

Art in America

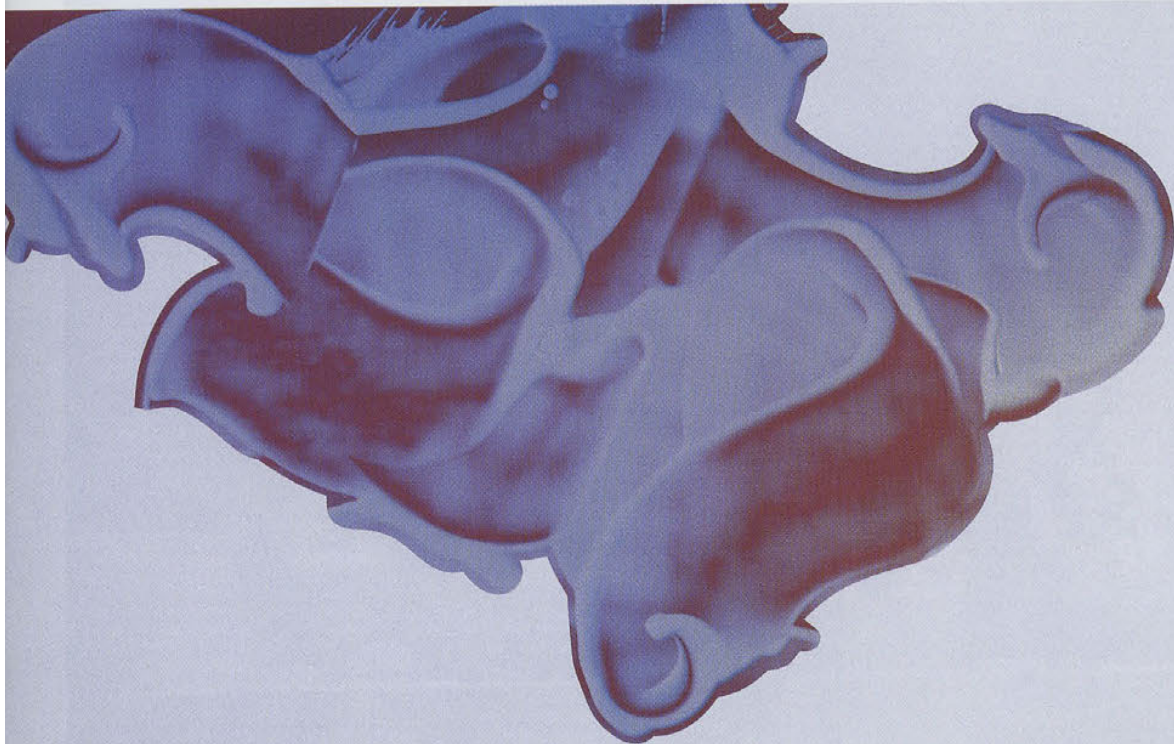
NOVEMBER 1997

Barbara Kruger
Extended Abstraction
Lyon Biennial
Site Santa Fe



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Abstraction Out of Bounds

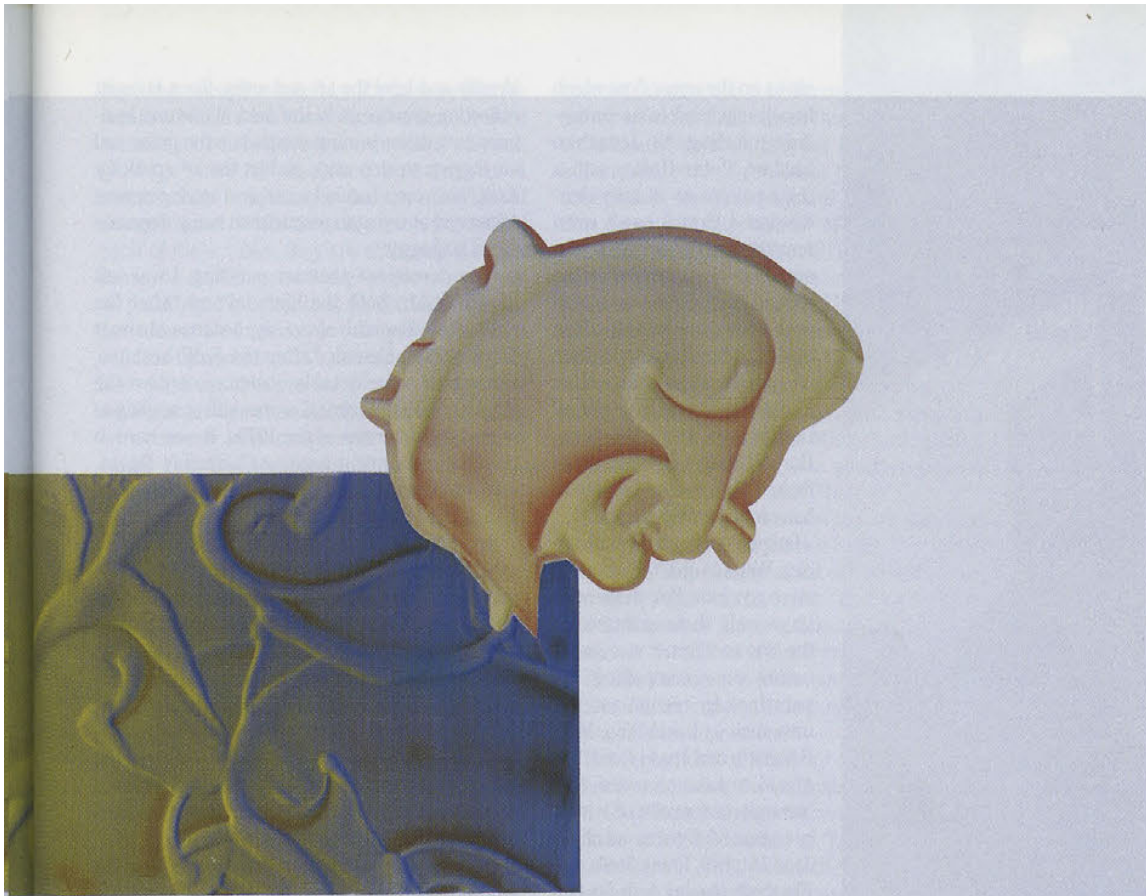
How has abstract painting weathered the challenges of the 1990s? In the first of two articles, the author examines five New York artists who are using sculptural form, installation, digitally altered video and blatant illusionism to redefine their mediums.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

I'm sure I wasn't the only observer to be struck by the virtually total absence of abstract painting at the 1997 Whitney Biennial. The closest the exhibition came to nonrepresentational painting—which was pretty far—was in the decorative but clearly image-laden paintings of Lari Pittman, the all-over porno-doodles of Sue Williams and Richard Prince's canvases in which oil-stick-and-acrylic patches of scribbled color were supplemented with scrawled jokes. Whatever residual traces of abstraction might exist in the work of Pittman, Williams and Prince, their paintings are a far cry from committed abstract artists such as Agnes Martin, Cy Twombly, Brice Marden, Philip Taaffe and Stephen Mueller, all of whom were included in the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

Given the starkly divergent attitudes of the two shows toward abstraction, one looks for an underlying cause. Did the successive embrace and rejection of abstraction simply reflect varying curatorial tastes (Klaus Kertess's in '95 versus Lisa Phillips's and Louise Neri's in '97), or did it chart some shift in artistic practice? Are we to conclude, by comparing the contents of the two exhibitions, that abstraction lost such considerable ground over a two-year span? It's hard to know since, in their catalogue essay and public statements, the 1997 Biennial curators didn't address the absence of abstraction, choosing instead to speak of topics such as "the end of the millennium," artists as "storytellers," Hollywood's influence on L.A. art and the defense of "creativity against the sometimes mindless force of new technology."

