Visual Stimulants

While it is commonly assumed that abstract art in the West reached its zenith, some might say its conclusion, by the late 1960s, its aesthetic residue continues to linger, albeit in an often skeptical critical atmosphere. Perhaps on some levels it did reach its conclusion, at least in terms of its own discourse. In the writings of the time, most of them based in New York, the discussion of colour and support as the fundamental elements of painting reached such eloquence that convincing claims were made that abstraction epitomized the essence of art. Post-painterly, hard-edge and colour-field painting were the models employed to illustrate these claims, and the relationship between critics and artists was an often symbiotic one. Rigourous theoretical parameters were constructed that secured abstract painting from the annoying narrative of everyday life. Ad Reinhardt, who made both beautiful and tough paintings, summed it up by proclaiming that "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else."[1] Pop Art and Conceptual Art countered these claims by presenting work that elevated the trashiness of popular culture and the most mundane of physical actions into the realm of high art. They debunked abstraction as the

proprietor of truth in art and rendered its presumptions as distanced, elitist and exhausted. By the end of the 1960s, abstract painting retreated into the background of progressive art; after all, once the deduction that a painting consisted of material form was achieved, where was there left to go?

In recent years, a resurgence of abstract art has been evident internationally in the work of a relatively young generation of artists. The generalizations that have come to summarize high modernist abstract painting – the primacy of its physical presence, the quest for universality, the integration of materials and what they represent – have been acknowledged, at times incorporated, and simultaneously interrogated. The confidence surrounding the project of modernist painting is replaced by indifference to dogma and acceptance of a world of increasing polyvalence and uncertainty. While much of the new abstraction appears visually related to the formalist concerns prevalent in the 1960s, it arises from distinctly different aesthetic and philosophical intentions, ones ironically linked more to the legacy of both Pop and Conceptual art. In the new abstraction there exists a desire to question its autonomy and return it to the realm of the everyday.

1. Rheinhardt, Ad, "Art-as-Art," in *Art as Art: The Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, Ed. Barbara Rose, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p.53.
2. In Canada, innovative conceptual approaches to painting and abstraction were explored as early as the mid-1970s at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design by artists such as Garry Neill Kennedy, Jeffrey Spalding, Eric Cameron, and Gerald Ferguson, but the work had little impact beyond Canada.

The regeneration of abstract art, and its referents to the 1960s, extends back to the 1980s in New York as exemplified in the work of artists such as Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, and Philip Taaffe.[2] Built into their practice were conceptual underpinnings that contested originality and the heroic imprint of individuality, so important to painting two decades earlier. It was a reaction against not only the often prescriptive agenda of modernism, but also what was considered the painterly excess of Neo-Expressionism in the early 1980s. It can be argued, however, that both Levine and Halley now possess a signature style and have reached a degree of prominence that position them as originators. Levine, first recognized for her photographic appropriation, made paintings in the mid-1980s that condensed the emblematic trademarks of modernist abstraction through her use of stripes and checkerboards. Her paintings humourously mimicked gameboards, which suggested that the enterprise of abstraction was perhaps a game. They were presented in unheroic small-scale formats that made for a more intimate encounter than the often monumental canvases they referenced. Peter Halley continues to make paintings that refer to the look of 1960s abstraction and have configurations that are diagrammatic of cells and conduits, and in turn, of systems of regulation in the social and technological world. The supposed neutrality of geometry is exposed as a sign of control, and he transforms the purity of the square into something more akin to a prison cell.

The intent of these artists was not to institute a new style or paradigm. Instead, they endeavoured to expand, and simultaneously question, a visual language that was considered complete and closed, yet for them still unfulfilled – a kind of perverse admiration for work that they believed was serious and rigourous, but that they ultimately felt compelled to deconstruct. In writing about these artists, Thomas Crow observed that the renewed interest in abstraction arose out of modernism's enervation, "where it has been freed from its own history and made available, like the liberated signifiers of advertising and commercial entertainment, to endless rearranging and repackaging."[3] By appropriating a style and placing the conceit of originality in a subordinate role, and by presenting meditations on ideas other than the aesthetic, these artists established another set of rules in the evolution of Western abstract art. More than fifteen years later, the territory that their work opened up continues to allow artists to embark on new ways of exploring the language of abstraction.

