

on condition

Painting Between Abstraction and Representation

As an artist and educator I am engaged by the questions surrounding painting in current practice. In selecting these artists and their work for this exhibition, I have had the opportunity to identify and consider some of the issues raised by painting when it is positioned between abstraction and representation: *when the reference in the painting challenges abstraction or when abstraction informs or structures reference.*

on condition presents recent paintings by twelve contemporary artists, paintings which differ in appearance and intention. Working within painting's material definition, that is, the application of paint to a flat, prepared surface, each artist establishes a unique approach to painting's history and to current critical issues, engaging the language(s) of abstraction with the methods, systems and/or conventions of representation. The character of that engagement is qualified by the references the artist introduces and negotiates and the forms of visual abstraction—color, shape and line— which are employed.

Considering these paintings individually, each may appear to operate entirely within the terms of representation or abstraction. Yet upon closer examination, one senses that the works hold an uneasy allegiance to either position, and that the images in each painting continue to shift association, offering finally a synthesis of meaning.

It is instructive to consider how meaning is joined, how synthesis is achieved. Rohrer, Sisto, Statsinger and Wolff willingly embrace their references and the specific spatial illusion necessary to convince, but then set their images to work, challenging that very illusion through the deliberate editing of the imagery selected, or through reductive methods of painting.

Doremus, Kim, Rohrer and Rosen investigate abstract systems of visual calligraphy, sign or spoken language. These paintings allow the mind to read, to mouth their silent but insistent speech.

Chunn, Dona, Moreno, Sisto and Statsinger employ various combinations of cultural, political, diagrammatic or signifying methods of image-making toward deliberate ends. They further augment meaning by fragmenting those images, thus building their paintings through juxtaposition, substitution or cancellation.

Heilmann and Nozkowski develop full and varied surfaces, transparent and opaque, in which the procedure of form-making is a transference of subjective, physical experience. Their forms adhere to the canvas as forms themselves, the complete image neither larger nor smaller than itself: a representation of an abstraction.

Further examination of each artist's method of painting and the speed of each painting's assembly offers additional distinctions and nuances of meaning: Chunn, Moreno, Nozkowski, Rohrer and Statsinger have developed organic, hybrid strains of visual images, patiently grafting illusion to flatness or signification to primary shape, color or painterly accumulation. Dona, Doremus and Heilmann have established their vocabulary through replication, even acceleration, allowing (dis)similar visual forms or passages of painting to collide or impulsively cover-over, before suddenly braking to a stop. Kim and Rosen have lifted language, and Sisto and Wolff have lifted images, selectively but in near seamless entirety; in their work, the reference/system exists independently and outside of the painting as both a representation and an abstraction.

Encountering these paintings, one surely will recognize a (self)conscious consideration of several art-historical precedents, including the subjective, disjunctive revelations of Surrealism, the scale, authority and painterly gestures of Abstract Expressionism, and the unabashed transfer and elevation of cultural iconography found in Pop and recent appropriation art. While these historical factors have provided some of the intellectual foundation from which the artists work, the paintings presented in this exhibition are also constructed with an awareness of the critical and theoretical reassessment of those very precedents within our current (and continuously redefined) cultural context. Assembled here, these images offer evidence of an enriched position for painting, one gained through weighing the requirements of both abstraction and representation, and calibrating their relative and mutual influences.

Curator, Julia Fieh