This silence on the matter of abstract painting was in contrast to vociferous comments by the curator of another recent



Left, David Reed, #334, 1993-95, oil and alkyd on linen, 34 by 110 inches. Goetz Collection, Munich. Photo courtesy Galerie Rolf Ricke, Cologne.

Below, a Jessica Stockholder sculpture from 1996, made of stacking crates, acrylic paint, purple plastic, chandelier parts, cable and clamps, ribbons, yarn and mixed mediums, 58 1/2 by 41 by 51 inches. Private collection, Italy. Photo Cathy Carver, courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York.

abstraction-free show, Documenta. I'm thinking in particular of an interview in the May 1997 *Artforum* (really more of an argument-in-print) between the curator of Documenta X, Catherine David, and the Museum of Modern Art's Robert Storr. At one point, Storr, whose curatorial credits include shows devoted to de Kooning and Ryman, brought up the subject of painting. Had David considered including any painters whose careers began in the '70s or '80s? The French curator's response was a curt "not really." And what about those who'd started out in the '60s? "No," David answered, "we [the Documenta team] had a long discussion about '60s painting, but there is no one left, apart from Richter." David went on to explain that she left painting out of Documenta because, in her opinion, "these days, in a very reactionary way, people are usurping the metaphysical space, the cultural, historical, sensitive space of painting—as if it had not been deconstructed—for cheap ideological and commercial reasons." Acknowledging that at least two painters (the nonabstractionists Pittman and Kerry James Marshall, both '97 Whitney Biennial participants) had been granted a place at Documenta, David dismissed all aspects of their work unconnected to content. It's not "helpful to describe their work as painting," she told Storr. In David's opinion, Pittman's and Marshall's art is a matter of "privileging cultural operations, crossbreeding, questioning cultural identity, and using specific image-strategies." Although Storr objected that this was "a very limited reading," pointing out, for instance, how dependent Pittman's work is on the "language of painting," David refused to budge from her "it's not painting" position.

The exclusion of abstract painting from Documenta and the





Installation view of the exhibition "After the Fall" showing Lynda Benglis's *Fallen Painting*, 1968, on floor; Frances Barth's painting *Or of*, 1975, on right wall; and an untitled 1996 work by Madeleine Hatz at extreme right on facing wall; at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York. Photo Olivia Georgia.

Whitney Biennial—how many years back would one have to go before finding another Biennial similarly bereft of abstraction?—was underlined by a less publicized and very different show running concurrently at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor on Staten Island. The title of that exhibition, "After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970," declared curator Lilly Wei's ambition to revisit nearly three decades of abstraction. Including work by 80 New York-based painters, the show was an admirable attempt to tackle a hefty subject: what happened to abstract painting following the decline of the modernist certainties on which it was founded. (The "fall" of the title is a reference to the sense that, as Wei puts it, "by 1970, many in the art world had acknowledged the 'death' of painting.")

That Wei's show did not wholly succeed was due to a number of factors. First of all, the physical layout of the Newhouse Center, which began life in the 19th century as a retirement home for sailors, was a problem. Although the building has plenty of charm, its chapel-like lobby and series of small rooms are hardly the best places to see contemporary painting. The worst moment of the show, spacewise, was a room the size of a walk-in

closet on the upper floor which hopelessly tried to accommodate paintings by Jonathan Lasker, Peter Halley and a third painter so visually overwhelmed that I can't even remember his or her work. But even in the larger rooms on the ground floor, there was a general crowding which often made it difficult to concentrate on individual paintings. One also assumes that with a small institution such as Snug Harbor, budget considerations limited the curator's ability to borrow major older works.

Despite such practical obstacles, Wei was able to field some strong works. For those who know only their canvases of the '80s and '90s, it was illuminating to see compelling '70s paintings by recognized figures such as David Diao, Mary Heilmann and David Reed. Not afraid to take chances, Wei interspersed works of widely recognized figures such as Joan Mitchell, Frank Stella and Elizabeth Murray with far less well-known artists such as Madeleine Hatz, Martha Keller and Denyse Thomasos. The show was also admirably well-balanced in terms of gender.

Within her decade-by-decade layout Wei also proposed a half-dozen loose categories in which to fit the participants. The results of this classification were imperfect. It's hard to understand how artists as different as Bill Jensen and Pat Steir can be lumped in "Gestural or Expressive Abstraction." And if something called "Conceptual Abstraction" has to accommodate an inheritor of Op art (Peter Schuyff), an innovative gestural painter (Suzanne McClelland) and a creator of stained-fabric installations (Polly Apfelbaum), it's probably better to drop the attempt to generalize altogether.

When confronted with the stylistic salad of "After the Fall," it was hard to discern a dominant tendency in today's abstract painting. The show included landscape-inspired painters such as Jensen and Gregory Amenoff and champions of sociological geometry such as Halley and Diao; it made space for those who work to consolidate and personalize the achievements of midcentury American painting (Cora Cohen, Melissa Meyer) and those who embark on its literal and philosophical deconstruction (Apfelbaum, Fabian Marcaccio). With this inclusive, nonpartisan stance, Wei echoed a widespread reluctance to make esthetic judgments of the kind that were once the stock-in-trade of art critics. It is more acceptable, these days, to simply

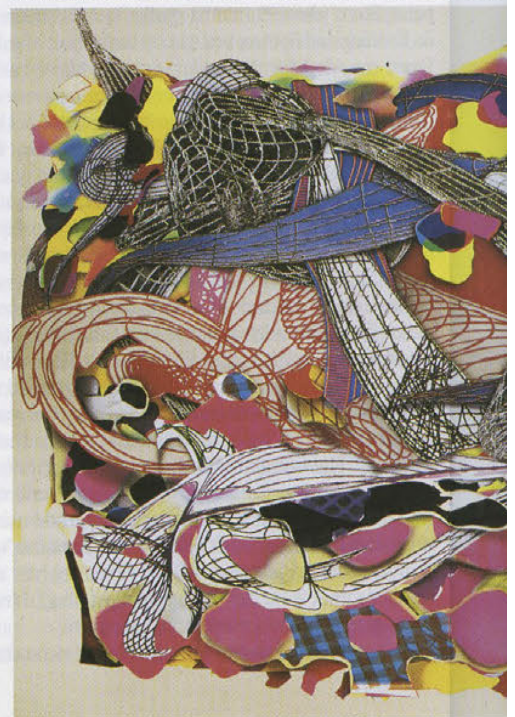
identify and label the art and artist, like a botanist collecting specimens in the field. While one hesitates to criticize a curator who has the grace and intelligence to step aside and let the art speak for itself, Wei's even-handedness risked leaving viewers exhausted at trying to reconcile so many disparate visual languages.

