

POST-PAINTERLY ABSTRACTION

The long-awaited Greenberg exhibition fails to make its point.

By [John Coplans](#)

• **NOT ONLY IN THE CREATION OF ART** has New York proven to be distinctive in recent years but also in the quality of its critics. Such partisans as Clement Greenberg, Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg, for example, have thrown a very special quality of illumination onto the New American Painting, so much so, that at times it is difficult to separate our experience of the paintings from the passionate and intense views of these writers. Given Clement Greenberg's special standing in this respect, any exhibition organized by him is looked forward to with considerable relish, but even more so at this particular moment, for he has vociferously propagated the notion that American painting, or rather abstract art, is in a condition of crisis.

The nature of this crisis is plain to Greenberg, and he makes no bones about it:

Abstract Expressionism was, and is, a certain style of art, and like other styles of art, having had its ups, it had its downs. Having produced art of major importance, it turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms. Its leaders attracted imitators, many of them, and then some of these leaders took to imitating themselves.

In addition, as Greenberg has not tired, recently, of pointing out, the critics who have supported Abstract Expressionism, far from pointing out this decline, have been as rich in their praise of "some of the emptiest art ever created" as they ever were of the inspired leaders. In short, it is time for "something as new and independent as Painterly Abstraction (Greenberg's phrase for Abstract Expressionism, or Action Painting, etc.) itself was ten or twenty years ago."

There is, in all of this, a peculiar adherence to Ortega y Gasset's untenable theory of periodic changes in style: Impressionism, post-Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and so on, all following one-another at the most regular of intervals. Now, with more than Ortega's fifteen years having passed since the advent of Abstract Expressionism, historical necessity demands a change. In "Post Painterly Abstraction," the title of the exhibition Greenberg has organized for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he hopes to present us with the new art, "an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art."

But in viewing "Post Painterly Abstraction" it is obvious that Greenberg has not focused upon what is actually being created in current American art. Instead, he has structured the exhibition to assert a personal notion of style; that is, to reveal what in his opinion the major ambitious art after Abstract Expressionism *ought to look like* and what means it *ought to employ* to gain this look. For this purpose he goes to quite arbitrary and absurd lengths to lend credence to this view. Whatever means Abstract Expressionism employed, the new style, it seems, demands the employment of the opposite in reaction to its excesses. Abstract Expressionism was loose; the new style is tight. Abstract Expressionism revealed brushstrokes; the new style conceals them. Abstract Expressionism used thick paint; the new style uses thin paint. Abstract Expressionism was dense and compact; the new style is clear and open. Abstract Expressionism used accents of

dark and light; the new style employs color. Abstract Expressionism used loosely organized forms; the new style tends towards emblematic forms. Abstract Expressionism employed textural effects, the new style tends towards flat paint. Abstract Expressionism had a packed, agitated look; the new style has plainness and linear clarity. Thus any abstract painter—good, bad or indifferent—who shows at least one or more of the latter characteristics is included. For example, John Ferren boxes a flurry of overlaid brushstrokes into a loosely-grouped rectilinear shape in the middle of the canvas—good, he is in. Arthur McKay’s heavily inlaid surfaces are delineated by a more or less clear outline—he is also in. Dzubas paints irregular asymmetrical flat shapes with a ragged outline, good—the flatness qualifies him. George Bireline paints a rectilinear assortment of sweetly accented colors—ah, color and rectangles, he is in. Ralph DuCasse paints flat abstracted pseudo-primitive shapes lolling in a white field—he is in. With rare exceptions, the same pattern of choice is revealed in another twenty-three or four artists who make up the bulk of the exhibition.

Correctness of style is all, and Greenberg is explicit in his rejection of quality as a yardstick: “. . . this show is not intended as a pantheon, as a critic’s choice of the best new painters.” But why, particularly in an exhibition meant, at least in part to act as a corrective upon “some of the emptiest art ever created,” is it better to choose indifferent painters in preference to the best? On what basis do indifferent painters clarify any issues? Is it not axiomatic that the best painters bring a hard tough focus, a reductive clarity as it were, while lesser painters bring only muddle? How, for example, could the core of Abstract Expressionism be apprehended say, in 1949 if Byron Brown, John Ferren and Milton Resnick were offered in the company of Pollock and de Kooning but Kline was left out—how, would the heart of the contribution be apparent to us? In this exhibition, Greenberg has left out a number of painters whose work approximates the style he is attempting to isolate, included some, and then crammed the exhibition with as many minor imitative or irrelevant talents as he could find in Canada, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington and New York.

If the critic does focus on certain aspects of what is being created from time to time, surely his intention is to clarify, not confuse. Greenberg, in rejecting the notion that contemporary art is clearly distinguished by the co-existence of a number of perfectly valid, credible and widely diverse styles, asserts there is only one correct logical style at any one given time. (This is revealed by his attitude towards other styles—he brings up the question of Pop Art in the catalog and instead of dismissing it as, for example, slick art of low vitality or outrageously bad art, he challenges it on the grounds of lacking evolutionary authenticity. His blindness to Rauschenberg, or any other assemblagist, for that matter, stems from the same stubbornness.)

