate the present moment in history—all these in turn affect both how we will read what came before and what may yet arise. There are many, many loose threads to choose from, and the artists in this exhibition have elected, naturally, to pick up the ones that most compel them.

_____ (line break or other indication of separation) * * *

Contemporary painting, whether in Toronto or New York, no longer bears the stamp of radical newness which once was associated with modernist art. While the local contexts and histories of the two cities differ significantly, as do their two nations, the artists' practices share a common language across the 49th parallel. [With regard to the eight artists in this exhibition],

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[9]Cappallazo, Amy. *Glee: Painting Now*. The Aldridge Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, 24 September-7 January, 2001. Exhibition catalogue: p. 1

At least two from Toronto have shown in New York, and two of the Americans have previously shown in Canada. All could be considered mid-career, and their ages range roughly from early thirties to late forties.

What these artists share is a sense of the possibility and potential of abstract painting. Freed from the confining discourses of both purity and irony, and aware of painting's current status as an artworld also-ran, they can get on with the job of making their work. Abstraction's inherent strengths continue to stand them in good stead. An abstract painting "self-conciously exhibits its own processes of formation and formulation."[10] It draws our attention to the experience of looking. It offers a space of contemplation while still containing echos of its earlier incarnations as a metaphysical or spiritual language. Its basic vocabulary of colour, form, surface and mark are far from exhausted.

The artists in the exhibition consider how colour, well, *colours* our world, and they use that knowledge to reflect back to us our post-industrial, prefabricated, plastic, pantone universe. Some employ forms that indirectly reference the world, while others engage in the play between figure and ground, imbricating one within the other as if to suggest the implied lack of hierarchy in post-Modernism. All are working within a manageable scale which is neither "heroic" nor "pathetic". They accept a certain set of limitations as the requisite ground on which to formulate their questions and pursue their interests. Surprising, for this moment in history, each of these painters actually paints. Well aware of post-Minimalist strategies that favour hardware-store rations, and contemporary sculptural and photographic practices that define themselves in relation to painting, these artists are nonetheless engaged in the craft of painting. Putting one colour next to another, knowing how long it will take to dry, understanding how to make one mark and not another—the intimacy of painting and the slowed-down time of studio practice continues unabated in their hands.

Now I've got you in my sights...

New York-based artist **Dan Walsh**'s paintings operate simultaneously within "real" space and "optical" space. Hung low to the ground, his horizontal canvases wittily recall display modules—shelves, schedules, charts—all rendered by hand in a decidedly upbeat palette. Both his use of colour and his choice of form slyly and gently reverberate with echoes of the familiar, the quotidian. Walsh is interested in the visual systems that we employ to organize information; those ubiquitous Modernist grids that assist us to order the chaos of our daily lives. The "boxes" in his paintings, for example, are drawn at a scale that is theoretically

[10]Moos, David. "Exhibiting Abstraction: Painting Past Language". *New York Abstraction: a Symposium*. Guelph, Ontario: MacDonald Stewart Art Centre. 1997

"useful"—that is, they are big enough to move stuff around in. Assuming an analogous "use value" for painting, he extends to the viewer a generous invitation to contemplate the syntax of the everyday.

Toronto-based painter **Elizabeth MacIntosh** makes colour-saturated, hyper-optical compositions that exploit the dual visual pleasures of repetition and variation. Literally "made up of themselves", the paintings describe their own limits with an engaging off-handedness. McIntosh intentionally courts discordant colour combinations and awkward compositions in an effort to keep the decorative in check. While her secret loves are found in the remainder bins of art book stores (Klimt and Hunterwasser lurk not so far beneath her playful jumble of jostling discs and layered lozenges), it is in relation to the work of the American minimalist/abstract painter Mary Heilmann that her work can most profitably be considered. Heilmann's straightforward paintings initially call to mind a "slacker" aesthetic with their apparently casual colour arrangements and provisionally painted surfaces. However, the flaccid geometry of her compositions belies a fierce visual intelligence and a "just the facts, ma'am" Minimalist rigour.