As a devotee of abstract painting, I was left unsatisfied by both the Biennial and "After the Fall"—the Biennial, obviously, because abstract painting was absent; "After the Fall" because, along with some notable absences, it gave the impression that abstraction was still struggling to escape the doldrums of the 1970s. It was hard to imagine a painting-hater—Catherine David, say—walking through the show and undergoing an esthetic change of heart.

In a way, these two very differently conceived exhibitions may have run up against the same problem. Namely, the silence and misunderstanding that has enshrouded abstract painting over the past 10 years. If curators such as Phillips and Neri do not feel compelled to pay attention to recent abstract painting, and one such as Wei finds it impossible to choose among that art form's various factions, it may well be because neither the aims nor the achievements of contemporary abstraction have been adequately articulated and understood.

Certainly, it's easy to take abstraction for granted. As a symbol of modernism, it reminds some viewers of battles long since won. Others are perhaps put off by the often impenetrable philosophical discourse generated by those involved with abstract painting. (For better or worse, many of today's most engaging painters

Frank Stella: *Polombe*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 11 by 31½



have been deeply marked by abstruse poststructuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze.) A third factor may be the perception in today's avant-garde circles of abstract painting as a commercially compliant art form, a mere tool of the art market. While there is some truth behind each of these views, they are all based, it seems to me, on an imprecise image of the actual state of painting. To bring that image into sharper focus, as is my intention in this pair of articles, it will first be necessary to backtrack in time a little bit—11 years, to be precise. Despite the fact that we live in an age when artistic memory can often be measured in nanoseconds, it's only with a longer view that the true achievements of contemporary abstract painting will become clearer.

Frank Stella and the Discourse of the 1980s

In 1986, Frank Stella once again seized the attention of the contemporary art world, not with a new body of art work, as had been his good fortune to do every few years since the end of the 1950s, but with a volume of art writing, *Working Space*. Based on a series of lectures Stella delivered at Harvard in 1983-84, the 167-page book was part revisionist art history, part autobiography and part artist's handbook.

Stella's point of departure was what he termed the "present crisis" of abstract painting, an outgrowth of the fact that the "limited, difficult space of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, and Newman has degenerated into the self-effacing, almost non-pictorial space of 1970s abstraction." In the aftermath of Color Field painting and Minimalism, Stella

averred, abstraction had become lost in "averaging effects" and "smoothing over spatial transitions." Announcing the historical parallelism that runs throughout the lectures, he observed in the first pages of *Working Space* that faced with the "ashes" of a grand legacy, abstract painters of the 1970s found themselves in a predicament similar to that of painters in Italy in the early 17th century who, he imagines, must have been asking themselves questions such as: "Where were the heirs of Roman classicism and Venetian color going to come from? What painting was going to stand up to Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael? What painting was going to glow as brightly as Giorgione's and Titian's?"

In the early '80s, the answers to such questions were still not clear and, warned Stella, the "line of succession" from "the great art of the past" to current abstraction was in doubt. "Can we find," he asked his readers (many artists among them, one assumes), "a mode of pictorial expression that will do for abstraction now what Caravaggio's pictorial genius did for sixteenth-century naturalism and its magnificent successors?"

The remainder of *Working Space* is largely devoted to exploring the implications of this question. Stella's prescription for revitalizing painting includes a reconsideration of "its relationship to the mechanics of representation . . . [including] overlooked, overworked representational techniques: such as shading and skeletal structure." In his search for alternatives to the "easy-to-read, inert space" of 1970s abstraction, he envisions an allover painting containing "more movement and definition." One way to achieve this, Stella sug-

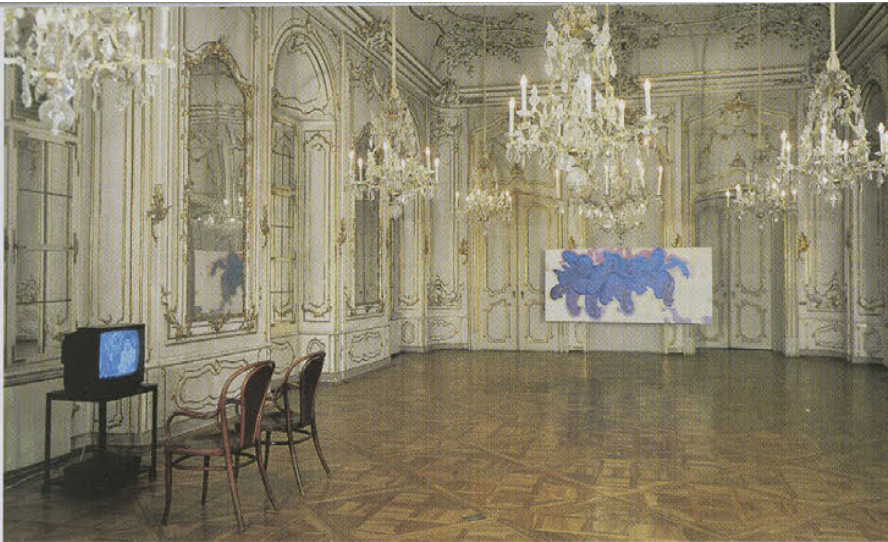
In the 1990s, Stella enlisted pictorial illusion into his quest for a new kind of space. After a decade of thrusting sculptural extensions, this is a welcome change.

gests, rather obscurely, would be by incorporating "tubular displacement and disposition of fluid pigment, as if it were coming out of a hose and could hold itself together."

All Stella's evaluations and prescriptions are based on his belief that "the aim of art is to create space—space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space in which the subjects of painting can live. This is what painting has always been about." In quest of such space, he offers enlightening commentary not only on the conditions of the contemporary painter but also on artists of the past. The book's sound formal analysis and wealth of brilliant aperçus make it one of the most important volumes of art criticism published in the 1980s. It is also, not surprisingly, filled with hints about Stella's vision of his own work. Clearly, his ideas of activated space in painting find concrete existence in his multiplanar relief paintings of the 1980s. And his evocation of "tubular displacement and disposition of fluid pigment" begins to make more sense if applied to some of Stella's recent warped-canvas, computer-aided paintings. These paintings also incorporate "shading and

31 1/2 feet. Photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.





