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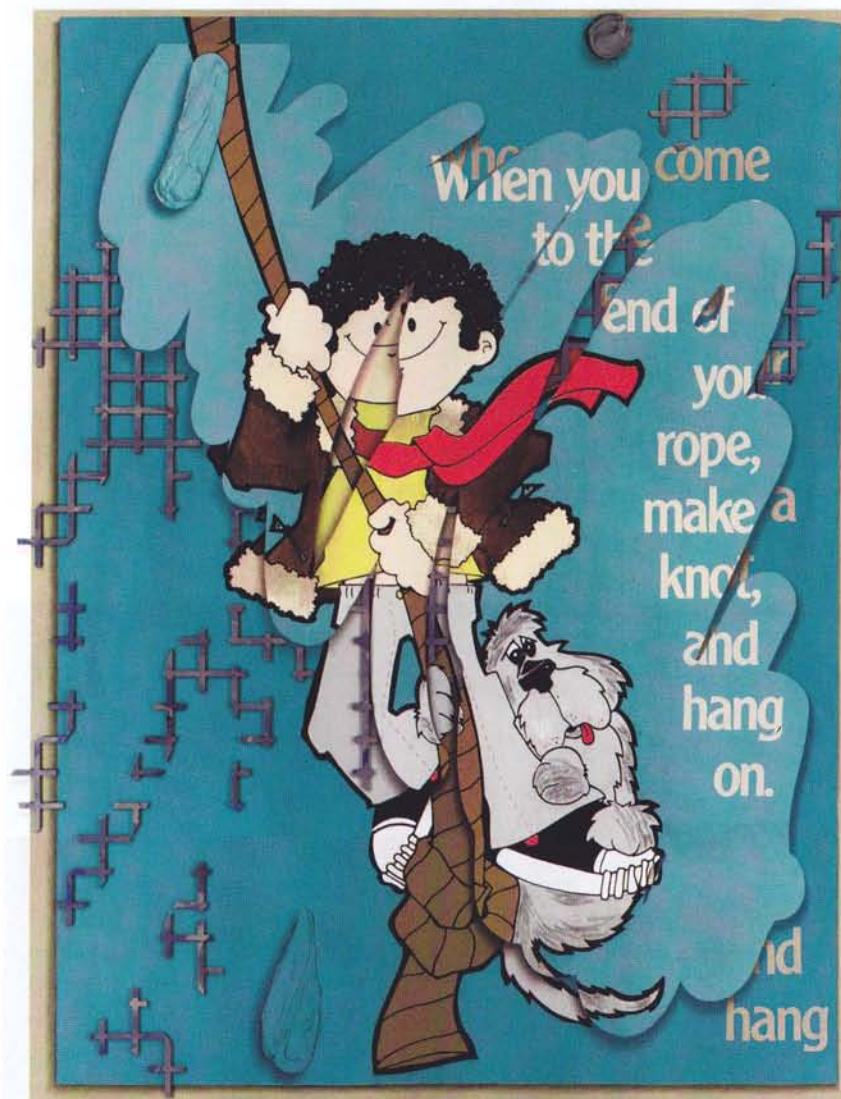
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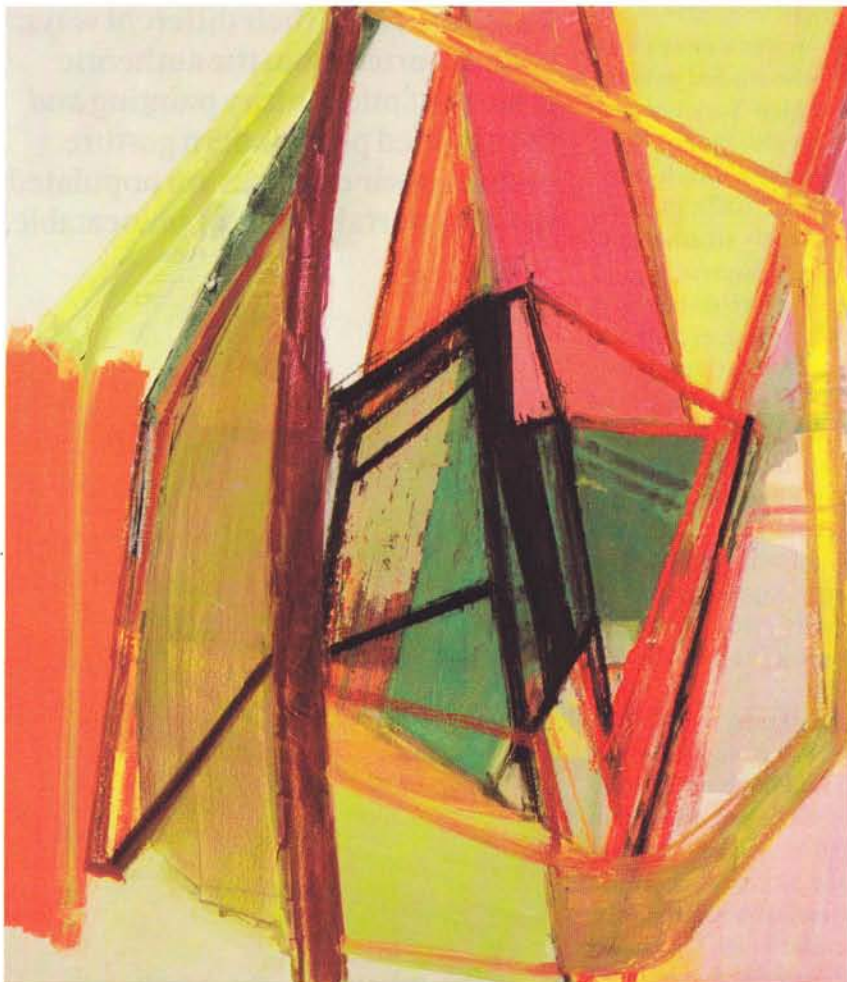
MARK GODFREY ON THE ART OF JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES, LAURA OWENS, AMY SILLMAN, AND CHARLINE VON HEYL



