

(A) History Of New Abstract Painting:
Toward A Theory Of Domestic Abstraction

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The current abundance of abstract painting is awfully pretty. And yet curiously the discussion around these paintings seems to ignore just their obvious prettiness. Why has the reception of this work so insistently avoided any mention of its prettiness? And why is this insistent avoidance complemented by an equally insistent embrace of the supposed abstract nature of the work? Why is it that this work has been so readily titled abstract?

Much of the reception simply presumes that this work is unproblematically and obviously abstract; but what criteria inform this presumption? Perhaps the deeper impediment to our encountering this work afresh is just the seemingly obvious and intuitive "abstract" nature of it. Apparently the sole criterion for the denomination "abstract" is wholly determined by the observation of whether or not pictures can be discerned. The resurgence of the term abstraction prescribes that any figural painting be judged unreal, which re-erects the fictive opposition between the abstract and the real. This was undoubtedly a productive mystification seventy years ago, but no longer is, except as nostalgia for those halcyon days of simple oppositions.

Declaring these paintings without pictures "abstract" confers a bogus authenticity through an expropriation of historical specificity and thereby entitles them to an intellectual provenance and an historical credibility that remain unearned. By naming these contemporary works abstract the attempt is to transform an historical idea and its formal expression into a genre of painting, as though we might forget that abstract painting was an historically determined, culturally specific event.

Without making any claims as to the authenticity, import or truth of a previously named abstract art, we assert that this contemporary re-named "abstract" art has as its primary cultural function the erasure of any imagined or imputed force, relevance or memory of what previously was claimed to have occurred under that title. We are less concerned with the look of contemporary painting and more concerned with contemporary production being premised upon a seemingly necessary evisceration of the past.

Historical abstraction predicated itself on the creation of a fiction of timelessness. The rhetoric of this timelessness was unrelenting in the sweep of its application; everything from human nature to color, line, and composition appeared universal and timeless. The conceit was that such a thing as a profound human nature could only adequately be expressed in a correspondingly essentialist language of pure color, line, etc. We propose that the term Compositional Formalism designate this dream of a universality configurable in a timeless visual language.

The ideology of Compositional Formalism is to affect the collapse of the specificity of abstract painting as an historical and cultural occurrence into something resembling a kind of natural category, thereby engendering the fantasy of a stable and inexhaustible wealth of cultural comestibles called "abstract art." If the project of abstraction was to constitute its own identity by creating the illusion of timelessness, then the irony of the current resurgence of "new" abstraction is that by its own inherited vacuity it points up not the timelessness of abstraction but its historicity, i.e., its timeliness.

There is in other words an intimate and strategic connection between the emptying out of the term abstraction and the construction of the category "new abstract

painting". The connection relates to a particular kind of emptiness. The paradox of this dynamic of emptying out is that the historical closure of abstraction becomes the prerequisite for the elevation of "abstraction" to a fiction of timelessness.

By calling itself a natural category of painting—reifying a supposed opposition between abstract and figurative painting—so-called abstraction obscures its own historicity and covers the datedness of its tracks. One of the characteristics of contemporary "abstract painting" is to absorb this mystification and proceed as if it were a fait accompli. When the obscurantism within historical abstraction is no longer seen as such, the road is paved for a "contemporary" abstraction.

But historical abstraction perpetuates itself at the price of the emptying out of any other history that might have occurred between the beginning of that project and our own time. Hence the current popularity of the regeneration of abstraction is not to be registered as the success of Abstract Painting, but rather as a successful distraction, a deferral of contemporary painting from the present. The "new abstraction" is thus a deflection from the contemporary, and a diversion from its own forged historical pedigree. Since what is abstract can only be historical, there can be no "new" abstraction, but only a contemporary distraction from that history and, more importantly, from any other contemporary event or production.

Our concern here is first to examine the significance of the reiteration of the term "abstract painting." We want to know what, if anything, might warrant the reuse or extension of the term to cover a branch of contemporary painting. We suspect that what appears as merely an art historical or linguistic mistake is instead a strategy performed by, and directed at, cultural production. The effect of this consistent misnaming is not only to obviate any encounter with the work itself but also to forestall aesthetic evaluation of the supposed genre. This strategy consists of the substitution of the appearance of taste for the need to exercise it.

In other words, by accepting the term "abstract" we are excused from the effort (and pleasure) of judging. When we look past the term abstraction and toward the surfaces themselves we judge this work simply pretty, indeed overwhelmingly pretty.

