

"Exploring Fluidity: The Ebb and Flow of Control"

Curated by Rebecca Bellamy

This exhibition presents Artworks that could be described as “post-painterly”, but more specifically the artworks will have been created using spontaneous, fluid processes such as Stain-painting and Wet-on-wet. Characteristically the Artist's chosen medium is thinned with turpentine or water, and encouraged to flow, seep and drip; enabling colours to bleed into one another. Some of the artists are driven by process, others engage in a balancing act between figuration and abstraction. Therefore this exhibition comprises of Artists who manipulate these loose and expressive processes, to form purely abstract as well as semi-abstract work.

Abstract Expressionism has been the most prominent movement of the past century, therefore the fluid mark-making associated with the Abstract Expressionist practise, is often interpreted as forms of personal expression. However, fluid mark-making and other fluid processes have been adopted by Artists, whose main objective is not self-expression, but the exploration of aesthetics and process.

Stain painting is a branch of colour field painting, which has its roots in abstract expressionism; however in his essay for the exhibition titled “Post-painterly Abstraction” held in 1964, the curator and critic Clement Greenberg explains that these Colour-field painters were reacting against the personal, gestural qualities of painterly abstraction. They rejected thick paint and were far more interested in colours than texture. Often their work appeared flat, because they tended to emphasise the clarity of pure colour, rather than tonality.¹

Stain painting was a technique developed by the Colour Field painter Helen Frankenthaler in 1952, a technique that involved pouring thin paint onto raw, un-primed canvas. In April 1953, Morris Louis as well as Kenneth Noland, were brought to Frankenthaler's studio by Clement Greenberg. After seeing Frankenthaler's piece “Mountains and Sea” Louis was inspired to change the direction of his own work, “He began to feel, think, and conceive almost exclusively in terms of open colour”² He said that

¹ Herschel B. Chipp: 1992: 297-298, Theories of Modern Art, California Press

² <http://sites.google.com/site/yaandshi/onmorrislouis>

Frankenthaler was “a bridge between Pollock and what was possible.” Louis and Noland went on to develop Frankenthaler's stain-painting technique, forming what was to be called the 'Washington Colour School'.³



(Morris Louis- “Dalet Kaf” 1959, Acrylic on canvas, 256 x 363 cm)

A shared belief by many process-driven Artists is that;

“expression and meaning arise not from preconceptions, but from discoveries made in the course of manipulating materials.”⁴

This echoes the principles of Abstract Expressionism. Fluid methods, for example pouring, dripping, splashing and smearing, were techniques that owe their development to Action painters.

Jackson Pollock pioneered Abstract Expression, owing much of his popularity to the support of Clement Greenberg. Pollock was best known for his drip painting technique, often placing his canvases on the ground and while approaching from various directions, dripping paint from his brushes onto the surface . A spontaneous and energetic process, otherwise known as 'Action-painting', in an interview with William Wright in 1950, he describes his practise, “the energy, the motion, and other inner forces... The modern artist is... expressing his feelings rather than illustrating.”⁵

³ <http://sites.google.com/site/yaandshi/onmorrislouis>

⁴ Karen Wilken, Art In America (Nov 2K8 issue) Cited

http://artid.com/members/art_aesthetics/blog/post/1826-abstraction-and-empathy

⁵ <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Analysis+of+Clement+Greenberg's+%22the+Situation+at+the+Moment%22->

In his article "The American Action Painters," published in 1952, Harold Rosenberg (1906–78) described how these artists used the canvas as "an arena in which to act" rather than as a place to produce an object. "What was to go on the canvas," he wrote, "was not a picture but an event."⁶

James Brooks (1906 –1992) was one of the first Abstract Expressionist painters to exercise the staining techniques derived of Helen Frankenthaler;

*"His concern has always been to create painterly accidents of the kind that allow buried personal meanings to take on visibility."*⁷

Paul Jenkins is another notable colour-field artist who uses fluid processes, but he chooses to prime his canvases, so that his paint tends to pool upon the surface, rather than soak through the fabric. He also combines these methods with more gestural marks, producing what could be described as lyrical and illusionary compositions, it is for this reason that Jenkins has not received the same level of acclaim as those such as Morris and Frankenthaler.

Jenkins was very much part of the New York art scene during the late 1940s; he knew Pollock, Newman and Rothko and attended the Arts Students League; however his work did not conform to Clement Greenberg's Formalism. Greenberg determined that it was the two-dimensionality of Abstract Expressionist artwork, which led to it becoming a significant movement in the history of art.

*"Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else"*⁸.

The power that Greenberg's art criticism had during the 1950s and 1960s, greatly influenced perceptions of what was considered to be the great art of that time.

⁶ http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2402a01073741900

⁷ Carter Ratcliff. 1973: 38-39, Art International, February issue. Cited <http://www.artbrokerage.com/artist/brooksames/,%20James-Brooks>

⁸ <http://www.theartstory.org/definition-flatness.htm>



(Paul Jenkins-Phenomena Uranus Burns 1966 acrylic on canvas 216 x 178 cm)

Artists that pursue pure abstraction are usually focused on the organisation of space using line, colour and form; this approach requires intuition and instinct.

“Colour-field painters believed that the source of creativity was the unconscious and that the artist's role was to make the unseen visible, rather than depict what could be seen”.⁹

It can be tricky, finding meaning in aesthetics rather than a concept or narrative, such art has been dismissed as “decorative”. However, it can also have the power to connect with the viewer on a level beyond words or reason; to quote Piri Halasz,

“People who have trouble with such art call it merely “decorative”; those with the capacity to see more clearly will often find themselves deeply moved. Purely pictorial art can sometimes reach viewers on a level beyond intellectual analysis or words”¹⁰

Fluid processes are still employed for the purpose of expression by many contemporary Artists, whose objective is to express themselves as directly as possible, as

⁹ Karen Wilkin 2008 http://www.afaweb.org/education/downloads/color_field_brochure.pdf

¹⁰ Piri Halasz July 20th 2010 The Spreading Stain, New York Observer
<http://www.observer.com/2010/spreading-stain>

did the Abstract Expressionists, to quote Jackson Pollock from an interview taken in 1950,

“Today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within.”¹¹

However, Artists endeavour to describe and express their external reality. Whether the Artist is pursuing expression, or pure abstraction they are often driven by process and the sense of surprise that a certain amount of indeterminacy offers; but many also combine and juxtapose these fluid “stains” or forms, with more controlled mark-making and figurative forms.

Contemporary Artists continue to adopt the techniques of stain-painters, but work is also being created, that pushes the exploration of fluidity further still, beyond Greenbergian formalism. These artists often adopt a pluralist approach, amalgamating styles and mediums,

“twenty-first century art is distinct, owing to the openness of form and style, so much so that various genres coexist on the same ground.”¹²

Aesthetics are approached with a historical awareness of the processes adopted and forms rendered in the Artist's pursuit of meaning.

The outcomes of fluid processes are energetic, moody, they often mimic organic forms because the liquid paint is encouraged to seep and flow, with little interference by the artist's hand. Gravity often plays a significant part, as does the density of the paint. Unravelling the 'event' is an engaging aspect of interpreting process-driven work. Whether the artist is pursuing pure and impersonal abstraction, personal abstract expression, or a myriad of styles and influences; the ebb and flow of substance is an exhilarating challenge for the artist to control and a captivating experience for the viewer to behold.

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11 Pollock 1950 Interview with William Wright, Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: 22

12 <http://ezinearticles.com/?Western-Painting---Pluralism---The-Multiplied-Art&id=3082948>

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