Above: Charline von Heyl, *Blotto*, 2004, oil on linen, 78 x 82".

Right: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2014, Pantone ink, silk-screen ink, Flashe paint, acrylic paint, oil, pastel, paper, and wood on linen, 11' 6" x 8' 8".

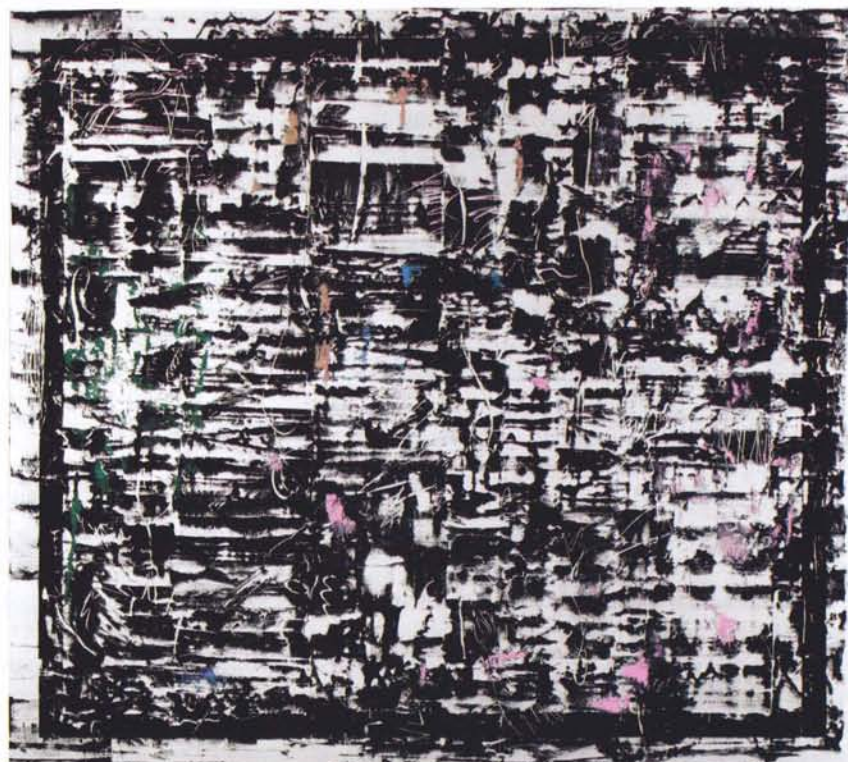




Above: Amy Sillman, *S*, 2007,
oil on canvas, 45 x 39".

Right: Jacqueline Humphries,
Untitled, 2014, oil on linen,
9' 6" x 10' 7".

LIKE A SOCIALIST INVESTMENT BANKER, a painter in a top MFA program circa 1990 was something of a living contradiction in terms. It's no coincidence, argues curator MARK GODFREY, that artists JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES, LAURA OWENS, AMY SILLMAN, and CHARLINE VON HEYL all got their starts as renegade practitioners of gestural abstraction in the poststudio atmosphere that prevailed a quarter century ago. Challenging their own educations as well as the gendered connotations of their chosen field, Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl established resistant positions poised between authenticity and appropriation. Here, Godfrey looks at the commonalities that unite his subjects, proposing that an adroit "fakery" of gesture and a new engagement with composition, agency, intention, and other erstwhile taboos inform the practices of all four painters—and have made them central to the art of today.