Like both Walsh and McIntosh, Brooklyn-based painter **Julie Sass** accomplishes a lot in paintings that appear at first to not take themselves too seriously. Unlike them, however, she grounds her work in representational painting. Armed with an eclectic arsenal of techniques and mark-making implements—ball-point pens, markers, and spray bombs, as well as paint on canvas—she creates paintings that engage the spaces of the real, the remembered, and the imagined. Daily drawings assist her to distil an initial image and to keep it, in her words, "on the edge of becoming something."[11] Sass recently began using multiple canvases as a means to consider notions of real space verses the space of painting. The smaller canvases are set as "disturbances" against the larger ones, related by proximity, if not by scale and vocabulary. In *NY # 10, 2001 Untitled*, noodly lines sprawl across wilted rectangles (perhaps in a cheeky allusion to Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*), while cartoony configurations below collapse in mock exhaustion.

David Urban's current paintings also originate in representational painting. Turning equally to nature and to art history for inspiration, his pictures evoke Titian, Hartley and early Mondrian. Cezanne is in there too, as Urban works through the pictorial problems of traditional abstraction—the investigation of figure/ground, the foregrounding of the mark, the use of nature-derived forms as an underlying grid to organize the space of the canvas. Invoking T.S. Eliot's 1928 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Urban recently mused how "Central to that (essay) is the paradox that you are most yourself when you are under the spell of

[11] In conversation with the artist, April 22, 2002

somebody else."[12] His paintings have a kind of evanescent quality—they appear to simultaneously construct themselves and dissolve before one's very eyes. Urban's current work contains traces of his earlier jazz-inspired abstractions, which themselves alluded loosely to the grammatical structures of Jonathan Lasker's painting. The new work retains the engaging awkwardness of those earlier paintings, but their reading is slowed down and complicated by his use of densely layered impasto brushwork. Urban's work offers the possibility of an intelligent, un-ironic homage to and continuation of early twentieth-century abstraction.

Alternative painting methods and hybrid references inform the work of both **Jane Fine** and Steven Charles. Fine's work begins with pours of toxic-hued paint—a recipe she carefully developed with the technicians at Golden Acrylic. These pours, like inkblots, begin to suggest narratives and thus enact a reverse abstraction, one where the abstract gives rise to the pictorial structure. (As a studio strategy, this evokes Andy Warhol's Rorschach paintings, but also calls to mind the 18th century British landscape painter, Alexander Cozens, who would invent from an ink stain a complete countryside; or earlier yet, Leonardo da Vinci, who would improvise from cracks he spied in the ceiling a rogue's gallery of portraits.) Using markers and ballpoint pens, Fine ornaments, extends, teases, and refines the blobs and globs of her initial pours. There's an element of schoolgirl doodling to her work—the *horror vacui* impulse that overflows textbook margins. While noted figurative artists like Karen Kliminik, Lisa Yuskasage and Amy Sillman make paintings that picture female preadolescence, Fine plonks herself smack into the middle of that ethos, employing a 'grade four language' to make paintings that in the end are equal parts Dr. Seuss and Dame Edna. On her studio wall are pictures of ornate multi-tiered wedding cakes. In her VCR is a tape of a Jetsons animated cartoon that she loved as a girl. And, indeed, Fine has stated that she is looking to "animate" abstraction.

Steven Charles, too, begins his vividly coloured work with an accidental drip or pour. Riffing off Pollock or, more recently, Lydia Dona, he tilts his canvas this way and that to control the direction of the drip. This creates a series of interconnected paths, which he painstakingly re-traces with ever-finer lines until the solid line gives way to a broken line, which in turn is refined to a series of dots. Reckless colour, in Charles' hands, is applied at a snail's pace. His paintings have been called "information-age abstractions, multi-tasking abstractions"[13] for their retina-ripping palette and network of associations, from mosiacs and aboriginal dot

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[12]Quoted in: Enright, Robert. "An interview with David Urban: The Miraculous Questions of Looking". Border Crossings. Vol 20, No. 4, issue no. 80:18-31.

[13]Volk, Gregory. "Steven Charles' Regenerative Abstractions." Steven Charles crclgogobaronst. Brooklyn, NY: Peirogi, 2001. Exhibition catalogue.

painting to biological systems. Time-filling, obsessive, optically-stunning—equal parts mapping and Peter Max—Charles' work embraces the decorative impulse in abstraction so fully and exuberantly that Greenberg's warnings against this "sin" waft harmlessly away; little puffs of Puritanism blown off by a full-on attack of wilful gorgeousness.