Above, view of David Reed's "Mirror Room," which included a video installation with scenes from vampire movies and # 350 Vampire Painting for Graz, 1996 (in background, at center); at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz, Austria. Photo Johann Koinegg, courtesy Galerie Rolf Ricke. Below, Reed: "Judy's Bedroom" (foreground), 1995, a mixed-medium installation with a bed, video and painting # 328, 1990-93; at the Kunstverein, Cologne. Photo Boris Becker, courtesy Galerie Rolf Ricke and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.



skeletal structure," the former by the use of illusionistic shadows, and the latter through the invisible supports that give the paintings their eccentric shapes.

In the pages of *Working Space*, Stella clearly hoped to set the agenda not only for his own work but for contemporary painting in general. Now, more than 10 years later, we should be able to see whether Stella's hopes for abstraction have come to fruition, whether contemporary painting has found its Caravaggio.

Given the similarities between the kind of painting Stella was calling for and the kind he went on to produce, we might expect his own work to be the best argument for the artistic validity of his polemic. However, to my eye, his work of the '80s and '90s is less convincing than his lectures. In his sculpturally extended paintings and, more recently, in full-blown sculptures, Stella seems to have taken his concept of "working space" altogether too literally. The prob-

lem may lie in the fact that for all the quasi-baroque flourishes that have enlivened his work since the '70s, he remains wedded to his Minimalist beginnings. Slow to relinquish the brute physicality of his medium for more imaginative realms, Stella seems overly willing to respond to a pictorial problem by throwing scraps of metal at it.

And, though others may feel differently, I have always found this artist's paint handling, in the scribbled, gestural and stained marks with which he activates his relief paintings, to be oddly unconvincing. If one can penetrate the visual bravura of his bristling constructions to focus on a detail, this closer view rarely repays such attention. (John Chamberlain handles paint on metal much better, and for old-master-inspired compositions, sheer baroque exuberance and 20th-century painterly gestures, I infinitely prefer the 1980s and '90s paintings of Stella's senior, Norman Bluhm.) Notably more successful, at least to my eye, are

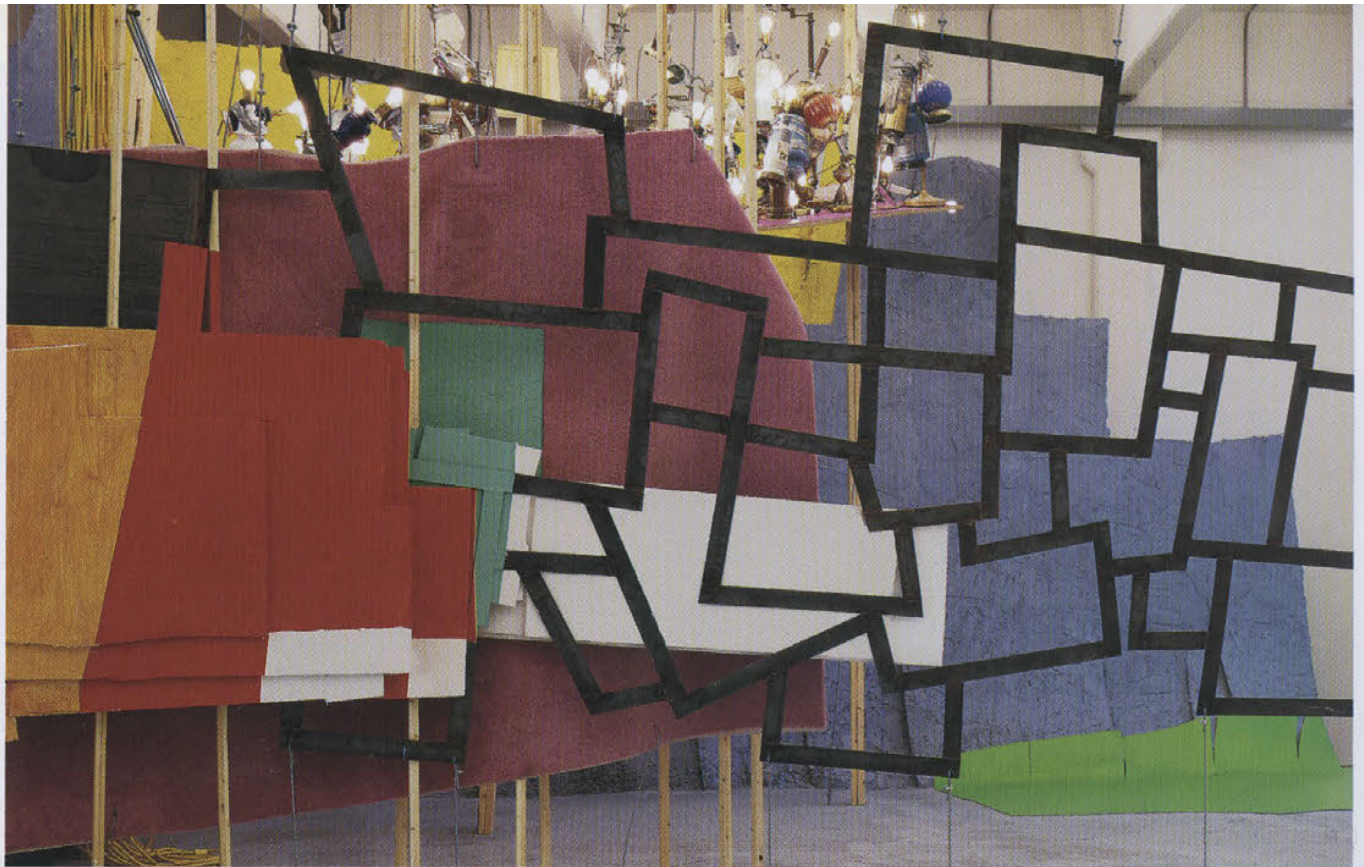
Reed's forays into video and installation have involved *Vertigo* and the '80s TV show "Crime Story"; Stockholder speaks of her work as a "tenuous site where fiction and reality struggle."

high-tech, high-energy paintings such as *Polombe* and *Hooloomooloo*, two giant 1994 canvases which not only forgo relief elements but go so far in the opposite direction as to use spray-brushed shadows to create the illusion of spatial depth. The essential problem with the paint-handling in Stella's relief paintings is that the brush, that paragon of suppleness, is always forced to adapt itself to the stiff edges of the pre-cut aluminum shapes. As he returned to canvas, Stella was freed from this constraint and has been able to give his baroque inclinations greater scope. Stella's decision to enlist pictorial illusion into his quest for new kinds of space is also a welcome change after a decade of thrusting sculptural extensions.

Stella was not the only painter to be taking a stand in print in the mid-'80s. A year after *Working Space* came out, Peter Halley published his *Collected Essays 1981-87*, a book that probably had more immediate influence on younger painters than did Stella's lectures. At the time, whether or not one shared Halley's admiration for Jean Baudrillard or responded to his Day-Glo Albersian paintings, his insistence that geometric abstraction needed to take into consideration the digitalized, postindustrial vocabulary and methods of the contemporary world was compelling and challenging. If, in the mid-'80s, Stella upheld the status of painting as a vehicle of formal innovation, Halley defined it as philosophical discourse by other means.¹



Reed: A video still from *Las Vegas Piece*, 1996-97, in which the artist has digitally inserted his own painting #358 into a sequence from the '80s TV series "Crime Story." Photo courtesy Max Protetch Gallery and Patricia Faure Gallery, Los Angeles.