BAD EDUCATION

IN 1986, when she was a student in the famously theory-driven Whitney Independent Study Program, the artist Jacqueline Humphries presented a group of her abstract paintings to visiting professor Yvonne Rainer and received a silent shrug in response. The gesture, Humphries recalls, appeared to mean something like “Oh well—there’s nothing I can do for someone like you.” Humphries was taken aback to find Rainer at a loss for words, but from our vantage point the anecdote isn’t so surprising: There *were* no words, at that time, with which an ISP faculty member might credibly discuss abstract painting. Or rather, there were plenty of words, but all their permutations seemed exhausted. Influential critics had recently dismantled the “return to painting” and had decried the late-1970s retrenchment of unreconstructed expressionism, while artists such as Sherrie Levine, who confronted modernist abstraction as a set of worn-out conventions, had found favor.² Between these poles—abdication of criticality on the one hand and proclamations of the medium’s depletion on the other—there seemed to be no middle ground. So what *could* Rainer say when confronted by a student who was not treating abstraction with cool detachment, yet was intent on making work that was critically informed?

Fast-forward some twenty-eight years. Today, Humphries has taken her place as one of the most interesting figures in an increasingly celebrated generation of painters that also notably includes Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl. But the words to describe these artists’ endeavors still seem to be missing. All four have had key shows in the past year, and seem to garner more institutional support by the month (all are in this year’s Whitney Biennial). At a moment that gives every indication of marking a turning point in these artists’ receptions, it seems appropriate, if not crucial, to determine what commonalities—not only with respect to concrete matters of paint handling and composition but also in relation to history, to gender, to technology—have placed these artists at the forefront of contemporary painting, and to attend to their own words, their extensive interviews and statements, when doing so.

Any such account must begin by emphasizing the fact that the artists *all* faced Rainer’s shrug, so to speak—that is, they came of age in an environment in which their interests in abstract painting were discouraged. The resistance they faced turned out to be productive, something worth considering when we think of younger painters emerging from the anything-goes art school context today. “At the time of my early encounters with the medium,” Humphries recalls, “to paint at all denoted artistic failure. So

painting’s status as the disavowed underside of art-making gave it fresh meaning—it was almost a kind of rogue practice.”³ Sillman, who studied painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York not long before Humphries’s ISP stint, has also spoken about this context, highlighting the extent to which it was inflected by gender expectations: “AbEx painting was not the expectation for a female art student in the 1970s. . . . There is a certain ‘transgressive’ goal in trying to exploit a collapsed and forbidden terrain in order to open it up, de-mythologize, exploit and change it for new people’s use. At that time it was basically like trespassing.”⁴ Von Heyl now works in New York and Marfa, Texas, but she spent her formative years in the Rhineland, and, as she recalls, “abstraction was absolutely nonexistent in my immediate surroundings in Germany in the ’80s. The positions that I was confronted with were Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Martin Kippenberger, and Albert Oehlen’s. It was a heavily male, very jokey, and ironic stance toward painting. Anarchistic and also quite arrogant.”⁵

Owens started out slightly later, studying at CalArts in the mid-’90s, but the atmosphere was hardly more welcoming. Students had to wade through the critical literature about painting before setting off on their paths, as if their instructors hoped to dissuade them from actually picking up a brush.⁶ Yet thanks in part to David Reed, who was a visiting professor during Owens’s student years, Owens did have access to a history of ’70s painting that included Mary Heilmann and Joan Snyder. In the early ’90s, there was nothing for Owens to read about the links between this work and feminism (later, Helen Molesworth’s essay “Painting with Ambivalence,” in the catalogue for the 2007 exhibition “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” would elucidate these connections⁷), but at least she could glean a sense of a possible relationship between feminism and abstraction. Save for Sherrie Levine’s comments about her strategy of showing “the uneasy death of modernism,”⁸ largely associated with a canon of male protagonists, no such resource was available to the other three.

APPLYING PAINT

EMERGING WITHIN THESE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, each of these painters would be highly conscious of the heroic and gendered associations of the AbEx and Informel brushstroke, though they also recognized that generations of artists before them, from Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein to Polke, had deflated these gestures. They would also have taken note of postmodern parodies and appropriations of certain kinds of brushstrokes. But they

These artists, in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of midcentury painting *and* the emptied postmodern gesture. Instead, their canvases are populated by the uncertain, fake, or unlocatable.

Below: Amy Sillman, *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, 2012, digital animation, 5 minutes 9 seconds.