Minimalist artists often used strategies of process, repetition, and industrial manufacture to distance the work from the artist's touch (with its problematic associations to ideas of "authenticity"). Both Paul Campbell and Jordan Broadworth accept the gauntlet thrown down to the "artist's hand" by the Minimalists.

Paul Campbell has quite literally picked up the loose threads left behind by Minimalism. In his String Series paintings, he snaps paint-soaked strings onto the flat surface of the canvas. Butterfly-like marks of surplus paint record the point at which his fingers held the string taut. He gains even greater distance from his work when he sets a small army of remote control cars, robots and ambulatory toys into motion. Literally at a remove from his canvas, Campbell steers his "assistants", some with brushes attached, some pre-dipped in colour to track paint over the prepared monochrome ground of the canvas. More than one marking device is used per canvas, the sequential layers separated by additional coats of colour suspended in encaustic. The finished paintings exist as a record of these "events" and offer a palimpsest of pirouettes, lyrical trails and meanderings for the viewer to follow. Like most painters operating in this zone of LeWittian process/detachment, his process is not free from loopholes or imperfections. While his "brushes" are eccentric, the support, colour, and even composition are still very much under his control. Winking, he admits that he's "rolling the dice with a stacked deck."[14]

Jordan Broadworth applies his gestures surgically, laying in his trademark "question mark" drip with a syringe. In an elaborate game of timing he determines the optimal moment at which to squeegee back the paint in order to make ghosts of the drips and thus reveal the underlying geometry of the painting's initial composition. Like Campbell's work, Broadworth's paintings refer simultaneously to field (all-over) painting and to the tradition of the monochrome. Within this initially dichotomous structure, Broadworth instigates further dialogues—between figure and ground, geometric structure and curvilinear gesture, presence and absence. This question and answer, a literal give and take, sets up a rich dialogue with the process of the painting's own making.

...With these hungry eyes

[14] In conversation with the artist, April 22, 2002

> "How we perceive paintings is changed by things outside of painting. ...Once painting was prized for its sense of movement, its ability to capture bodies in motion, whether those bodies were clouds, ballet dancers, squiggles of colour, gestural bolts or busy pattern, but now, in the face of so many moving images, so much rapid cutting from one image to another, painting may have become valuable for its stability, its unchanging nature. There it is, once and for all, committed to this particular configuration, offering the same form to which you can return many times."[15]

When asked to describe or categorize a painting in which there is no identifiable image, many will default to the word "abstract". Defined in terms of what it is not—not figurative, not narrative, not theatrical, not literary, not illusionistic—abstraction has long been associated with negation or absence. This negation, ironically, became more acute as the critiques of abstraction's (now) suspect embrace of universality and social idealism grew in intensity during the latter part of the 20th century. Lost in the fracas was a more optimistic sense of the possibilities open to a medium and a genre at heart so open, accommodating and generous.

In *One Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze proposes an alternative theoretical construct for contemporary abstraction in which he replaces the provisional "not" with a prodigious "and". He sees abstraction as capable of pushing art forms "beyond and beside themselves, causing their very language, as though possessed with the force of other things, to start stuttering 'and, ...and....and...'" This sort of abstraction, which is able to see in dead movements new ways of proceeding and to poach merrily from the world at large, suggests something of which we may still be quite capable, a prospect still with us and before us.[16]

The works by the artists in this exhibition propose an alternative, affirmative basis for contemporary abstract painting. The paintings embrace the generous and prodigious "and" that Deleuze offers. Painting and ..., painting and display, and structure, and doodles, and princess castles, and art history, and digital technology, and drips and scrapes and kitsch and toy cars and candy and a whole lot of colour. Painting indeed as a feast for hungry eyes.

Monica Tap
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[15]Rubenstein, Raphael. "In Praise of Plasticity." *New York Abstraction: A Symposium*. Guelph, Ontario: MacDonald Stewart Art Centre. 1997

[16]Rachman, John. Op. Cit.

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