Our contention is that contemporary so-called abstract art is not publicly judged pretty because such a public declaration would disallow any further reception of the work under the name abstraction. (Moreover, historical abstraction predicated itself on a claim to authenticity. Conversely, prettiness was posited as merely decorative and therefore an inessential quality of visual appearance, thereby becoming the mark of inauthenticity.) In other words, though these paintings are really pretty it is not their prettiness alone which is deceptive, it is rather that so long as their prettiness remains unstated what remains concealed is the overwhelmingly obvious fact that these paintings have everything—and yet nothing whatsoever—to do with the historically closed event already named abstract art.

In short, in order for something like the aura and mystique (dare we say fetishism?) which surround historical abstraction to be transferred to contemporary so-called abstraction, the specificity of that original term must be alluded to and at the same time effaced. Prettiness is the technology of that effacement, indeed prettiness might even be that which elicits its own effacement.

We do not mean prettiness as a kind of lesser beauty. Prettiness is of course a judgment, indeed an *aesthetic* judgment leveled against something or someone. Prettiness courts dismissal, and in a very specific way. What impulse informs this judgment of prettiness? Perhaps we should take a cue from social life, where it seems the judgment is more often than not directed against women, though delivered in the guise of a tribute. Yet what if this tribute paying is a strategic move, more specifically a strategy by which some potential threat is disarmed? To judge a woman pretty would then be an ideological move. There are no pretty women—and yet indeed there are, but it is only the judgment that makes them so. But what truly is being done to them in the act of making them pretty? What power is being exercised and concealed in the judging of prettiness? (It is precisely the duality of power here that makes the judgment ideological.)

Our contention is not that women really are threatening and that judging them pretty is a way of disarming that threat. We believe instead that the judgment of prettiness serves at once to both constitute women as threat and simultaneously to insist all the more vehemently on the necessity of disarming the threat. The judgment of prettiness is a closed circle of constitution and suppression; it has nothing to do with women and everything to do with the fear of what one might imagine them to be.

New abstract painting is a somewhat different, but related kettle of fish. The manifest prettiness of these paintings preempts just that appropriate judgment. Prettiness is not in their case a judgment to be leveled against them, but is instead a simple description of their content and *modus vivendi*. Their very emptiness, the lack of any content beyond a strategic self-concealment, is precisely what allows them to be so readily appropriated as the new appearance of the old, under the name abstraction. And the meaning of the term "abstraction" is thereby transformed: it is now the name used to forestall the naming of the technology of prettiness through which these paintings actually deploy themselves as attractive and hence effective decoys. Put differently: there is nothing more timely than new abstract painting. And yet what gives it the appearance of being an advanced artifact is that its contemporaneity comes to appearance only under the guise of an old, supposedly timeless, project called abstraction. What we hope here to accomplish by pointing to the obvious prettiness of new abstraction is to point contemporary culture away from the device of clothing itself in the garb not only of a popular past, but a past that had in turn clothed itself in the illusion of timelessness.

Pretty women are but one aspect of a larger picture. There is a double movement at work here, and the larger term "domestication" embraces both aspects of this double movement. The two moves are as follows: first, by calling these paintings abstract they are domesticated by being assimilated, linguistically and pseudo-historically, to that which is already familiar. Domestication is not the process by which something wild and new is transformed into something tame and old, but rather a process in which something is made familiar by making it appear as though it always already was tame and old. And should this first strategy fail there is then a second domesticating strategy. Appearing on the surface of the paintings themselves is a strategically profound prettiness. But the strategy of prettiness, as we've tried to show, lies not so much on the surface or even in the content, but rather institutes the prohibition of a content. Thus these paintings are themselves nothing more spectacular than the instantiation of the denial of their own content and possibility, though strategically framed under the contentful claim that they

are abstract. Still, they are awfully pretty. Just as prettiness is not simply the misnaming of beauty, so too is "abstraction" not merely a misnomination. It is instead the act of domestication whereby the threat of something potentially resembling a truth is deflected into familiarity. The pretty is that uncanny, close at hand thing.

Our claim here that most contemporary so-named abstract art is pretty is thus not just a strategic judgment on our part in order to dismiss the bulk of this work. We believe that most people already judge the work pretty yet cannot bring themselves to declare it so. If the work is to remain commercially viable, no one dare utter this aesthetic judgment. But the chief charm and attraction of this work is its prettiness.