Opposite page: Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2011, oil on linen, 90 x 96".





understood that to base a practice on mapping abstraction's failures or exposing styles of paint application as empty conventions was no longer valid. Sillman has noted in these pages that such critiques are themselves a lazy cliché: "[AbEx's] detractors would have it that the whole kit and caboodle is nothing but bad politics steel-welded around a chassis of machismo—that the paint stroke, the very use of the arm, is equivalent to a phallic spurt."⁹

Intent on transferring the liquid matter of paint to canvas, the four artists developed a variety of responses to these fraught circumstances. Sillman's strategy has been to deploy this gestural mode, but in such a way as to indicate a kind of hesitancy about its use. Each of her strokes reveals itself not as the final masterful decision but as just one more application on a surface already covered with other strokes, which you can see behind to the last one. In addition to layering strata of pigment in paintings such as *S*, 2007, she complicates the distinctions between brushed areas of color and the drawn lines that outline forms or describe vectors, creating a sense of uncertainty as to the identity of each.

Humphries also confronts AbEx tropes, recognizing that quotation and parody are not the only ways of playing with preconceptions. In an untitled painting from 2011, a slathering of pink pigment, dripping toward the work's bottom edge, evokes such tropes, but Humphries's treatment of this quintessential AbEx mark goes far beyond allusion. "A drip, formerly a symbol of feckless artistic abandon, becomes for me a primary structuring agent," she says. "To enact a gestural mark, I must locate myself in the gap between its form and its received meaning."¹⁰ In *41/14*, 2014, in the Whitney Biennial, drips that we assume were the product of unintentional runoff are in fact highly constructed, resulting from the buildup of dry paint rather than the movement of liquid paint: fake drips.

In von Heyl's work, too, what appears to be a drip or a quickly made stroke is, as often as not, something else altogether. For instance, in *It's Not Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, 2010, a line of drips changes color, indicating that half of them are "painted" drips rather than trails of paint. And von Heyl hunts down modes of paint handling that are even more

problematic than the AbEx stroke, often looking back to artists whom she calls "second rate" and who have fallen utterly out of favor. She might emulate the thin lines in Bernard Buffet's portraits (her *Bois-Tu de la Bier?*, 2012) or the thick black lines in Celestino Piatti's illustrations (her *Big Zipper*, 2011) or the "heavy-duty, existential oil painting"¹¹ of Georges Rouault (*Igitur*, 2008). Sometimes she will appear to have faithfully replicated such marks, but "when you get close, you realize that the surface is not keeping that promise; it's almost like a betrayal."¹² She remarks, "I never saw myself as appropriating styles. I'm using different effects and procedures, and different materials."¹³ Nor does she wish to critique the idea of the unitary author by avoiding the development of a signature style. The idea, for her, is to ask in what ways these absolutely "forbidden" methods might be useful now, stripped of the rhetoric that once surrounded them. Von Heyl also seeks to make marks that look as if they've been mechanically printed—she may fake the appearance of the ink smudge (*Dusty Dafni*, 2011), say, or the engraved line. These notions of paint application as



Above: Charline von Heyl, *It's Vot's Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, 2010, acrylic and oil on linen and canvas, 82 x 72".

Below: Charline von Heyl, *Dusty Dafni*, 2011, acrylic on linen, 82 x 72".



faking, even betrayal, are important, as is the distinction from quotation or parody: We feel confused by an act of faking, but sure of ourselves with an act of quotation. Von Heyl, moreover, has proposed a position of falseness as the beginning of a new kind of sincerity. "At the core of my being in the world, and my being an artist, is this feeling of falseness, which feels paradoxically like the one truly existential sense of self left, or possible. And it is this paradoxical twist that gives me a new lease on pathos."¹⁴

Owens's approach to applying paint is perhaps best illustrated by her experiments with impasto in "Pavement Karaoke," 2012, a series of seven paintings, and in the twelve works made in 2013 for her space, 356 S. Mission Rd., in LA. In these works, impasto, that erstwhile calling card of impassioned expressionism, does not carry the meanings it did in the '50s. The thick strokes of whipped-up Day-Glo paint are confined within crisply outlined, bulbous shapes that, one quickly concludes, must be digitally generated. In fact, the forms are created by a painting program that allows the user to select a curved line from a menu and elaborate it into perfect squiggles and equally perfect erasures; Owens projects such figures onto canvas and fills them in with impasto. The impression of fakeness is amplified by the illusionistic drop shadows she paints in to accompany the real shadows cast by the physical crests. Discussing these works in these pages, Owens has said that she wanted "to emphatically try to inhabit the gesture."¹⁵ But she went on to ask, "Is it even possible for a woman artist to be the one who marks?" She sees her recent paintings not only as subjecting gesture to forms of mediation but also as posing a radical question: If painterly gestures have long been understood in relation to the male orgasm, and if "the female orgasm has no use [in terms of reproduction], no mark, no locatability," is it possible to conceive of the female orgasm as a "model for a new gesture"—one that is both hard to locate spatially and not identifiable as assignable to a particular author?

