

Art in America

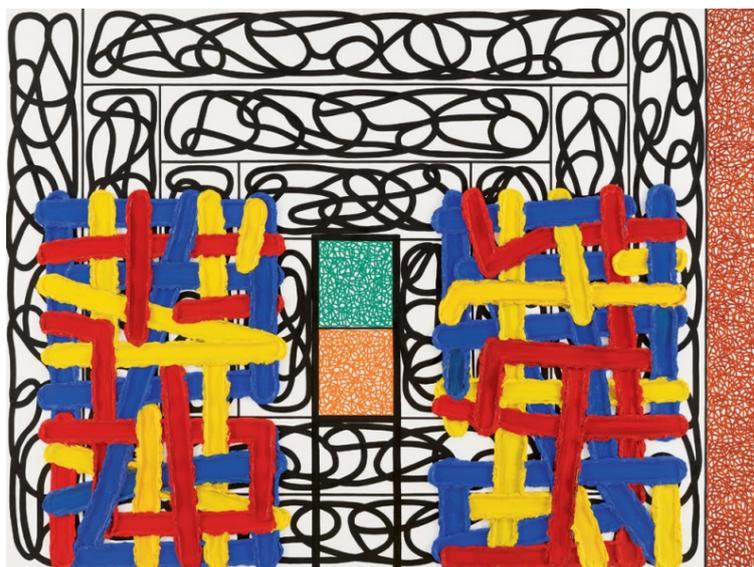
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CONCEPTUAL ABSTRACTION

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by *lilly wei*

NEW YORK



"Conceptual Abstraction," curated by Pepe Karmel and Joachim Pissarro—on a suggestion by artist Valerie Jaudon and with the help of dealer Carroll Janis—was a 21-year reunion of sorts, and a 21-gun salute to abstraction and painting. A gathering of eye-catching works, the show reprised an important 1991 exhibition of the same name at Sidney Janis Gallery, a then-leading contemporary venue that was known for museum-quality shows of modernist art.

All 20 artists in the first venture contributed work to the 2012 version. Among the participants were Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, Philip Taaffe and Peter Schuyff, all of whom had, in 1991, been reconsidering for some time the parameters of abstract painting. The umbrella term "conceptual abstraction" was intended to be inclusive. Determined to distance themselves from the last vestiges of Greenbergian formalism, these artists sought ways to move forward. Their diverse works admitted narrative; references and appropriation; textuality and illusionism; and signs and symbols.

The recent "Conceptual Abstraction" exhibition juxtaposed work from then and now in a compare-and-contrast format that was not at all formulaic; works by individual artists, for instance, were not always hung side by side. One of the many pleasures of the show was discovering themes and motifs shared by different artists in works that drew you from gallery to gallery, in a gratifyingly complex orchestration. The paintings are often generously (but not heroically) scaled, far from the intimate-sized canvases favored by many young painters today.

Striking, indeed, was the materiality of certain works, such as Jonathan Lasker's *The Inability to Sublimate* (2009), in which the paint is thick and three-dimensional in places. Color was rich and intense throughout the show. Halley, Stephen Westfall and John Zinsser led the charge in this respect. Even the vintage work looked as if it had arrived fresh from the studio.

Although some of the artists have made other, more disparate bodies of work, the newer examples were selected for the most part so that they appeared to have evolved directly from the older, with similar imagery. Lydia Dona, prescient both in 1991 and now, envisions the modernist grid not as a utopian construct but as smoldering urban systems corrupted by the reckless disregard for environmental realities. David Diaó contributed two instances of his handsome info-charts, *Plus and Minus* (1991) and *Barnett Newman: Chronology of Work (Updated)*, 2010, both presenting his double-edged institutional critique.

Thomas Nozkowski's colorful pop figurations are irresistible, as are the Mary Heilmanns, especially the double canvas *Violette* (1991), in which a centrally placed purple spiral reclines flirtatiously on a luscious white ground. Shirley Kaneda's taut, bright, cleanly executed paintings look digitally induced and enhanced. Jaudon's distinctively patterned paintings are visual teasers, as are Richard Kalina's erudite collages, both artists hijacking the modernist grid for their own purposes in their signature blends of the systemic and the intuitive. David Reed and Stephen Ellis, each in his own way, conflate the cinematic and the painterly, factoring time into their work.

David Row's gorgeous gold and black *Split Infinitive* (1990) is a kind of postmodernist altarpiece, a vision of the empyrean. Its fractured form returns in the shaped canvas *Ellipsis* (2012), executed in Row's current palette of night-sky blue. Space, as well as time, appears to fold in on itself. It may be taken as emblematic of this triumphant back-to-the-future show.

Photo: Jonathan Lasker: The Inability to Sublimate, 2009, oil on linen, 75 by 100 inches; in "Conceptual Abstraction" at Hunter College/Times Square.

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