In comparison to the work of the 1980s, the work today is less preoccupied with the so-called death of modernist abstraction. Pleasure in the visual and engagement with materials play a fundamental role, and these are pursued without guilt. Abstraction's emphasis on form and colour, in essence its decorative qualities, offers the challenge of new possibilities, and many artists today seem at ease with a practice less dependent upon predominantly critical principles. The underlying anxiety that touches a Levine painting is not present. But this does not suggest that their intentions lack seriousness. Abstraction and the visual are not taken for granted; instead, they provide a vehicle with which other concerns can be considered.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the preoccupation with linear progression and a concept of the *new* – in which a tendency builds upon or is in contradistinction to the one that preceded it – has been blemished by an interest in the *retro*. It is part of a cycle that finds the art and popular culture of previous decades becoming material for re-interpretation by a generation too young to have experienced them directly. The 1960s (now conflated with the 1970s in terms of style) has sustained itself in *retro* culture for nearly two decades – in fashion, music, colour trends, automobile purchases, graphic design, television, and movies. It is not unlike the scenario that Crow described about modernism, in which history ceases to be tied to a moment, and thus becomes "liberated" and "available." The *new* is no longer exclusively equated with creating something unprecedented or unique, but now incorporates reprocessing the past.

3. Crow, Thomas, "The Return of Hank Herron," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986, p.16.

Angela Leach, Ken Singer and Jeremy Stanbridge present emphatic visual statements that directly or indirectly refer to the aesthetic of the 1960s. The eye is thoroughly engaged, and the presence of abstraction is insistent. High visual impact is synonymous with the 1960s. The explosion of super graphics, Day-Glo colours, drug culture, psychedelia, and emerging technologies were emblems of a liberated popular culture that saw itself breaking loose from the conformity of the 1950s. Op Art, in particular, was involved in an exploration of the relationship between colour and shape and the way it determined optical reception; it was the most extreme visual proposition in the art of the decade. One of its achievements was the creation of vibrating or pulsating illusions on a two dimensional surface. It is indebted to European Constructivism rather than American abstraction, and was more engaged in scientific, mathematical and technological exploration than in aesthetic meditations. Both, however, set out to avoid all reference to representation in order to lend primacy to the eye. Yet, unlike the public's seeming incomprehension of modernist painting and its utopian intentions, Op Art was embraced by popular culture; its special effects bordered on entertainment, and it was immediately incorporated into design and fashion.

The fascination with Op Art was brief and though it has been discredited as a serious contender in art history, it has been appearing increasingly on museum walls. Many younger artists are embracing its exaggerated visual sensation, a sensation which parallels the intensity of the digital revolution's visual theatrics. Leach, Singer and Stanbridge, while undoubtedly conscious of cybergraphics, maintain a loyalty to a hands-on process in making their work, and to the physicality of the object.

Of the three artists in this exhibition, Angela Leach's paintings have the most resonance with the visual experience of Op Art. Her combination of colour and shape creates charged optical effects, which, like the work of the preeminent British Op artist Bridget Riley, attain a three dimensional illusion not based upon perspectival principles. Leach has configured intricate and interlocking patterns that defy the flat surface of the painting's support, and the small scale or unusual proportions of her paintings intensify an undulating visual energy that seems poised to burst beyond the edges.

Leach makes cardboard templates of simple shapes that are used to construct repeated and layered patterns into complex designs. Once the design and colour are determined, there remains the lengthy procedure of filling in the spaces, with each painting taking several weeks to complete. The latter is basically mechanical, allowing a meditative state to prevail where the mind can wander as the patterns come into being. Her paintings are systematic in construction, both in her use of a template and in her palette, which currently consists of thirty-two colours that are applied in an order specific to each work. By

restricting the colour range, she challenges herself to create a different effect each time she makes a painting. Despite the systems she adheres to, there exists an element of discovery as she does not always know what the final product will be until it nears completion. For the viewer, the logic of her colour arrangements is difficult to ascertain – especially in the paintings that are cross-hatched – so what seems a purely aesthetic preoccupation includes deciphering an idiosyncratic methodology.

Educated in textiles and design as well as art, Leach makes her living as a weaver working on a hand loom producing fabric for clothing. Her employment as a labourer and her work as an artist are integrated; in both she works with strands of colour that are constructed into patterns of contained and repeated designs. The colours she incorporates into her paintings are not unrelated to those of the wool used to make fabric, rugs or tapestries. In this sense, she considers herself as much informed by a craft sensibility as she is by visual art. But more importantly, while the paintings she makes appear exclusively rooted in abstract art, they are also based in the things that comprise our living environment, from the clothes we wear to the carpets we walk upon.

Ken Singer's pieces are the least visually aggressive in the exhibition, and convey a subtler image of abstraction, something closer in tenor to an Olitski or a Reinhardt. Although his are the only works in the exhibition not painted in a traditional manner, they initially read as

paintings. Singer was trained in art school as a painter, but now challenges himself with making works that look like painting, but are technically not. Non-traditional materials such as polyurethane and Plexiglas are used to create depth, leaving the impression of an 'empty' space between the surface and the ground. The colour is created by the use of household paint swatches garnered from the paint store and placed beneath a thick layer of polyurethane. When strategically lit, this 'glazing' causes the colour to modulate as the viewer passes in front of the work and thus activates the process of looking. For Singer, this physical interaction is essential to the experience of the work.

