

The Golden Age of Abstraction: Right Now

Riffing on the past as it comments on our own time, contemporary abstraction evokes landscapes, bodies, signs, buildings, and much more

BY PEPE KARMEL

It's tempting to see the years 1912–25 and 1947–70 as the two golden ages of abstract art, and to feel that the present revival of abstraction is no more than a silver age. But the present is always deceptive: it was not evident to their contemporaries that Malevich, Mondrian, and Pollock were the towering giants they seem to us in retrospect. The fact is, there is a vast amount of good abstract art being made today, and the best of it is every bit as good as the best abstract art of the past. The golden age of abstraction is *right now*.

Museums and art centers have lately been taking a remarkable interest in abstract art, past and present. Last year, MoMA opened "Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925"; the Guggenheim offered "Art of Another Kind," comparing American and European abstraction of the 1950s; "Destroy the Picture," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, explored the fascination with dirty, distressed materials among artists of the same era; the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal traced the impressive history of Canadian abstraction since 1939; the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery presented "Conceptual Abstraction," a survey (which I curated with Joachim Pissarro) of 20 abstract painters who came to prominence in New York in the 1980s; and MUDAM (the Musée d'Art Moderne) in Luxembourg gathered 23 contemporary European artists in "Les Détours de l'abstraction." Already in 2013, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis has opened "Painter Painter," a survey of emerging abstract painters from both the U.S. and Europe, and next month, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago opens "MCA DNA Chicago Conceptual Abstraction, 1986–1995," with works in various mediums.

How do we make sense of all this activity in a type of art

that was declared dead 40 years ago? I believe the most useful way to understand abstraction is not in terms of its formal evolution (which does not, in any case, fit the linear models beloved of theoreticians) but in terms of thematic content. The formal qualities of an abstract painting or sculpture are significant not in themselves but as part of the work's expressive message. Artists work by reviving and transforming archetypes from the unconscious of modern culture. Therefore, the most useful questions to ask about contemporary abstract painting or sculpture are: What themes and forms does it retrieve from the tradition of modern art? How have they been changed? And how has the artist used them to express the social, political, and spiritual experience of our own time?

We might view abstract art as falling into six basic categories. Three respond to nature: cosmologies, landscapes, and anatomies. And three respond to culture: fabrics, architecture, and signs. These categories are not mutually exclusive. It often happens, for instance, that cosmological images include anatomical imagery or that images inspired by fabric patterns include drawn or written signs.

OPPOSITE Chris Martin's *Seven Pointed Star for Isaac Hayes, 2009*, touches on cosmology and technology.

1. Cosmologies

Cosmological imagery in modern art assumes three main forms: orbs, orbits, and constellations. The orbs and orbits in the work of pioneering abstract artists like Alexander Rodchenko and

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Liubov' Popova reflected the Russian avant-garde's obsession with space travel as an allegory of revolution: the cosmonaut left behind the corrupt old world to build a rational utopia in outer space.

Another kind of cosmological imagery emerged in the 1920s: the constellation or star chart, consisting of an array of dots connected by lines. In the late 1940s, Pollock took the fixed constellations and set them into motion, in paintings like *Reflection of the Big Dipper* (1947). Both static and mobile versions of the motif play important roles in contemporary abstraction.

For the Parisian Surrealists, the dot-and-line motif of the star chart was significant as an example of the way that intelligible meaning (the figurative image of Orion or the Great Bear) can emerge from chance events (the random distribution of stars in the night sky). For a contemporary audience, however, the same formal motif is likely to read not as a literal constellation but as the more abstract image of a network.

Chris Martin's cagelike "constellations" evoke the Internet Age, with its promise of total connectedness and its threat of incessant surveillance. The funky, handmade facture of his painting, with papier-mâché spheres emerging at each node, reasserts the value of flawed humanity over the seamless web of technology. Julie Mehretu's paintings similarly transform the meaning of her sources. Where Pollock's swirling constellations appeared to their original audience as images of the Jungian unconscious, Mehretu's grids and streaks, punctuated by shifting crowds and billowing smoke, express

the dynamism and turmoil of the global economy.