Previous discussions of what we have termed Compositional Formalism presuppose the visibility of all formal characteristics. But this is to omit what we take to be the pre-eminent formal characteristic of any artifact—the temporality of its production. Oddly enough then, an artifact's most important formal characteristic is invisible. This invisibility on which contemporary abstraction depends will be made visible when it is understood that this work is constituted through a mistaken projection of the past. (We might add that this invisibility is attested to, but only imaginatively eclipsed, when the artist inscribes a date on a work.) It is precisely this invisibility, and not the apparent evolution of formal compositional elements, that gives content to the discipline of art history.

What is especially cunning within the new abstraction is that it conceals its own historicity in the very gesture of pointing toward it. That is, the reiteration by new abstraction of all the formal visible components of historic abstraction elides the profound disjunction between two historically distinct epochs. All that separates the new from the old is the invisibility of history.

Still, what strikes us as excessive is just the insistent, over-determined strain of the repetition of visible formal characteristics. The near hysterical visibility of those referents designed to efface their own elatedness instead reveals the emptiness of those referents. The solution is not to legislate that all "abstract" works of the past and present have the invisible formal characteristic of their date of manufacture inscribed indelibly on their surfaces, but instead to reveal the historical specificity of any supposed abstraction.

The object of contemporary painting is produced derivatively by alluding only to the visible components that have thus far been seen in historical abstraction. Our designation of Compositional Formalism implies that a work could be wholly constituted by its visible attributes. Our contention is that a work's formal components can never be reduced to what is visible in the work. As an alternative to Compositional Formalism we propose the term Constitutive Formalism as the name for that formalism which takes the historical specificity of the work's manufacture as its primary formal characteristic. Constitutive Formalism implies that what constitutes the form of a work—what informs it—is the time of its production.

We have shown that this achievement occurs by way of the effacing of the invisible yet constitutive formal component of historical occurrence. That the term "abstraction" becomes timeless is the belated fulfillment of a desire on the part of historical abstraction.

There is a dual, complementary emptiness in abstraction. There is the emptiness achieved through the prejudice of a formalism that asserts that the form of a work

consists wholly of its visible attributes. The other emptiness of "abstraction" consists of its refusal to die. The resurgence of abstraction is no accident since the essence of the historical project was its refusal to see itself as historical. Therefore, any painting that construes itself as in any way "abstract" automatically, and unfortunately, participates in this refusal. The founding and constituting moment of any and all abstraction is the necessary blindness to the historicity of each painting and the historicity of the project. (If the postmodern is an insistence on the utter simultaneity and interchange ability of, indeed indifference to, History, then "abstraction" is an insistent indifference to its own history. The current resurgence of abstraction is the vengeful bookend to the postmodern.)

The pervasive emptiness of new abstraction is most visible in the hysteria of its reception. The grandiosity of the terms through which the work is being presented recapitulates the emptiness and fungibility of the category. These terms are the expression of an impasse rather than an identifying description of the work. In other words, the reception of the work mimics the works' own empty core.

The choice of titles and themes of the exhibitions of this work is therefore also an unconscious recognition, and attempted recuperation, of the willful blindness at the heart of the work. The failure of the work, and the end of the project of abstraction, is symptomatically recorded in the reception of the work; thus the titles of the two major exhibitions of new abstraction: "Conceptual Abstraction" and "La Metafisica della Luce." Something historical is clearly afoot when the traditional rhetoric of abstraction feels the need of further rhetorical support from "concepts" and "metaphysics". The collapse of the rhetoric that sustained the historical project of abstraction is further evidenced in the increasing fungibility of the term itself. "Abstraction" is all too readily coupled with yet another bit of dated rhetoric masquerading as a category of nature: "The Feminine in Abstract Painting."

One might object here that these three examples are the product of curatorial decisions and so not truly indicative of the critical reception of this work. But if we turn to David Carrier's essay-review of the first two shows named above, we find further evidence of rhetorical decay attempting to conceal the mortality of the project of abstraction: "Paintings that matter right now manifest faith in our culture's capacity to build upon its artistic traditions, a faith all the more important because it is hard to come by at this moment." (*Arts Magazine*, March 1992, p. 60.) Faith, culture and tradition are redeemable only at the expense of the particularities of the object. "Paintings that matter right now" becomes merely the excuse for, or vehicle of, something transcendent called culture or whatever. The insistence within Carrier's reception is the insistent mis-reception that recapitulates the insistence within the project of abstraction: evisceration in exchange for immortality. The new cult of abstraction prescribes an insistent reaffirmation of faith in a pretty, empty culture.