Installation view of Jessica Stockholder's *Your Skin in This Weather Bourne Eye-Threads & Swollen Perfume, 1995*, mixed mediums; at Dia Center for the Arts. Photo © Cathy Carver, courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art.

Until almost the end of the decade, Halley's was the paradigmatic position. Abstraction came to be seen as a field in which the artist could insert encoded messages, subtle or not. If Stella could speak of "space" in terms of depth and shallowness, projection and recession, Halley had little interest in such issues. "In my work," he wrote, "space is considered as . . . a digital field in which are situated 'cells' with simulated stucco texture from which flow irradiated 'conduits.' This space is akin to the simulated space of the video game . . . a space that is not a specific reality but rather a model of the 'cellular space' on which 'cyberneticized social exchange' is based."

The strategies of Neo-Geo—presenting geometric abstractions as "models" of intellectual concepts; appropriating modernist motifs in order to parody them; engaging the middle-class, suburban environment—came to pervade abstraction in the 1980s. Aided by these new stances and a cresting art market, a generation of abstract painters was able to reawaken widespread interest in nonobjective painting. One reason their work met with such enthusiastic response is that they had skirted one of the stumbling blocks of abstraction: content. Whereas a painting by Albers or Stella confronts viewers with uncertainty as to its subject, the forms in a painting by Halley or Ross Bleckner have assignable meanings.

But while abstraction's meaning became more accessible, the cannibalizing aspect of Neo-Geo, which depended so much on making allusions to

the work of preceding generations of painters, began to take its toll. By 1990, even a sympathetic critic such as David Pagel noted that abstraction seemed "beleaguered, bereft of purpose, lacking an audience, and missing an agenda."²

The late 1980s was a difficult time for those who envisioned painting as offering something other than diagrams of sociological concepts and tongue-in-cheek visual commentaries on modernism. But out of that moment of irony and cynicism about the claims of abstraction came a new sense of possibility. Having brought to earth the idealist claims of earlier generations and indicated the shortcomings and arrogance of Greenbergian formalism, abstraction could move on from the realm of the "critique." Surprisingly, this evolution permitted it to deal effectively with some of the issues raised by Stella in *Working Space*.

David Reed: The Gesture Adrift

Arguably, the painter who has most explicitly addressed Stella's concerns is David Reed, a New York-based artist now in his early 50s whose work is deeply engaged with the heritage of Baroque painting at the same time that it addresses hot contemporary issues. The connection between Stella's ideas and Reed's work was pointed out (by Tiffany Bell, writing in these pages³) soon after *Working Space* came out, but even then, Reed was keenly aware of what separated him from the older painter. In a 1991 article written in collaboration with philosopher David Carrier, Reed

challenged aspects of *Working Space*. The article accused Stella of exaggerating and misrepresenting the importance of Caravaggio's painting. In sentences that echo some of my own feelings, Reed and Carrier observed that this

leads [Stella] to the absolutely mistaken conclusion that the goal of abstraction should be to create a literal space, like that of his recent works, which really are large scale relief-sculptures. The true power of Baroque art, and also of abstraction, is its capacity to create an illusionistic space. Stella misidentifies the spectator's role. Painting circa 1990, as circa 1590, involves the spatial and temporal relation of a spectator to the image. The aim of the Baroque was to reestablish contact with the spectator, which cannot be done within a literal space.⁴

In the years since he co-authored this response to Stella, Reed's own work has undergone some significant changes, conquering new space—much of it so far from the literal as to be termed virtual—for his painting practice.

Some of the changes, though by no means all, have been occurring on the canvas itself. For a long time, Reed's paintings flirted with photographic effects. When presented under surfaces as smooth as a photographic print, his ribbonry, wet-into-wet markings done with palette knife or paintbrush often seemed closer to reproductions of gestures than to the real thing. By silhouetting gestures or parts of gestures against solid color fields, Reed heightened their photochemical associations. In 1994, he began incorporating actual



James Hyde: *Radius*, 1996, glass, oil, paint, enamel, silicone, 95½ by 33½ by 51 inches.

Hyde offers a variant of the deconstructed painting in an ongoing series of gestural compositions painted with oil, acrylic and enamel on the insides of clear glass boxes.

reproductions into his work. In his 1995 show at Max Protetch Gallery in New York, some of the paintings displayed side by side a gesture and its silkscreened double.

Throughout this decade, Reed has become increasingly fascinated with the melding of the real and the fictive. His paintings which combine actual and reproduced gestures slyly challenge the viewer's ability to distinguish between the presence and absence of the artist's hand. As Reed himself has pointed out, the kinds of issues raised by such methods are very different from the quest for the sublime that drove the Abstract Expressionists. They are also a far cry from the materialism of the Post-Minimalist period in which Reed emerged. In place of the sublime or terminology derived from the formal or material properties of the work, Reed prefers to describe his work as concerned with the fantastic, that is, presenting the viewer with the kind of eerie conundrums common in tales of the uncanny.⁵

There's certainly an uncanny aspect to Reed's experiments in the medium of video, the first of which was a 1995 tape in which Reed digitally inserted one of his paintings into a short sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated 1958 film *Vertigo*. In the scene where Kim Novak awakens after having been saved by Jimmy Stewart from a suicide attempt, one of Reed's paintings appears to hang on the wall behind the bed Novak is lying in. Unexpectedly, the horizontal abstraction fits very naturally into Hitchcock's scene, something we can attribute not only to digital wizardry but also to the fact that the color and format of Reed's paintings have long been influenced by 1950s Hollywood cinema.

When Reed showed this video at Max Protetch it was accompanied by a three-dimensional replica of the bed in the scene and, hanging on the wall above this "real" bed, the actual canvas whose digital image Reed had inserted into the film scene. He has subsequently made other forays into installation and video. Later in 1995, at the Cologne Kunstverein, he reconstructed another bedroom scene from *Vertigo* alongside a computer-altered video showing one of his paintings in the corresponding film clip.⁶ A 1996 work slipped one of his paintings into a video sequence from the 1980s television series "Crime Story." The setting of this cop show was Las Vegas, which allowed Reed to play off the neon lights of the strip and the surrounding desert landscape.



Hyde: *Fix*, 1997, vinyl tape on papier-mâché, 10½ by 15 feet.