Among contemporary painters, David Row combines orbital imagery with crystalline forms, shifting its meaning from social and utopian to spiritual and transcendent. Other abstract artists using cosmological imagery include Olafur Eliasson, Iole de Freitas, Bill Komoski, Albert Oehlen, Matthew Ritchie, Peter Schuyff, and Christopher Wool.

Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, 2004, in Chicago's Millennium Park, reflects and distorts the surrounding landscape.

2. Landscapes

A half-century ago, in the February 1961 issue of *ARTnews*, the iconoclastic art historian Robert Rosenblum coined the term "abstract sublime" to describe the way that the paintings of Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman call to mind a sense of the immensity and power of nature comparable to that found in the landscapes of such Romantic painters as J.M.W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. While the sublime may be out of fashion, references to the natural landscape persist in contemporary abstraction.

The huge popularity of Anish Kapoor's monumental *Cloud Gate* may be due to the hallucinatory impression it gives of having brought the heavens down to Earth. At the same time, the sculpture's mirrorlike skin, recalling Brancusi's polished bronzes, places it in the avant-garde tradition of art that

actively interacts with its viewers and its environment. In the setting of downtown Chicago, Kapoor's silvered sculpture seems to absorb, concentrate, and reemit the essence of a great American metropolis.

Of course, abstract art does not need to be monumental to evoke the natural environment. David Reed shades his gestural brushwork with such precision that it suggests roiling clouds over a western landscape. Gerhard Richter's abstract pictures glow with the same damp, shimmering light as his paintings of the German countryside. His translucent colors and modulated shading look like photographs even in his nonfigurative compositions.

At the opposite extreme, Mary Heilmann uses opaque colors and rough brushwork to avoid any hint of illusionism. Nonetheless, the baroque swerves and switchbacks of her stacked bands in a painting like *Surfing on Acid* (2005) suggest the parallel lines of waves approaching a beach, swelling and breaking as they near the shore. Using the new technology of digital animation, Jennifer Steinkamp transforms trees, vines, and branches into writhing, abstract arabesques.

Jonathan Lasker's *The Quotidian and the Question*, 2007, suggests anatomical structures.

Landscape-related imagery also appears in the abstract work of Tara Donovan, Stephen Ellis, Anoka Faruquee, Jacqueline Humphries, Shirley Kaneda,

Wolfgang Laib, Fabian Marcaccio, Joseph Marioni, Odili Donald Odita, Cornelia Parker, Joanna Poussette-Dart, Pat Steir, William Wood, Sanford Wurmfeld, and John Zinsser.

3. Anatomies

In Jonathan Lasker's canvases, thinly painted stage sets and imaginary landscapes are occupied by brooding presences laid in with thick strokes of impasto. These "presences" have typically come to take the form of P-shaped configurations suggesting massive heads that confront one another, like the haunted eyeballs and truncated feet of late Philip Guston.

However, the abstract anatomies of contemporary artists rarely correspond to the image of the human body as a whole. Instead, their work tends to hint at individual body parts, internal organs, or the "abject" substances excreted by the body. The masterwork of sculptor Tim Hawkinson is an enormous installation of floating bladders linked by long intestinal tubes, appropriately titled *Uberorgan*. Among painters, Sue Williams has created throbbing allover compositions of sexual organs, while Carrie Moyer uses biomorphic curves and blushing colors to intimate arousal in compositions that initially look like abstract landscapes.

Leaving the recognizable body further behind, Ingrid Calame depicts a universe of drips, stains, and smears, their pathetic associations offset by bright, incongruous colors. It seems at first





glance that Calame's skeins and pools of color must have been dripped freely onto canvas, Pollock-style. However, the apparent fluidity of her work is the result of a meticulous process of tracing markings found on sidewalks, floors, and streets. These drawings on translucent paper are archived and then arranged in layers to create new compositions.

