

Timothy Taylor Gallery

Content is a Glimpse

7th November - 21st December, 2001

Willem de Kooning once declared that “content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash”. When these fleeting encounters occur, the simplest abstract mark can attain meaning, with inevitable associations to an image gone before it. Abstraction and figuration are not mutually exclusive.

In de Kooning’s late paintings the implication of a synthesis of abstraction and figuration is fully expressed. In a painting just released from the estate and never previously exhibited to the public, these briefly glimpsed, figurative undulations of colour have a youthful and lithe shimmy. The pared down forms are a serene expression of the artist’s freedom to develop in the last years of his life. These late paintings contain the essence of a lifetime of images.

Philip Guston was the only other Abstract Expressionist able to maintain his artistic freedom against the constraints of his own career. The late figurative ‘impure’ style that emerged out of Guston’s abstract painting uses bold and almost banal images. ‘Ledge’, painted in the last year of Guston’s life, is at once powerful and intangible. Figurative imagery becomes the medium through which the unknown can emerge. “There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art. That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyse its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is ‘impure’. It is the adjustment of ‘impurities’ which forces its continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden.”

Juan Usié integrates everything that we see in our visual reality into abstract painting. In ‘Welcome to the Eye’, the lighting of computer screens and discotheques is synthesised with expressionist daubings. The all-over compositions are about constant movement. Flashes of energy are taken to their extreme in paint.

In Jessica Stockholder’s work readymade objects become the medium. Dislocation from their traditional associations is essential. Although indebted to, and engaged with, painting Stockholder rejects painting’s most basic and definitive restriction to the two-dimensional surface. The works are abstract and painterly juxtapositions of objects with flat painted areas of colour. These are not to be regarded so much as sculpture and more as a three-dimensional reinvention and liberation of painting.

Jonathan Lasker’s thickly pasted scrawls and hieroglyphic forms float above, or are gouged into, brightly inexpressive and monochrome backgrounds. The conflicts between abstract and figurative, geometry and gesture, flatness and relief, reality and illusion are staged. “For a while now, I have been aware that my paintings are not truly abstract. Essentially, it comes down to the use of subject matter. Not in the sense of narrative, but by using aspects of abstraction for their content value and thereby building discursive themes into ‘abstract’ painting.”

Transcendent meanings are carried in Sean Scully’s abstract language of deeply felt brushstrokes, atmospheric lighting and evocative titles. Emotion and visual experience are reduced to coloured stripes. Scully’s self-imposed privation of form means that minor shifts in style totally transform the weight and depth of his painting.

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A gentle nudge of the body of paint away from the canvas edge releases the brushstrokes from gravitational pressure into euphoric freedom.

Painting's power to wed the retinal with the conceptual is explored in the work of Guillermo Kuitca. Controlled and precise monochrome surfaces and careful draughtsmanship discards gesturalism and improvisation, while the blotches and irregularities undermine dogma and mechanical perfection. The fragmented images of theatre plans, memory and dreams become abstracted and operate as mysterious icons.