As these videos demonstrate, Reed's current inspiration comes more often from TV and film than from the heritage of Baroque painting which he relied on earlier in his career. There is more involved in this shift than simply low cultural references exchanged for high. In a recent interview, Reed explained: "I've found that the more I think about film the better it is for my paintings. If I fall into composing or balancing my paintings I'm lost, but if I think in filmic terms like a cut, a fade, or a pan shot it's much better."⁷

Cinematic influences were also behind Reed's 1997 installation in the Rococo splendor of the Neue Galerie in Graz, Austria. Amid gilded decorations, crystal chandeliers and tall mirrors, Reed installed several works each titled *Vampire Painting for Graz*, 4½-by-10-foot horizontal canvases in which tangles of transparent gestures edged in pale hues were silhouetted against white grounds. The pale colors surrounding the gestures are divided into horizontal bands intended, Reed says, to create "a subliminal suffusion [of color], like the sparkling prismatic flash of the chandeliers." Smaller works, which seemed to repeat fragments of the big paintings, were directly installed over the mirrors, and in a corner of the room a video monitor played a montage of scenes

from 35 vampire movies, each showing a vampire standing before a mirror but creating no reflection. (The exhibition catalogue includes a journal Reed kept while watching more than 60 vampire flicks in preparation for the show.)

In a downstairs gallery, interspersed with still images taken from various vampire films, Reed presented an array of studies for the large paintings and another chance to view the compilation video. While an essay in the exhibition catalogue by Austrian critic and artist Peter Weibel drops hints that painting (supposedly killed off in the 19th century by the advent of photography) is itself one of the "undead," the vampire metaphor also seems well-suited to Reed's work in particular. This is, after all, a painter who likes to speak of his work in relation to the literature of the fantastic and who is not afraid of entering into parasitical relationships, be it with his own painterly gestures or with the films of Alfred Hitchcock. The vampire whose image cannot be reflected is also, conceivably, a metaphor for abstraction's refusal to simply mirror the visible world. Further, Reed's "Vampire Paintings" are apt emblems for his continuing exploration of the dual nature of painting in which the literal world of canvas, paint and gesture is folded uncannily into the immaterial world of light, space and illusion.

Jessica Stockholder and James Hyde: Hybrid Installations and Objects

As demonstrated by the work of a number of artists in their 30s or early 40s, Reed's extension of painting's space through video and installation is part of a larger exploration of painting's "extended field," to borrow the title of a recent Scandinavian exhibition. Seen in late 1996 and early '97 at the Stockholm Konsthalle and the Rooseum in Malmö, "Painting—the Extended Field" included conventional painters (abstract and figurative) as well as sculptors and video artists. Looking at "methods not normally thought of as pertaining to painting" and the "cross-fertilization" of various media, the show roped in such diverse figures as Diana Thater, Yukinori Yanagi, Paul McCarthy and Israeli sculptor Nahum Tevet. The danger with such a pan-painting approach is that the notion becomes so elastic, so "extended" as to lose all meaning. Nonetheless, at least two of the artists in "Painting—the Extended Field," Polly Apfelbaum (about whom more in a moment) and Jessica Stockholder, have created works in which painterly, sculptural and installational techniques are combined to marvelous effect.



Above, Polly Apfelbaum: *Floor drawing*, 1997, velvet and dye; installed at the *Kunstlerhaus am Acker*, Berlin. Photo courtesy NGBK, Berlin.

Below, installation detail from Apfelbaum's *Eclipse*, 1996, velvet and dye; included in the exhibition "Painting—the Extended Field" at the *Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art*, Malmö, Sweden. Photo © Jan Engsmar.



In her crushed-velvet floor installations, Apfelbaum is capable of creating intense painterly experiences without coming within a thousand miles of a paintbrush or a stretcher bar.

Although she is generally thought of as a sculptor and installation artist, Stockholder is keenly aware of her work's nonsculptural qualities. As she put it to me in a 1995 interview [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '95], her work "technically . . . may be more related to sculpture than to painting, because it takes up space in the room, but conceptually it's closer to painting." Actually, Stockholder's relationship to painting is far more than "conceptual." The squares and rectangles of bright color she paints across the surfaces of everyday objects make her work seem like a perfectly integrated collaboration between an abstract painter and an assemblage-driven sculptor—imagine Hans Hofmann (or Barnett Newman) joining forces with Haim Steinbach (or Jean Tinguely). By drawing attention to the surfaces of the objects, the solid-color paint opens our eyes to their formal properties, while the functional origins of the quotidian stuff Stockholder utilizes continually threatens to break up the three-dimensional abstract composition of which it is a part. The individual elements are at once distinct and inseparable. This tense cohesion is true of both her large-scale installations which play off their architectural surroundings and her smaller-scale movable sculptures. Speaking in terms not unlike those used by Reed, Stockholder describes the painted surface in her work as "a tenuous site where fiction and reality struggle with notions of subjectivity and objectivity."⁸

One can become entranced by the sheer color and form in her installations and a moment later be sent whirling by the brute physicality of the materials (ripe oranges imbedded in concrete, a dozen refrigerator doors hanging from the ceiling, Sheetrock, 2-by-4s) or the quirky humor (whirring electric fans used to draw attention to the "formal" properties of the air surrounding the sculptures). Working with many influences but few real predecessors (only Kurt Schwitters and Judy Pfaff come readily to mind), Stockholder achieves a compelling three-dimensional abstract experience. Many are convinced that formalism is an invariably conservative, historically exhausted force but—as Stockholder proves—for those willing to rethink the boundaries of painting, this is not the case.

Another artist who has been productively exploring the margins of painting in recent years is James Hyde. More obviously involved than

Stockholder with the artisanal aspect of painting, Hyde often incorporates the demanding technique of fresco into his work, albeit on an unorthodox support: thick slabs of Styrofoam. (Plaster is applied to one side of the Styrofoam, creating the wet surface necessary for fresco.) Hanging on the wall, these loosely brushed abstractions, measuring 2 or more feet deep, suggest chunks of wall salvaged from an archeological site. Looking at them, it's impossible to miss the contradictions: although giant and unwieldy, the chunks of Styrofoam weigh almost nothing and the venerable fresco technique has been applied to a throwaway product of modern industry.

The use of fresco is not limited to Hyde's Styrofoam works. The central element of *Bolt* (1993), for instance, is a 12-by-5-foot frescoed wood panel leaning against the wall. A heavy sheet of glass, supported by an upright white metal post, leans away from the panel of thinly painted, overlapping rectangles of reds, blues and yellows to create a witty and elegant deconstruction of the traditional painting-frame-glass format.

Hyde offers another variant of deconstructed painting in an ongoing series of gestural compositions painted with oil, acrylic and enamel on the insides of clear glass boxes. After the paint has been laid down, Hyde closes the box with a final sheet of glass, creating a see-through, hermetically enclosed abstraction. When the paint is sparingly used, it's as if a gesture had been sliced off the surface of a de Kooning and displayed under glass like some scientific specimen. In other instances, Hyde uses large clots of paint, crumpled paper and silicone to bulk up the painting. By submitting gestures to such three-dimensional visibility, Hyde transforms this emblem par excellence of abstract painting into a sculptural event. Propped against the wall, the glass boxes, some reaching as high as 8 feet, can sit directly on the floor or rest on steel brackets bolted to the wall. Their relation to the wall—they lean against it but never lie flat, as a painting would—underscores the dual nature of these painting-sculpture hybrids.