We can also find more or less bodily images in the abstract paintings and sculptures of Ghada Amer, Ross Bleckner, Chakaia Booker, Cecily Brown, Lydia Dona, Christian Eckart, Margaret Evangeline, Ellen Gallagher, Charline von Heyl, Rosy Keyser, Giles Lyon, Thomas Nozkowski, Roxy Paine, Monique Prieto, Martin Puryear, Ursula von Rydingsvard, James Siena, and Mark Dean Veca.

4. Fabrics

Turning from natural to man-made models for abstraction, fabric has figured prominently as a source of inspiration. Throughout much of the 20th century, male abstract artists rejected

comparisons between their paintings and decorative fabrics. In the 1970s, however, women artists, such as Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff,

set out to revindicate decoration and to use it as the point of departure for a new, feminist mode of abstraction. The artists (both male and female) of the Pattern and Decoration movement often incorporated representational and architectural elements into their brilliantly colored compositions.

Of the artists emerging from this movement, Valerie Jaudon has remained one of the most severely abstract. In her recent work, she almost eliminates color, using only black and white, or white paint on bare brown linen. But she combines this austere palette with a sensual profusion of pattern, numbing and teasing the mind like a carved wooden panel from the Alhambra. Her designs suggest the repeat patterns of fabric or

The work of Valerie Jaudon, who emerged from the Pattern and Decoration movement, has remained highly abstract but alludes to the repeat patterns of fabric or wallpaper, as in *Circa*, 2012.

wallpaper, without ever quite resolving into regularity.

In the 1970s, some American artists, like Kim MacConnel, looked to African fabrics as models of laid-back geometry. Today, it is African artists themselves who are winning recognition as brilliant innovators. Take, for example, the abstract tapestries of El Anatsui, on view in a retrospective that runs through August 4 at the Brooklyn Museum. Anatsui's tapestries are put together from hundreds or thousands of pieces of metallic scrap—the caps, bands, wrappers, and labels that

