

Possibilities

Extreme Possibilities

EXTREME POSSIBILITIES: New Modernist Paradigms

According to one definition, the course of modernism was a process of self-criticism, as each discipline gradually purged itself of everything not intrinsic to its medium until it arrived at its irreducible quality. By this account, the intrinsic, irreducible quality of painting was flatness. Traditional painting dissembled its material means—paint and the support—to create illusions of fictive space in which fictive forms were arranged, often in order to tell stories. Modernist painting celebrated the fact of paint and the literal expanse of the surface without relying on illusionism or narrative—or at least that's how the story has frequently been told.

In recent years, many inventive, thoughtful artists who declare themselves to be part of the modernist tradition—or at least, have not repudiated it—have simultaneously affirmed and challenged these assumptions, without resorting to post-modernist irony or cynicism and without adopting the mass culture references or the mass culture materials rife among self-consciously “contemporary” practitioners. The eight extremely various painters in this exhibition, Frances Barth, Clay Ellis, John Gibson, Joseph Marioni, Marjorie Minkin, Jill Nathanson, Thomas Nozkowski, and Susan Roth, can all be described in this way. In terms of the rather modish oppositions widely used in present-day discussion, these artists are committed to a “process-based” rather than a “concept-based” approach. They remain dedicated to making objects, wholeheartedly embracing modernism's emphasis on physical manifestations. Convinced that meaning must be embodied by their chosen materials, they are hostile to the notion that the ideas expressed by works of art can exist independently of forms. Yet there's nothing *retardataire* or backward looking about these artists. Quite the contrary. Barth, Ellis, Gibson, Marioni, Minkin, Nathanson, Nozkowski, and Roth create new possibilities.

They may make their provocative work with time-honored materials, used in more or less traditional ways, or they may combine unexpected media and methods, ignoring conventional ideas about the physical nature of painting—even such basic ones as its confinement to the rectangle. The work of these eight artists, ranging from declarative flatness to near-sculptural articulation of surface, from apparent lack of incident to rich illusionism—and a good deal in between—can blur the boundaries

between disciplines, at once asserting and disrupting aesthetic certainties. While they share many modernist aspirations, these artists reject others, no less than they reject the academic definition of a painting as a faithful depiction of things seen or imagined. Cumulatively, their work broadens the definition of what painting can be and ultimately, it creates new paradigms that make inherited categories not only unhelpful, but also irrelevant to their individual aspirations.

While the eight artists in this exhibition have different formations and histories, as well as different approaches, there are important things that link them. All of them are inventive colorists. All see themselves as part of the continuum of the history of art. All are indebted to the modernist tradition and all seem determined to enlarge its domain. (Obviously, they are not the only ones who could be characterized in this way or who share similar ambitions.) Yet despite these commonalities, the artists included here do not form a coherent group. Some know each other, some know *of* each other, or know each other's work; some don't. None is under forty five, but otherwise they come from diverse backgrounds and live in places that include upstate New York, Western Canada, and Massachusetts, as well New York City and its immediate environs. In a very real sense, this exhibition represents a rather willful selection. It might have been titled, perhaps more accurately, “eight artists whose work I have followed for many years, and who continue to surprise, move, puzzle, and—that much abused word—challenge me.”

At one end of the aesthetic spectrum are Marioni's aggressively disciplined monochrome paintings. But how to characterize the opposite end? Is the antithesis of Marioni's layered sheets of color on stretched linen to be found in Ellis's riotously colored, intricately patterned acrylic “skins”? Or is it manifest most clearly in Gibson's potent illusions of the wholly invented and frequently impossible? What about Minkin's physically substantial, optically elusive “reliefs” or Barth's delicately wrought, confrontational images with their multiple spatial references and unstable scales? An equally convincing case could be made for Roth's irregularly shaped palimpsests of painting events and manipulated canvas or Nathanson's collisions and layerings of surprising surfaces and hues. Or

it may be that the clearest opposition to Marioni's radiant, deadpan presentations of single hues is to be found in Thomas Nozkowski's ambiguous suggestions of mysterious narratives enacted in places that exist only in terms of the language of paint.

Marioni's monochrome expanses posit the notion that color, not flatness, is the irreducible quality of painting. His layered, translucent sheets of color are, paradoxically, documents of the effort to un-make painting, to dissolve a material presence of particular dimensions into a purely visual experience of light and hue, while at the same time asserting the existence of the painting as an eloquent physical thing. The proportions and extent of Marioni's paintings are dictated by what he calls the "personality" of color—its initial allegiance to the basic hues of red, blue, yellow, or green and the accumulated associations inherent in each. The subtle shaping of his canvasses—which are not rectangles—intensifies the character of each work as an autonomous object, yet the sense that light emanates from his paintings—apparently from different depths, depending on the quality of the surface and the chroma—plays havoc with our awareness of their physicality; the fragile evidence of the edges of sheets of color that sometimes announce the limits of the expanse add to this sense of dislocation.