All four of these painters, then, in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of midcentury *and* the emptied postmodern gesture. Instead, their canvases are populated by uncertain, fake, or unlocatable gestures. And where we do find "real" drips or passages of firm brushwork, we find it impossible to read them as we once did. Meaning is thrown back onto the viewer as the artists' own subjective investments in their decisions around paint handling become indeterminate and unknowable.

COMPOSITION

THE VERY IDEA OF COMPOSITION is as beleaguered as the brushstroke. In a recent statement summarizing

his career-long theorization of this subject, Yve-Alain Bois contrasted the fundamentally arbitrary gesture of the traditional composing author—"the expressionist route taken by Kandinsky"¹⁶—with Mondrian's rigorous approach to composition, where "a painting is understood as a highly balanced assembly of diverse elements unified through the action of an extremely complex system of thought."¹⁷ It is, however, non-composition, as Bois has shown, that is the defining rubric of modernism. Noncompositional responses to expressionist composition have played out in each generation over the twentieth century, generating modernism's signal strategies: the grid, the monochrome, the allover, the indexical transfer, the deductive structure, and various chance procedures such as the abdication to nature or gravity in process art.

The four painters under discussion here share a nuanced skepticism of the "expressionist route," and they do not work in strict sequence, with one composition generating a formal problem to be tackled in the next, in the manner of Mondrian. Most important, and against the tide of recent critically sanctioned abstraction, they complicate and even eschew noncomposition, developing ways of composing that are organic, unpredictable, and contingent. Such terms would seem the very definition of one strain of noncomposition—the organic, unpredictable, and contingent province of chance—but these painters show that one can productively mine both the subjective gesture and the contingent event, and need not make a false choice between the two. To them, many artists engaging noncomposition today can appear problematically proud, as if congratulating themselves on how each decision about color, canvas shape, amount of pigment, and so on is subject either to some preconceived system or to some aleatoric operation. The four probably recognize that non-compositional strategies have always involved initial personal, though underacknowledged, decisions on the part of artists; but there are more serious reasons for their departure from noncomposition. They realize that it has historically been (and to an extent still is) the privilege of white male artists to do away with their subjectivity (even if, of course, many artists have specifically used noncomposition to combat the hegemony of the bourgeois, Western notion of the individual subject). When one does not fit that default position, there is rather more at stake in deciding whether or not to foreground the self in all its ineluctably political specificity.

There is another factor militating against non-composition for these painters: They are working at a moment when technological changes are dramatically reconfiguring and arguably devastating the subject, when the "personal" is largely a function of how we self-advertise on social media, and when



View of "12 Paintings by Laura Owens," 2013, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. All: *Untitled*, 2013. Photo: Joshua White.

Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl all describe the procedure of beginning a work as a confrontation—they speak of being in front of a blank canvas, of facing the vertiginous uncertainty of just starting off.

scanned fingerprints are about to replace PINs (our memories bypassed, our bodies finally become machines for buying). Adopting chance or systematic procedures associated with noncomposition could today be seen as replicating the manner in which complex algorithms present and predict information, a submission to the rule of technology. For Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl, then, subjective compositional procedures have a contemporary urgency but are reinstated in new ways. The painter, though constantly making considered decisions during composition, is never quite transparent to herself and never, therefore, quite transparent to her viewer.

All four describe the procedure of beginning a work as a confrontation—they speak of being in front of a blank canvas, of facing the vertiginous uncertainty of just starting off. Once they begin, the process is one of constant accumulation and "violation,"¹⁸ "compulsive undoing,"¹⁹ "sabotage,"²⁰ transgression, and so on. They are all well aware that the notion of the painting as a "living thing" has previously been dismissed as an absurd, romantic cliché, but nevertheless say that they get to a point where the painting begins to appear to them as an entity that makes calls on them, that might irritate them, surprise them, confuse them. Von Heyl is clearest: "I don't want to make the painting, I want the painting to invent itself and surprise me."²¹

There is a term or idea that recurs in their accounts, and that is *unknowability*. Humphries says, "I have to destroy the painting I know to make the one I don't know yet."²² Sillman has said, "Making paintings for me is liminal: not quite-known, coming-into-being, not-yet-seen, being-remembered."²³ Von Heyl phrases it thus: "I can get beyond [design] only in the unknown. . . . I can force myself into that concentrated mindspace that is just looking and goes beyond

thinking."²⁴ Owens makes a similar point when she speaks of her refusal to "language"²⁵ her work—the word *language*, repurposed as a verb, referencing an exhaustive thinking-through of each decision, so that refusal to "language" is a kind of refusal to know, or to know too much.