In short, what is not in the right style cannot be art, and what is in the right style must be art. On this basis—correctness of style—he has selected for the Los Angeles County Museum exhibition thirty-one artists who, supposedly, share “common traits of style.” But in truth, the search for common traits of style is as fraught with danger as the search, abandoned by Greenberg for this exhibition, of exceptionally good paintings, and a certain vulgarity of eye manifests itself in the grouping of many of these artists. What, for example, do Frankenthaler and Kelly share in common? Or Kelly and Woelffer? Or Kelly, Woelffer and Krushenick? Or Krushenick and Noland? Or Dzubas and Jensen? Or Parker and Jensen? Or Parker and Krushenick? Or Krushenick and Ferren? Or Ferren and Stella? Or Simpson and Sander? In any event is it

“common traits of style” that the best art shares? What are the common traits of style in the typical work of de Kooning, Newman, Kline, Rothko and Still? Common traits of style can be found more easily in uninspired, uninventive followers. Greenberg is structuring the exhibition on “stylism” rather than creation. It would be preposterous to believe that he cannot tell the difference between those artists that adopt a style as an end in itself and those that use it as a necessary means to creation. It is obvious Greenberg has thought up some kind of a category for the exhibition, made little effort to define it, and then tried to find artists to fit it. As such, it is a clumsy attempt and full of holes.

In addition to “traits of style,” Mr. Greenberg would also like to believe that all of the artists in his exhibition have learned from, and are in reaction against, Abstract Expressionism. But how, for example, and in what manner, did Ellsworth Kelly react against and learn from it? Hasn’t Kelly painted in the same rigorous, precise, flat post-cubist manner since 1948? The very same doubts could be asserted for example, for Liberman, Stella and Bannard.

This lack of intellectual rigor forces Greenberg to confer a spurious unity on an ill-assorted group of painters by speaking of “physical clarity and openness” as what “the paintings in this exhibition owe their *freshness* to, as distinct from whatever success or lack of success they have as esthetic finalities.” What kind of nonsense is this? Isn’t freshness, if he is placing a value on it, a quality that comes as a result of esthetic success? Which paintings in the show have “a lack of success as esthetic finalities” (what a term for a work of art—an esthetic finality!) and yet are still “fresh”? Mason Wells, Frank Hamilton, George Bireline, Jack Bush, Ernest Dierenger, Ralph DuCasse, Alexander Liberman, A. F. McKay, Albert Stadler? What exactly is this “openness and clarity” business anyway? Is this really what Greenberg finds in common between Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis? What is it opposed to? Closed-ness and confusion? Greenberg himself says that “a crowded and murky” Rembrandt has more “ultimate” clarity than a bad painting. Where is the confusion in a de Kooning or a Pollock or a Kline? There is indeed a way of distinguishing the painters Greenberg wants to, but no man in his right mind would treat both the artists and an audience in this supercilious and offhand manner by 1) confusing the issues by presenting artists who are, in fact, not part of his trend and 2) disregarding the quality of the artists if they had a certain “look” and 3) posing the issue, having dodged the question of esthetic merit, in terms of “freshness.”

It is obvious the following painters do not belong in the show; they are Abstract Expressionists—Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, John Ferren and Emerson Woelffer. Nine painters—George Bireline, Jack Bush, Ernest Dierenger, Ralph DuCasse, Frank Hamilton, A. F. McKay, Howard Mehring, Albert Stadler and Mason Wells are, for one reason or another, so lacking in “esthetic finality” as to be not worthy of inclusion. Liberman is an old style geometric painter and Alfred Jensen’s recent head imagery, apart from anything else, precludes him. Essential to the exhibition is the work of Robert Irwin, a Los Angeles painter who withdrew from the show. Given the “thingness” of Stella’s work and Kelly’s reliefs, Donald Judd from New York should perhaps have been included (as well as Larry Poons and Sally Hazelet Drummond); certainly Tony Delap from San Francisco—but even then the exhibition contains too many doubtful figures.

Here is a kind of work that because of its scale and intensity of color demands unadulterated presentation to be able to be taken in. Assemblage, for example, can probably take a concentrated presentation, but such are the acute visual relationships in this type of painting, that it requires unusual isolation. Again, in its existing form, because of a deliberate choice of paintings of approximately the same size, the exhibition is like nothing more or less than a slide lecture. Completely obscured, for example, is Ellsworth Kelly's rigorous examination of the variability of format and image. Nor are three works sufficient to indicate the range of many of these painters. Given the choice of the very best painters in the exhibition—Louis, Kelly, Stella, Noland and the inclusion of Irwin, would not an examination of their work in some depth do more to essentialize this area of painting? At any rate, as the exhibition currently stands, it is so full of indefensible absurdities, we can only smile at such cuckoo judgments and lose the whole purity of what is new.

—*John Coplans*

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