

# The New York Times

## **An Era Still Driven to Abstraction**

**By Holland Cotter**

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YOU wouldn't know it from this year's Whitney Biennial, or from "Abstraction in the 20th Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline" at the Guggenheim last spring, but abstract painting in America is alive and in guarded but stable condition.

The Guggenheim survey took a lot of well-deserved flak for its snubbing of contemporary work. And now, a year later, three concurrent group shows of abstract painting -- at Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island, at Hunter College and at the Art in General gallery in TriBeCa -- are making an effort to fill the historical gap.

They come nowhere near succeeding, of course. Abstract art is a subject as slippery as it is huge. A sharp-focus examination can miss its scope; an overview can produce an inchoate sprawl. Almost any selection comes down to a personal choice, inviting endless second-guessing and critical pique.

But if the subject is impossible to broach, it is also too important to ignore. Abstract art is one of the great cultural innovations of the century, at least in the West. It offers new modes of visual pleasure; it embodies speculative thought in concrete form; and, utopian to the core, it rests on the faith that audiences will follow its radical path.

A section of that path is mapped out in an ambitious but oddly sparkless exhibition titled "After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting Since 1970," organized by Lilly Wei at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor.

The show has striking twists and turns. With 70-plus artists on hand, how could it not? But overall, it feels halting and scattershot, with major figures missing (Brice Marden, Robert Ryman and Cy Twombly to name just three) and too many worthy but lesser lights included.

The "Fall" of the title refers to the period in the 1970's when the cry of "Painting is dead!" was trumpeted through the art world. Ms. Wei, who has written often and well about abstraction, clearly considers the obituary to have been premature and has set out to prove so here.

In terms of numbers, she succeeds. More than 150 works, many of them large-scale, fill the Newhouse, organized roughly by decade: 1970's on the ground floor of the center's main hall, 1980's upstairs, 1990's in a separate wing. But the series of loose and imprecise descriptive categories she proposes within that framework are problematic.

"Minimalist abstraction," for example, admits both Erik Saxon's hard-edge neo-Suprematist panels (1978) and James Bishop's tiny, tremulous architectonic forms (1987). And while Porfirio DiDonna's spare, teal-blue "Jamaica" (1977) would seem a natural candidate for this group, it comes under "geometric abstraction" with Mary Heilmann's vibrantly brushed grids (1982) and Harriet Korman's tilting linear networks (1996).

Amid such arbitrary formalist sortings, chances are missed to explore bigger ideas, the kind that make abstraction a vital, complicated, challenging mode. There's a story to be told, for example, about how gestural painting, with roots in Abstract Expressionism, has changed in the last 30 years from a language of transcendence and feeling to one of skeptical intellectual inquiry. Hanging Joan Mitchell's passionate, golden "Sunflowers" (1981) beside one of Jonathan Lasker's "conceptual" paintings of disjointed, applied forms might spearhead such an argument, but the two works are kept rooms and worlds apart.

Overall, though, "After the Fall" favors abstraction about feeling, a bias that tends to give the show a conservative cast but that also provides whatever cohesion it has. And Ms. Wei's carefully judged installation works best when it underscores the contemplative intimacy that remains one of abstract painting's strong suits.

In each of several small, cell-like upstairs rooms, for example, she has placed three or four pieces. In one instance, Mitchell's painting shares a space with those by Louise Fishman and Margrit Lewczuk, suggesting the edgy romantic sensibility these artists share. In another, a big, brushy Katherine Porter painting hangs near others by John L. Moore and Gregory Amenoff, pointing up the psychologically charged landscape elements in each.

Such epiphanies are welcome, as are the pleasures afforded by many terrific single pieces throughout the show. But these isolated moments can't substitute for the cogent themes or lines of argument that "After the Fall," for all its valorous effort, lacks.

Two other, smaller concurrent shows of abstract work deserve note. "Turning the Corner: Abstraction at the End of the 20th Century," organized by Wayne R. Dynes at Hunter College, gathers the work of 10 painters, 2 of whom (Ms. Korman and Mr. Lasker) also appear at Snug Harbor.

Here again, an academic, compare-and-contrast emphasis on formal variety is at play, as one moves from the pigment-encrusted surfaces of Richard Timperio's paintings to the slick surfaces of Neal Myers's photo-based pieces, which emulate the appearance though not the form of painting. As in the larger show, the real interest lies in the contributions of individual artists: the closely wrought geometric abstractions of Roy Newell, now 83, and the wispy veil-like painting of Larry Potter, who died in 1966.

Finally, a show titled "Abstracted and Unfixed," organized by the artists Hiram Rodriquez-Mora and Richard Tsao at Art in General in TriBeCa, brings abstraction squarely into the present, with interesting, if coincidental, cross-generational connections to work at the Newhouse. Lillian Ball updates a 1968 Lynda Benglis poured-latex painting exhibited there. John Hogan's relief of plaster droplet shapes scattered across a wall echo a fragmented painting by Elizabeth Murray.

Katurah Hutcheson's cracked paintings on carpet bring Milton Resnick's impastoed surfaces to mind. And Darrell Shoub's cluster of circular paintings recalls a beautiful mandalalike tondo by Marilyn Lerner at Snug Harbor.

From all three of these shows one wants more: namely, some larger sense of what's at stake in abstraction itself as the century turns. But together they confirm the existence of links in a great tradition, and project a picture of a future that is at least viable, and possibly even bright.

"After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting Since 1970" remains at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Livingston, S.I., through June 29. "Turning the Corner: Abstraction at the End of the 20th Century" remains at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, Lexington Avenue at 68th Street, through May 10. "Abstracted and Unfixed" remains at Art in General, 79 Walker Street, TriBeCa, through tomorrow.