Such invocations of unknowability could be caricatured as so many New Age bromides, but we would be wrong to characterize them in this way. For a start, the unknowable has a new premium in a culture that prides itself on being able to know everything via instant access (constitutional or not) to massive troves of information. The language of the unknowable also resonates with Eva Hesse's claim that she wanted to get to "what is yet not known."²⁶ This lineage raises the question of whether we can locate a feminist position in this approach to abstraction. Molesworth, for one, has already pushed for the term *unknowability* in a 2013 essay on Sillman: "For me, feminism is a critique of power and mastery, and most of all it's a warning about how the combination of mastery and power has, historically, led to violence. One result of this questioning of power is that unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue."²⁷ What seems astonishing, and what may be the generative paradox at the heart of these practices, is the fact that each painter harnesses unknowability as an essential part of making art, but at the same time brings to her practice a profound knowledge of how to make, and fake, marks on canvas, how to navigate the histories and associations of those marks and control what impact they might have on viewers.

To get a finer-grained sense of this dialectic of the known and unknown, a closer look at each artist's process is in order. Owens's process (at least in recent paintings) is slightly distinct, given that her work is begun on a computer, and that her methods involve



Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2012, acrylic, Flashe paint, oil, resin, collage, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 x 1 1/2".

silk-screening and require assistance and planning. Nevertheless, there are fundamental similarities between her approach and those of Humphries, Sillman, and von Heyl. For "Pavement Karaoke," her first decision was to spell the unlikely titular phrase across the canvases in areas of silk screen made from vintage newspaper classified ads. She added sections of gingham, painted grids, and tilted lattices; the computer-drawn, impasto-filled brushstrokes discussed above; painted-in shadows; and scatters of applied lava rocks. Strikingly, these components have no evident conceptual connection either to one

another or to the idea of singing Pavement songs in a karaoke bar. This collision of elements might be viewed as hermetic and incoherent, but should be understood as a direct refusal of the pedagogy of CalArts, where artists were trained to explain and justify each step of each project. Owens willfully blasts her paintings with heterogeneous materials, processes, references, and textures, with no reverence toward the medium, confident that such amalgams will coalesce as dynamic works that could not have been planned in advance. "I really want paintings to be problems. . . . The painting is coming out at you and asking you to put these things together. . . . What interests me in painting is that it comes out into the room, almost punches you in the face."²⁸

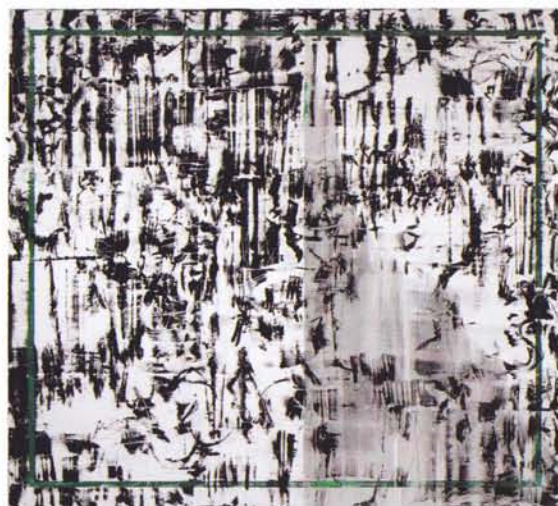
Von Heyl's ambition is "to create an image that has the iconic value of a sign but remains ambiguous in its meaning."²⁹ She has stated, "I want to get abstraction to a point where it screams that it is something: a representation and a thing."³⁰ To do this, the painting has to go beyond what she calls "design,"³¹ a term that for her refers to the visually known world—not only designed objects but also products, websites, ads, etc. Design gives things recognizability, and the meaning of designed things relies on this recognition. It is what a painter will fall into when she knows what she is doing—so von Heyl says she inevitably finds herself designing, but that she strives to go beyond this. For her, abstraction, when successful, has the same reality and visual power as design, but will be more difficult than design and will not convey a meaning. She will borrow memorable and identifiable elements from visual culture—checkerboards (*Yellow Guitar*, 2010), harlequin patterns (*Blotto*, 2004), figurative shapes (*Skull*, 2012), frames (*Dumka*, 2007), sawtooth serrated edges and zigzag lines (*P.*, 2008)—but her aim is to exceed the easy interpretations they promise. Similarly, she uses the bold colors associated with product design in ways that make them unfamiliar: In *Oread*, 2011, for instance, a thin layer of fluorescent yellow is detached from a brash composition of bulbous black forms and circles beneath.

