

New Mirrors: Painting in a Transparent World

by Sharon L. Butler

EXIT ART

JANUARY 9 - FEBRUARY 6, 2010

February 2010

In *New Mirrors: Painting in a Transparent World*, a group show at Exit Art, curator Herb Tam suggests that painters, confronting a digital onslaught in which shifting identities are continually updated and instantly distributed, are compelled to deconstruct the logistics of painting in a similar fashion. This idea leads him to assert that the artists whose work he has included in the show are dragging “the corpse of painting to the limits of legibility with processes that mirror a philosopher’s probing, discursive thinking.” The show as a whole does not remotely expose such stark iconoclasm. Despite the hyperbole, however, Tam has selected pieces that reflect current directions among painters today.

In Tam’s view, contemporary painters take positions between polarities: good and bad, right and wrong, figurative and abstract, beauty and vulgarity. Beyond that, I would contend that most painters fall into two dichotomous categories. First, there are those who love paint—slaves to facture—who believe in the power and beauty of the painting process. This category includes, among those represented in the show, Jesse Chapman, Benin Ford, Andy Piedilato, and Julia San Martin. The second group comprises painters who apprehend the medium more tentatively and dubiously, treating it like a conundrum with roots not in painterly concerns or visual phenomenon but in ideas and language. Kadar Brock, Mira Dancy, and Alison Fox are representative of these artists.

Jesse Chapman’s small-scale images, situated between the abstract and mimetic, emerge from a carefully crafted series of crosshatches and linear marks that seem lifted from old paintings and etchings. Whereas his earlier work hinted at fabulist narratives, Chapman’s new paintings are

more abstract and inscrutable. The intimate size and poorly stretched canvases give the paintings a fashionably amateurish look that belies Chapman’s evident—some might say unfashionable—devotion to the medium.

Andy Piedilato’s huge (8’ × 12’), colorfully exuberant paintings hardly spurn the hierarchy that Tam considers to be on the wane. In fact, Piedilato’s vision is the direct result of his prodigious imagination and an irrepressible belief in paint. His images juxtapose sketchily drawn, off-kilter architectural elements with thick, gesturally painted objects and animals. The overarching irony is that while the paintings depict a world dangerously askew, there’s such obvious joy and verve in Piedilato’s paint handling and color that it’s hard to worry.

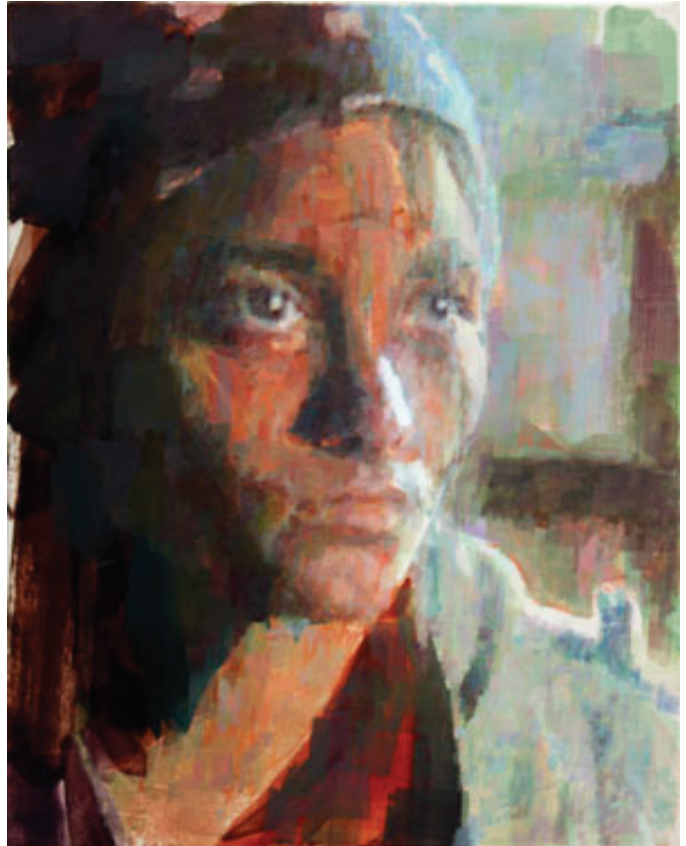
Benin Ford’s small-scale, pastel-hued paintings, featuring delicate pointillist-inspired brushwork, excise images of African-Americans from fleeting television narratives. Ford’s choice of subject may have political roots, but his granular focus on building enigmatic images with small brushes and carefully chosen color reveals a deeper commitment to tackling painting’s formidable—and longstanding—technical challenges.

Perhaps inevitably, given their more doubtful, experimental approach, painters in the second category offer work that is less visually prepossessing. From one perspective, Mira Dancy’s mission to make paintings that “challenge the line between tackiness and sophistication, undercutting the idea of quality,” are simply mediocre works that in fact fail to transcend the tackiness and low quality that they purport to essay. Dancy presents a well-reasoned and beautifully written conceptual thesis, but painting is ultimately about what we see. At least to my eye, her paintings come off as cynical and lackluster.

Alison Fox's techniques are equally fey. She dyes and stains old, odd-shaped pieces of fabric to "nurture surfaces that seem found rather than made." Fox, whose previous work was more painterly, is charting well-worn, if still marginally untraditional, territory here. The listless swatches, limply tacked up salon-style, could make a case for the tired proposition that painting is dead. But they could just as well indicate that Fox has simply lost the energy to explore the medium in an enlivening way.

Kadar Brock's work, unlike Fox's and Dancy's, shows some interest in facture without the instinctive paint handling skills to quite pull it off. His 10-foot tall totem-like panels, propped against the wall, feature repeating diamond formations crudely painted in simple color schemes like blue and black or red and black. Brock, claiming an interest in the intersection of abstraction and spiritualism, relies on accidental incidents to enliven the familiar diamond shape, but for the viewer, these eruptions seem too few and far between to distinguish the individual pieces in an intriguing way. There's a difference between making paintings about repetition and making repetitive paintings.

Tam holds that modernism's drive toward purity has given way to a polluted present in which painters are compelled to break free of their hard-earned hierarchy of standards, authenticity, logic, and creativity to find uncharted territory, and thus to adopt an "ideology of transparency." Leaving aside the questionable semantics, this is a bold and provocative assertion. But it begs the question of whether more unconventional painters have truly found uncharted territory or devised a clever excuse for anemic, disengaged painting that merely skirts the aesthetic challenges of the digital age. Likewise, the polarity of *New Mirrors* demonstrates only that while the digital age may indeed have prompted some artists to discard painterly standards, it has also inspired other painters to adapt them enterprisingly and effectively to the new epoch.



Benin Ford "Portrait of a Crackhead" (2009)
Oil on canvas. 20 × 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Andy Piedilato "76 and 3/4" (2009) Oil, acrylic, alkyd on canvas.
138 × 132 inches. Courtesy of the artist.