The dense patterns that cover the surface are made by felt markers that function as a substitute for the touch of the brush. With the markers he has better control, and there is no need to reload the brush, but simply replace the marker once it begins to run dry. Like Leach, Singer also invests many hours in completing each work and his endurance, both mentally and physically, is put to test. The imprint of this endurance is evident in the inconsistency of the patterns: the lines that span the surface waver and are uneven; the intensity of the markings varies as the marker runs dry or as Singer approaches fatigue; and the viewer is witness to the remnants of a 'performance' documented in the finished piece.

Singer uses the visual appeal of abstraction, and its supposed neutrality, as a decoy. Upon closer inspection, the marks on the surface reveal themselves as unbroken

lines of words that are repeated until the surface is covered. Singer has remarked that, "this process transforms the work from abstraction to 'readable,'" and in turn, suggests a narrative – a narrative that alludes to a multitude of interpretations through repetition.[4] Using titles like *Indifference* and *Ambivalence*, he appears to be making a statement about futility. But his aesthetic tactics and the commitment to his process could also be interpreted as a way to counter a perceived wariness towards the decorative and the political within the visual arts. This becomes more evident in *The Dangers of Peace*, where the words "violence," "jargon," "memory," "institution" and "tragedy" emerge as signifiers central to the impact of political agendas on people's lives. In this respect, visual pleasure and social consciousness converge.

The visual impact found in Jeremy Stanbridge's paintings is predicated upon the interaction between positive and negative space. Depending upon what the viewer focuses on, the paintings read either as a congested clustering of island-like shapes on a topographic map or as some viscous-like webbing that appears three dimensional. Moving from one perceptual experience of the painting to the other requires an actual optic shift,

4. Artist's statement, December 1999.

which is unsettling as it is difficult to determine which is the intended image. The complexity of the composition frustrates the eye's ability to rest in any one place, creating a circumstance where apprehension of the painting in its entirety is nearly impossible. Submerged within the paintings are stripes, circles or chevrons, and this is where Stanbridge's reference to the 1960s lies. His paintings loosely cite those of Kenneth Noland, an artist who employed what he considered neutral geometrical designs whereby colour and form were one and the same, and who stained his canvas with pigment to create a flat surface. But Stanbridge defiles the neutrality of geometry by making his designs appear to be in a state of disintegration and by forsaking flatness to make the surface volumetric.

Stanbridge constructs his images by first drawing a geometric design, chevrons in the case of this exhibition, and then veiling it with a pattern of rounded shapes. The space between these shapes emerges as a distinct element through his application of bands of colour that recede in tone. He then chooses a colour for the rounded shapes with which to activate the surface. As in the work of Leach and Singer, this is a systematic and time consuming process, with the labour being an intrinsic part of the artist's, as well as the viewer's, experience of the painting.

Although Stanbridge clearly references abstraction, and looks beyond its self-referentiality, he presents a more ambiguous reading of his paintings than Leach or Singer.

The odd, biomorphic shapes he concocts provoke subliminal associations and bring the psychological into play. He is interested in the way abstract shapes can be related to reality, and the forms he develops are derived from an unlikely amalgamation of sources: comic books, microscopic cells, video games, and even wallpaper. On the one hand, his paintings seem like a drape of camouflage webbing, tattered and vulnerable; on the other hand, the same pattern could also be interpreted as some mercurial substance oozing down the surface. But this is only speculation, and while Stanbridge exploits the familiar, the forms in his paintings evade explanation and appear poised at the edge of transformation.

Abstraction and the visual are central components of this exhibition. Yet lurking behind the apparent aesthetic concerns are intentions and processes that draw upon personal experience, popular culture, and everyday life. This is where their work deviates from the tenets of modernist abstraction of the 1960s. Rather than considering art as something separate from "everything else," Leach, Singer and Stanbridge consider "everything else" as integral to art.

KEITH WALLACE

ANGELA LEACH

Angela Leach was educated at the Sheridan College of Crafts and Design, Mississauga, and the Ontario College of Art, Toronto. She has exhibited widely in Ontario, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant in Toronto, McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, and Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto. This is her first exhibition in Vancouver. Leach is represented by Wynick/Tuck Gallery.

KEN SINGER

Ken Singer graduated from the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design in 1998. He has exhibited at the Third Avenue Gallery in Vancouver and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Singer is represented by the Third Avenue Gallery.

JEREMY STANBRIDGE

Jeremy Stanbridge graduated from the University of Victoria in 1994. He has exhibited at Artists Space in New York, Open Space in Victoria, Anodyne Gallery in Vancouver, and the Vancouver Art Gallery.