Humphries, for her part, aims to produce works that powerfully communicate a sense of being unfinished: "I start a painting by finishing it, then may proceed to unfinish it, make holes in it or undo it in various ways, as a kind of escape from that finitude."³² Across another painting at the Whitney, *Untitled*, 2014, for instance, there are several small silver loops, and it's hard to tell if they're the result of scratches or strokes. Appearing as impromptu doodles, they feel like initial, rather than final, gestures, productively out of kilter with the scale of the painting. Humphries has for some time begun her compositions by painting frames, and these serve as



Charline von Heyl, *P.*, 2008, acrylic and crayon on linen, 82 x 74".

Jacqueline Humphries, *41/14*, 2014, oil on linen, 9' 6" x 10' 7".



The painter, though constantly making considered decisions during composition, is never quite transparent to herself and never, therefore, quite transparent to her viewer.

structures against which to work: “The frame is a way of saying, ‘this, here, now’ then I break into that.”³³ The frames also lead us to anticipate an all-over arrangement of marks within them, but often Humphries fractures the internal space, leaving prominent diagonal or vertical breaks which (as in 41/14) can feel productively awkward. She seeks a final (if not necessarily finished) state in which figure-ground relationships have disintegrated. The idea of a place from which to feel a sense of authority as a viewer disintegrates, too, because it is impossible to orient oneself to any particular point or shape.³⁴ Whereas von Heyl, having taken a composition past the recognizability of design, stops when the painting asserts itself as a powerful image that has not existed before, Humphries ends in a place where the painting will not cohere and creates the experience of the unknown at every instance of looking at it.

VIEWING BODIES

THIS BRINGS US TO THE QUESTION of what happens when we, as embodied subjects, view these paintings. It seems clear that these artists recognize the changing conditions of perception and subjectivity in the world of digital spectacle, and hold out against this regime’s vitiation of corporeal experience. Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl are not particularly preoccupied with the effects of techno-culture on the life of images, as, for example, Wade Guyton is, with his attention to the change in appearance and materiality of an image between computer screen, print-out, and catalogue page. Their concern is with the effect of technological shifts on *our lives*. They recognize the way these shifts alter our sense of space and scale, our capacity for attention, our anxiety level as our iPhones keep us constantly at work. Acknowledging all this, they challenge us to look carefully and slowly, insisting on the works’ physical presence and on the real differences among layers on the surface of canvas, and restoring to us a sense of



Charline von Heyl, *Oread*, 2011, acrylic, oil, and oil stick on linen, 82 x 74".

our human scale as we encounter the paintings within real, not virtual, space.

Some years ago, thinking about the illumination of faces by the glow of computer screens, Humphries began to work with silver paint that she mixed herself, alongside deep, nonreflective, powdery black. Rather than emitting an even glow, as screens do, her surfaces absorb light and reflect it unevenly, while the borders between areas of absorption and reflection are scratchy and ill defined. The viewer is kept mobile by this optical instability and, as when Humphries is collapsing figure-ground distinctions, is unable to settle on a fixed position. The experience in front of Humphries’s work can be like a dance, but

the dancer is beset by uncertainty about where to be.³⁵ And this experience is complicated by the “false drips” and by the way Humphries works with layering and color. Flashes of color in paintings, such as *Untitled* at the Whitney, that are mainly covered in silver and black initially appear to constitute the works’ top layer, but as we get closer we discern that the colored pigment is a prior layer.

Humphries is clear that her primary motivation is not to create uncertainty as a value in itself but to captivate a viewer just as screens do. Aware of screens’ allure, she aims to offer an equally seductive but more complex experience: “I think a painter’s first job is to get someone to look at a painting.” She cites “a kind of

theatricality which may even veer toward the melodramatic.”³⁶ Such terms might also be used to characterize the experience of viewing von Heyl’s work, which also teasingly defies presumptions about layering. One assumes instinctively that the yellow and white stripes in *Orpheus*, 2008, lie behind the brown forms, but close up to the painting, you discover the stripes are in fact above, painted around. In *Jakealoo*, 2012, it seems clear that orange and red stripes have been laid down below a white expanse in the top right corner. Von Heyl painted two little black-framed windows in the white field as if to let us see through to this earlier layer, but when you get near, you see within the frame a third layer of yellow and red lying above the white. Unlike, say, the aleatory rips in Gerhard Richter’s squeegee paintings, which offer glimpses of earlier layers of paint, von Heyl’s sleight of hand is premeditated: “My paintings have weird shifts where you don’t expect them. . . . It’s not about mystifying anything; it’s about lengthening the time of pleasure. Or torture.”³⁷ She has also spoken of a “visual mindfuck.”³⁸ It strikes me that what von Heyl does with layering acknowledges the supersmooth layering in computer screens but complicates it, insisting on the physical rather than the virtual, rewarding a different mode of attention that, as her language

suggests, can be just as libidinal as digital visuality.