The materials and formats Hyde uses are constantly evolving and expanding. *Fix* (1997), the centerpiece of his recent show at now closed Paolo Baldacci Gallery in New York (the work was later shown at the Bulova Center in Queens), is a bulging 10½-by-15-foot wall piece made from hundreds of pieces of colored vinyl adhesive tape applied to an irregular support of steel and papier-mâché. The straight edges and geometric shapes of the colored tape are in striking contrast to the incredibly crumpled surface onto which it has been stuck—the piece looks like a hard-edge painting that's been through a trash compactor and then partially flattened out. The palette is predominantly blues and reds, but Hyde makes lively use of the wide range of colors that tape now comes in. *Fix* is so lively, in fact, that it takes a little while to notice that the colors are not evenly distributed but have been deliberately grouped to

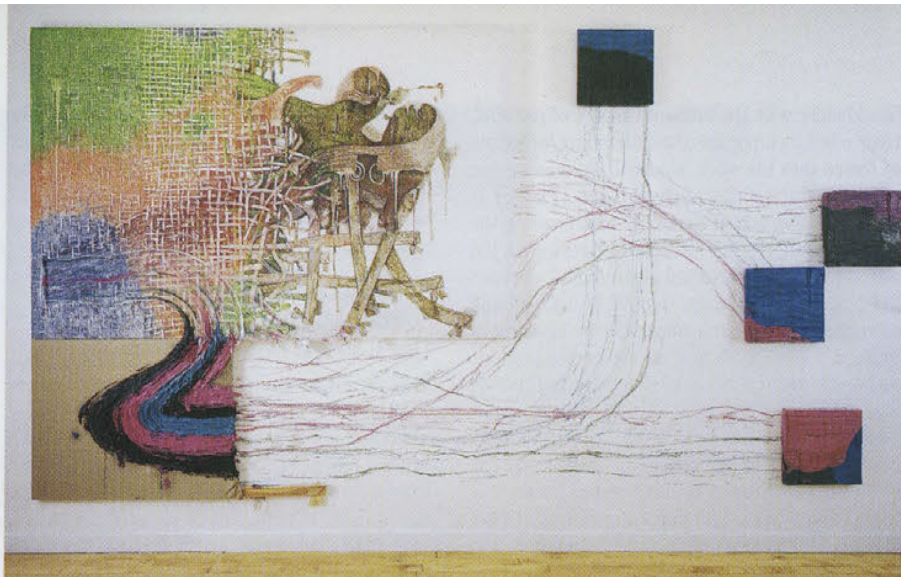
vary the visual form and weight of the piece. The work pulsates with memories of Stuart Davis and American quilts, but it is also dependent on its contemporary materials. Conventional paint and brush methods could never apply such smooth color into *Fix*'s narrow crevices.

Polly Apfelbaum and Fabian Marcaccio: The Canvas Unmoored

Of all the artists considered here, Polly Apfelbaum is perhaps the one whose link to painting is most tenuous, most "extended." Her favored medium is crushed velvet or bed sheets which she stains with colored dots. The stained fabric is sometimes displayed in large unstretched rectangles that can hang on the wall, lie flat on the floor or sit in crumpled piles. However, the artist is just as likely to cut up the material into small squares or ellipses which are exhibited stacked or spread out. The patterns and colors of the stains can allude to nature and popular culture, as well as remind the viewer of Apfelbaum's debt to aspects of post-war abstraction, from Larry Poons to the Support/Surface group. Perhaps Apfelbaum's most valuable contribution to current painting practice is to be found in her atomized compositions of separate patches of multicolored stained fabric as exemplified by her powerful installation, *Eclipse*, shown first at Boesky & Gallery in New York [see *A.i.A.*, Jan. '97] and later re-created for "Painting—the Extended Field." This past summer, Apfelbaum created a similar installation at the San Francisco Art Institute. Titled *The Night*, the work employed thousands of pieces of dyed velvet in spreading black-and-white compositions across the floor of the Institute's large gallery. Whether in her floor installation or her wall hangings, Apfelbaum is capable of creating intense painterly experiences without coming within a thousand miles of a paintbrush or a stretcher bar.

In 1995, Apfelbaum, Hyde and Stockholder were included in the 44th Corcoran Biennial, which took as its subtitle and theme, "Painting Outside Painting." The curator, Terrie Sultan, brought together artists who, in her words, had "made a break with the basic form and function of the classical or modern painted object." Sultan cited the influence of film and television on contemporary painting, but she also suggested that in response to "a surfeit of visual banality, painting has again begun to reassert the value of the handmade." The show stressed both the "physical" and "psychological" redefinition of painting.

Given this position, it was no surprise that Sultan included work by the painter Fabian Marcaccio. Although he stops well short of the installational strategies employed by Stockholder and Apfelbaum, Marcaccio is a radical deconstructor and a masterful extender of painting space. He employs both literal means, à la Stockholder, and all manner of illusionism, which



Above, Fabian Marcaccio: *The Altered Genetics of Painting #5*, 1992-93, silicone gel, oil, linen, printed fabric, plaster and dry pigment, 100 by 170 inches (variable).

Below, Marcaccio: *Paintant #2*, 1996-97, water- and oil-based paint on canvas, copper tubing and nylon ropes, 9 by 16 feet.



allies him to Reed. But compared to the highly finished, almost Olympian canvases of the latter, Marcaccio's paintings are tangled, irrational, teeming and blatantly contradictory. In Marcaccio's work, it is not merely the visible forms but the artist's very thought process that is baroque.

Marcaccio's paintings of the early 1990s, which usually offered images of isolated gestures against dense grids, were sometimes rather gruesome-looking objects. Erupting from the corners of the stretched canvas were wooden stretcher bars, carved into distorted forms that sometimes suggested snaggletoothed dragons. Colored scratch marks on the wall led from the ruptured canvas to squares of painted plaster that seemed to have

broken away from the painting. On the canvas itself, Marcaccio used printmaking techniques to imitate not only the weave of the canvas but also broad brushstrokes and dangling paint drips. These were supplemented with actual brushstrokes in garish oil paint and transparent gel medium. Combining illusion and real painterly events, Marcaccio offered a vision of abstract painting as a mutant form of manic instability. Color seemed to separate from the brushstroke, paint drips turned into woven threads, gestures attacked themselves. But all was not irrationality, for behind this chaos and entropy was an organized visual glossary. It's possible to consult this glossary via the published brochures in which

Marcaccio catalogues the hundreds of motifs in his paintings. Each numbered entry in these brochures consists of a cartoonlike drawing of the motif followed by a descriptive name in the artist's self-invented terminology.