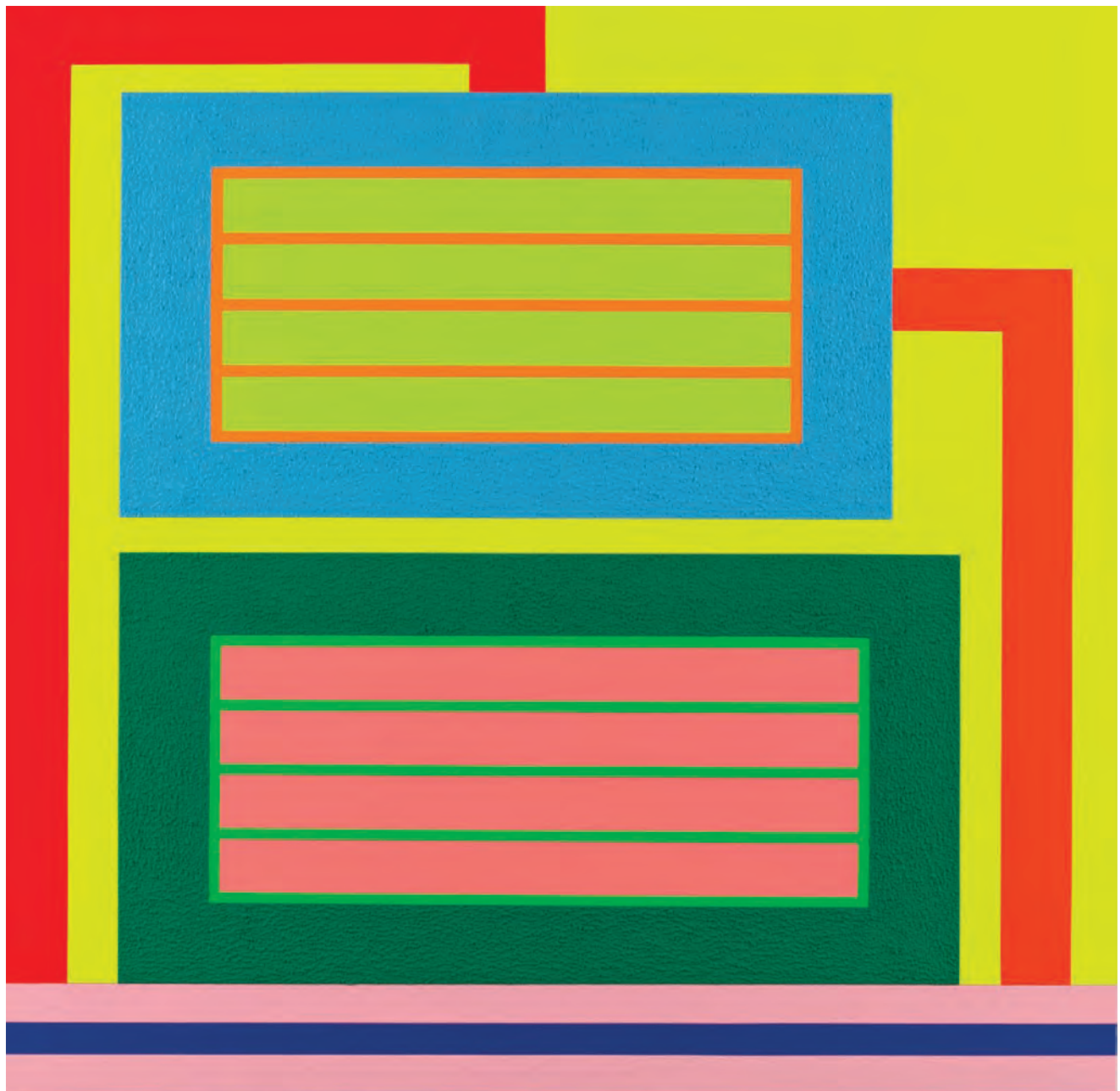
adorn the bottles and other items you would find in a market or trash heap in western Africa. The shimmering gold and silver of Anatsui's work offer an

image of celebratory splendor. Draped and folded, rather than hung flush against the wall, these tapestries challenge our assumptions about the obligatory flatness of abstraction. Other contemporary abstractionists working with the imagery of fabric and decorative patterning include Linda Besemer, Bernard Frize, Richard Kalina, Ryan McGinness, Beatriz Milhazes, Sean Scully, Frank Stella, Philip Taaffe, and Adriana Varejão.

**Architectural structures
inform Peter Halley's
paintings, as in *Accretive
Cognition*, 2010.**

5. Architectures

Peter Halley's paintings, which launched the Neo-Geo movement of the 1980s, focus obsessively on the motif of a rectangular cell, reminiscent of a house, a prison, a computer chip, or a piece of machinery. Resting on a narrow band of earth or



flooring, the structure is plugged into its environment by conduits that run through the ground or take to the sky, connecting it into an invisible urban grid. Instead of a place of refuge, the cell becomes a symbol of the postmodern self: isolated, immobilized, and under surveillance. The pure optical quality of 1960s modernism gives way in Halley's work to a purgatory of Day-Glo colors and motel-room textures: garish, menacing, and weirdly seductive. Another painter, Sarah Morris, uses tilted grids and pulsing colors to suggest the dazed confusion found

In 2013, as in 1913, abstraction is how we think about the future

in the mirrored facades of corporate modernism.