With their powerful frontality, the layers of Owens’s paintings—grids, letters, strokes, all stacked parallel to the picture plane—might also remind us of the windows on computer screens. But her digital processes and references to the visual world of the screen serve only as tools in a larger project that insists on the importance of material surfaces seen in real space. Viewing her works means contrasting peaks of impasto and fake drop shadows; it means understanding that the real gaps between the paintings of “Pavement Karaoke” are part of the composition; it means spotting the frayed gingham beside slickly painted-on grids; and it means making decisions about whether to stand close enough to read the silk-screened texts or far enough away to see the whole work. It also means being assaulted by color so intense as to seem viscerally present.

In von Heyl’s studio, it struck me that all the paintings, despite differences in composition, facture, and color, were about the same size. Her immediate explanation: The works were scaled to her reach. In making her largest paintings small enough to be worked on without ladders, von Heyl is close to Sillman and Humphries. The paintings’ essentially anthropomorphic scale, a few feet high and an arm-stretch wide,

reminds us of our own bodies as we view.³⁹ Owens’s “Pavement Karaoke” canvases and the paintings that appeared in her 2013 exhibition at the Los Angeles venue 356 S. Mission Rd. are considerably larger. However, even these works do not lend themselves to white-cube hyperbole. At 356 S. Mission Rd. it was clear that the space, with its raw architecture, was a gathering spot as much as a site of display, and in addition to providing a necessary openness in contrast to the enclosure of screen culture, this sociable atmosphere made the paintings feel generous in scale rather than bombastic.

Humphries’s and Owens’s insistence on physical experience is echoed by Sillman’s and von Heyl’s insistence on the bodily within their imagery. Many of Sillman’s most abstract paintings are derived from sketches of figures. In other works by the artist, the body is unmistakable even if only recognized in fragments—dislocated shoulders, drooping limbs, and so on, as seen for example in *Clubfoot*, 2011. In von Heyl’s work, the body registers, but never in its totality as a coherent depiction. Marks in one painting might recall smears of blood or excrement; a handprint appears in another. Knowing that the history of Western painting has centered on the representation of skin, and that its depiction can act as a

These artists are not particularly preoccupied with the effects of technology on the life of images. Instead, their concern is with the effect of technological shifts on *our* lives.



Left: Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2013, oil on linen, 100 x 111".

Right: Charline von Heyl, *Jakealoo*, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 82 x 74".





Amy Sillman, *Clubfoot*, 2011,
oil on canvas, 91 x 83 7/8".



Above: Amy Sillman, *Duel*, 2011,
oil on canvas, 90 1/2 x 84 1/4".

Below: Amy Sillman, *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, 2012, digital animation, 5 minutes 9 seconds.

lure for a viewer, she detaches skin from the body and subjects it to strange travails—for instance in *Frenhoferin*, 2009, in which it looks as if skin is being pushed through a sieve.

Sillman is the only one of the four to actually make works for the screen. In a recent exhibition at Thomas Dane, London, pride of place was given to a heavily worked painting called *Duel*, 2011, dominated by a slit flanked by two drooping hands. Next to this she hung an iPad showing *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, 2012, an animation suggesting various directions the composition of *Duel* might go, were she to continue working on the painting. The animation gives clues to Sillman's own compositional processes: The slit becomes a curtain, then a wound, and later simply a line. Lines become limbs and hands become blobs; blocks of color squeeze to penis shapes and balls become breasts. Things excrete as they transform. It makes no sense to see abstraction and figuration as poles—like the male and female body parts, they are in a constant state of becoming each other. Memorable scenes convey attempts to probe sources: A man digs up the ground, a bunny blabs on an analyst's chair, a searchlight shines in the dark, but against the promise that stable origins could be

discovered, there is a constant sense of morphing. Where Owens hints at the computer-drawn origins of her "brushstrokes" by making them so perfectly bulbous, Sillman manages to make the slick surface of an iPad appear like a canvas layered with translucent pigments. It's not just that we see things that touch and are touched: The glass of the iPad itself seems "scumbled," or "scratchy," or "buttery."⁴⁰ The way the compositions change in the animation implies no straightforward intentionality but suggests the artist submitting herself to the contingencies of humor, desire, and the pleasures of change. Yet at the same time, Sillman is surely reflecting on the conditions of her own practice. She has spoken about the way the juxtapositions of iPad and canvas undercut the idea of the painting as a finished entity. But the juxtaposition also destabilizes the authority of the screen and, with it, the credibility of the promises that screens seem to offer: to make life more efficient, to allow us to communicate better, and so on. Sillman's animations offer no such platitudes: Like the surface of the painting, already thickened with past ideas, the iPad animation keeps on going, refusing conclusions. □

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For notes, see page 344.