In his recent work, Marcaccio has continued to follow his vision of painting as a "disaster of itself," but with a number of dramatic changes. The most immediately noticeable innovation is the use of dozens of nylon cords which attach many of the new paintings to the wall. The cords hold the canvas taut over a structure of copper tubing, but in contrast to the flat planes achieved by conventional wooden stretchers, there are irregular bulges and indentations on the surface of the canvas as a result of the bent copper tubing. Also new are the hammer and sickle, peace sign and swastika images that float in the foreground of the paintings. Somewhat perversely, Marcaccio combines these dated political symbols to fabricate hybrid logos. The backgrounds of many recent paintings incorporate photographic images of large crowds. Further changes include the use of more vivid color and the increasing evidence of the artist's hand, whether in painstakingly drawn patterns or in painterly flourishes.

Although highly regarded among other painters, Marcaccio is an artist who continues to puzzle some critics and viewers. This may be partly because of the overload of visual ideas delivered by any one of his paintings (in this, he is akin to Stella), but also because he brings to the traditionally high-minded realm of abstraction a visually punning sensibility that is at times almost slapstick. To cite a recent example, in *New Ground Management* (1997), Marcaccio has enlarged the lower lefthand corner of the canvas to make it seem as if the nylon ropes stretched between the canvas and the floor are pulling the painting apart. The addition of a canvas-weave pattern, both imprinted and painted by hand, adds to the farcical illusion of ripping fabric. Some viewers may also have difficulty with the new work in which an ostensibly abstract painter fills his canvases with clearly recognizable images. Just as he has been unafraid to bend and break the physical boundaries of abstract painting, Marcaccio is equally willing to dismantle its conceptual borders.

Space Lost or Gained?

In the years since Stella's passionate call for the renewal of painting, abstraction has had to weather many challenges. The critique fostered by Neo-Geo was followed by the rise and spread of artistic genres—from socially concerned "identity art" to expressions of the "slacker" mentality—which drew interest away from abstract issues. The lives of two towering figures in postwar painting, Joan Mitchell and Willem de Kooning, came to an end. Younger museum curators across the country and around the world began to show an increasing tendency toward the relatively new gen-

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Along with an overload of visual ideas, Marcaccio brings to the traditionally high-minded realm of abstraction a visually punning sensibility that is at times almost slapstick.

res of installation and video art—what Peter Schjeldahl has called “museum art”—and away from what is often perceived as the retrograde and inert art of painting. At the same time there is a growing sense that digital media, from CD-ROMs to the Internet, are dragging the culture further and further away from the kind of physical presence painting requires.

Yet, lest one be inclined to write painting's hundred-and-first obituary, the phenomena I've just cited could also be viewed as positive developments for abstraction. Neo-Geo not only suggested how sociological issues could be introduced into abstraction, but its use of appropriative strategies helped shake up some old-fashioned notions of subjective expression. (Possibly even more influential than Neo-Geo has been the example of two endlessly skeptical and endlessly inventive German painters, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke.) Identity art has, arguably, helped broaden the range of subjects available to all artists, even abstract painters (think of Byron Kim's variously colored, multipanel monochrome paintings, each of which matches the skin tone of an individual with a different racial background). As regards the loss of de Kooning and Mitchell, when has the death of great masters not opened up creative space for younger artists? And won't the curatorial prevalence of installation and video encourage supporters of painting to strengthen their efforts? (I know it has strengthened mine.) And, finally, the ever-expanding electronic media not only make the physical experience of painting all the more valuable, they also offer the open-minded painter challenging new fields of action.

So, have we acquired the mode of pictorial expression that Stella hoped for in the mid-'80s, the mode that “will do for abstraction now what Caravaggio's pictorial genius did for sixteenth-century naturalism”? The various ways in which Reed, Stockholder, Hyde, Apfelbaum and Marcaccio have extended the realm of painting suggest, at least to me, that painting does indeed possess more “working space,” both physical and imaginative, than it did a decade ago. But these five artists are hardly the whole story of current abstract painting. In a subsequent essay I will explore further aspects of this embattled and resilient art form. □

1. Interestingly, Halley devoted a chapter to Stella, whom he viewed as an artist immersed in the postmodern and the

hyper-real, even though Stella himself professed very different beliefs. Associating Stella's paintings with Disney World, Las Vegas and shopping malls, Halley found that they presented “a world in which any sign is admissible but all are severed from any vestigial real meaning. In these works, the abstract expressionist brush stroke is reduced to an empty, neutral sign.” See “Frank Stella . . . and the Simulacrum” in Peter Halley, *Collected Essays 1981-87*, Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, Zurich, 1988.

2. Exhibition catalogue for “The Ends of Paintings: The Edges of Abstractions,” Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 1990.

3. “Baroque Extensions,” *A.i.A.*, Feb. '87.

4. David Carrier and David Reed, “Tradition, Eclecticism, Self-Consciousness: Baroque Art and Abstract Painting,” *Arts Magazine*, January 1991, p. 44.

5. As defined by literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic occurs in the moment in a story when the protagonist is confronted with an uncanny, mysterious event. (He cites examples from authors such as Gerard de Nerval, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Jan Potocki.) Either the mysterious occurrence can be explained by rational means or else it must be attributed to supernatural powers. As long as the narrative hesitates between these two choices, says Todorov, it and its readers are in the realm of the fantastic.

6. Reed showed an earlier version of this work in 1992 at the San Francisco Art Institute. Here, the painting was digitally inserted into a black-and-white video still but not into the clip from *Vertigo*.

7. This quotation comes from a 1995 interview Reed gave to Noemi Smolik. A German translation of the interview appeared in the February-April 1996 issue of *Kunstforum*. I quote from the original transcript.

8. Jessica Stockholder, “Parallel Parking,” in *Turn-of-the-Century Magazine*, spring 1993, reprinted in Barry Schwabsky, Lynne Tillman, Lynne Cooke, *Jessica Stockholder*, Phaidon, London, 1995.

“After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970” was seen at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Staten Island [Mar. 27-Sept. 7] and was accompanied by a two-volume catalogue. The Queens Museum showed a selection of James Hyde's 1992-97 work at Bulova Corporate Center [June 30-Oct. 5].

Upcoming shows by the artists discussed above include: David Reed at Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zurich [Nov. 21, 1997-Jan. 17, 1998] and Max Protetch Gallery, New York [spring 1998]; Jessica Stockholder at the Kunsternes Hus, Oslo [through Nov. 23], the Musée Picasso, Antibes, and the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes [both opening January 1998]; Polly Apfelbaum is included in “Hanging by a Thread,” Hudson River Museum [Oct. 17, 1997-Feb. 15, 1998] and “Simple Forms,” Henry Art Gallery, Seattle [Nov. 13, 1997-Feb. 1, 1998]; Fabian Marcaccio at Ruth Benzacar, Buenos Aires [Nov. 1-30], Mario Diacono, Boston [Mar. 21-Apr. 18, 1998] and Joan Prat, Barcelona [opening February 1998].

Marcaccio: *New Ground Management*, 1997, water- and oil-based paint on canvas, copper tubing and nylon ropes, dimensions variable. Photo John Bessler. Photos this spread courtesy Bravin Post Lee, New York.