Whereas Halley and Morris propose large allegorical statements about contemporary society, Rachel Harrison speaks to a realm of personal experience. Her sculptures often incorporate beams, lintels, and moldings embedded in cement or pieces of sheetrock fastened into a loose grid, accompanied by toys, framed photographs, and other household furnishings. The works seem like fragments of houses that have been smashed apart by natural disasters or worn down by everyday life. And yet there's something oddly cheerful about Harrison's eroded architectures, even when they're not painted in the primary-school colors she often favors. They have a kind of pluck, as if they're determined to carry on, no matter what. (In Harrison's most recent work, architecture has mutated into anatomy, as her stacked forms begin to resemble living creatures.)

Architectural structures also play an important role in the abstract work of John Armleder, Frank Badur, Helmut Federle, Liam Gillick, Guillermo Kuitca, Sherrie Levine, David Novros, Doris Salcedo, Andrew Spence, Jessica Stockholder, Sarah Sze, Phoebe Washburn, and Rachel Whiteread.

6. Signs

Signs have been an important element of modern art ever since 1911 and 1912, when Picasso and Braque put stenciled letters and scraps of newspaper into their Cubist pictures. But Jasper Johns's flag, map, and number pictures of the 1950s and early 1960s initiated a revolutionary transformation in the character of sign painting. His stenciled letters and regular grids came to convey meaninglessness instead of meaning. They didn't express emotion; they repressed it. In one way or another, his work lies behind much of the most important art of 1960s, from the monochromes of Frank Stella and Brice Marden to the Minimal boxes of Robert Morris and Donald Judd.

Fifty years later, Johns continues to exercise a decisive influence on abstraction. Wade Guyton, shown last year at the Whitney, updates Johns's number paintings, eliminating the artist's hand by using digital printers instead of stencils. Guyton's insistent X's seem less like marks than like cancellations, refusing to signify and then fading into blankness.

Mark Bradford's paintings resemble the giant computer screens that sophisticated police departments use for real-time surveillance of traffic, crime, and accidents, with data overlaid on urban grids. But in contrast to the flickering pixels of the computer screen, Bradford's images have actual substance. Like Calame, he works with papers and materials gathered from the streets of Los Angeles, shredding and aging them, then layering them into his compositions. Bradford's powerful combination of imagery and materials captures the experience of living simultaneously in the parallel universes of information and sensation.

Other artists using written language or formats recalling maps and diagrams include Ai Weiwei, Mel Bochner, David Diaó, Caio Fonseca, Carmela Gross, Gu Wenda, Jenny Holzer, Wosene Worke Kosrof, Glenn Ligon, Tatsuo Miyajima, RETNA, Joan Snyder, Xu Bing, Stephen Westfall, Terry Winters, and Hossein Zenderoudi. Written language, in particular, seems to have an international potency.

Ultimately, the evolution of abstract art—like the evolution of modern art more broadly—has been a series of responses to the experience of life in the 20th and 21st centuries. As Halley argues in a brilliant 1991 essay, abstraction before World War II was largely inspired by the utopian belief that rational technocracy (i.e., socialism) would create a better world. The technocratic ideal found its most powerful symbol not in the rosy-cheeked workers of Socialist Realism but in geometric abstraction. After the devastation of World War II and the revelation of the horrors of Stalinist Russia, geometry could no longer function as an image of utopia. Changing polarity, it became instead a symbol of alienation.

Much contemporary art—not to mention fiction, film, and television—reflects a *Blade Runner* vision of a world, in which the individual is rendered powerless by anonymous government agencies, giant corporations, and deafening mass culture. It's useful to remember that this nightmare vision is itself a romantic stereotype, ignoring the positive aspects of postmodern society. Since 1980, the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined dramatically, both as a percentage of world population and in absolute numbers. The principal reason is the globalization of the economy, which has created millions of factory jobs in the former Third World, lifting workers from starvation in the countryside to subsistence in the cities. Some of the most exciting abstract artists today are those, like Anatsui and Mehretu, whose work responds to this transformation, either by reinventing traditional arts for a global art world or by creating visual allegories of social change that carry us beyond the old capitalism-socialism divide. In 2013, as in 1913, abstraction is how we think about the future. ■

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