Gibson's "portraits" of imagined spheres seem at first sight to state very different conceptions of a painting might be from Marioni's. They apparently explore familiar notions of illusionism, employing perspectival rendering, subverted by aggressive surfaces, to create images that appear completely convincing. Yet the illusion of truthfulness is itself an illusion. Gibson's elegant disquisitions on the way bulk and mass can carve out space on the surface of the canvas prove to be anything but conventional or faithful to perceived actuality. His spheres exist in impossible spaces, under impossible light conditions. Once we begin to concentrate on the deliberate peculiarities of these deceptively forthright pictures, we become increasingly aware of the fictive nature of what is before us. Shadows and highlights resist logic; patterns and color relationships begin to declare their autonomy from quotidian rules. The more we look at these enigmatic paintings, the more abstract they become. Despite an apparent attachment to visible phenomena and an appreciation of illusionistic heft worthy of a quattrocento master drunk on the pleasures of perspective, Gibson turns out to be no less preoccupied than Marioni

with the intangible, evocative, purely optical effect of color and surface density.

Other alternatives to both Marioni's and Gibson's theses are provided by Minkin's shaped paintings on Lexan, Ellis's equivocal explorations of pattern and discontinuity, and Roth's aggressively inflected collaged paintings. Minkin's transparent, rippling shapes detach stroke and gesture from the flat surface and launch them into space, as if she were deconstructing painting by making its components both more tangible and less substantial. The contradiction is strengthened by transient effects of shadow and projected color, which alter according to our viewpoint and the lighting conditions. The wall plane behind Minkin's paintings can play an active part in the way we read her work, both as the carrier of these transient effects and as a foil to the articulations of the Lexan. Minkin's concerns seem to be those of an artist dedicated to abstraction, yet because of their human proportions and their swelling forms, many of her Lexan "reliefs" conjure up potent associations with the body. The tension between the transparency and the substantial presence of the Lexan, the assured brushmarks and disembodied color is intensified by these echoes of the torso and its insistent presence.

Ellis's sleek expanses can create potent illusions of three-dimensionality, turning flat surfaces into metaphorical sculptures while asserting their painting-like character. On occasion, real projections, sometimes reinforcing the illusory swells and bulges, sometimes at odds with them, demand that we reevaluate our sense of form, mass, and categories, while abrupt shifts in color or disjunctions in pattern suggest collage construction in what are, in fact, continuous surfaces. The chromatic shifts and the disjunctions are made more dramatic by the real depth of Ellis's layered color; the intensity of his chroma is the result of overlays of translucent hues that fuse into light-diffusing layers that can serve as background for evocative patterns, mask them, or trap them at various depths. The multiple associations provoked by Ellis's patterns—which can range from domestic comfort to expedient construction, from textiles to lumber, from the photographic to the handcrafted, and more—both reinforce the drama of his works and make them more disquieting.

Roth's intensely physical abstractions depend on a kind of solemn battle between real spatial articulations, created by manipulating sheets of cloth or plastic, collaged onto the surface of the canvas, and painterly color incidents that either heighten or cancel the three-dimensionality

of the projecting rucks and folds; her occasional inclusion of what appear to be fragments of other paintings, with often violently different scales, rhythms, and textures, along with the audacious shaping of the supporting plane in response to internal pictorial incidents makes the battle even more fierce. (Roth's paintings are shaped from the inside out; far from being composed to the rectangle, they achieve their final, often irregular contour in response to the pressures of the shapes, forms, and colors within.) Roth plays, too, with allusions to the past. She can invoke the illusionistic material richness of High Baroque painting and the literal physicality of American post-war Modernism, with a nod at the disorder and brashness of vernacular culture.

Barth has said that she wants her paintings to tell stories that cannot be expressed verbally. She does so, in part, by forcing a variety of spatial and graphic languages into an uneasy compatibility—airial views that suggest mapping, suggestions of perspectival rendering, unequivocal flatness, schematic diagrams that seem to have escaped from science texts, and more—destabilizing our of orientation. At the same time, Barth questions the very pictorial conventions she deploys, using them to provoke a multiplicity of readings rather than to create coherent structures. Elongated formats test our perceptions, forcing us to back away to see the paintings whole, and then pulling us close to read delicate details. Barth's fragile, pristine surfaces and tender, radiant color often seem at odds with the toughness of the images, making her inchoate narratives even more absorbing and more ominous.

Nathanson's paintings similarly ring changes on the conventions of perspectival illusions, exploiting our almost involuntary ability to infer the illusion of enterable space from particular shapes and arrangements of planes, and the subverting the resulting tenuous suggestions of three-dimensionality by means of unexpected color relationships and richly inflected surfaces. In her most recent works, those chromatic improvisations and inflections have become so varied that they threaten to subsume completely the memory of a warped grid that haunts her compositions. I suspect that rather than being a pictorial device, opposition may serve as a metaphor—given Nathanson's serious, scholarly interest in certain forms of mysticism—for the conflict between divine intention and the imperfections of reality. The modulated hues call to each other across the picture, fluctuating between opacity and transparency, ultimately ignoring the limits of the confines of the rectangle. Projecting edges move records

of hand gestures into an ambiguous zone beyond the nominal boundaries of the picture, reiterating the spatial ambiguities of the interior spaces. Paradoxically, while these projections read as disembodied flourishes, they are in fact, real, tangible pieces of paint.

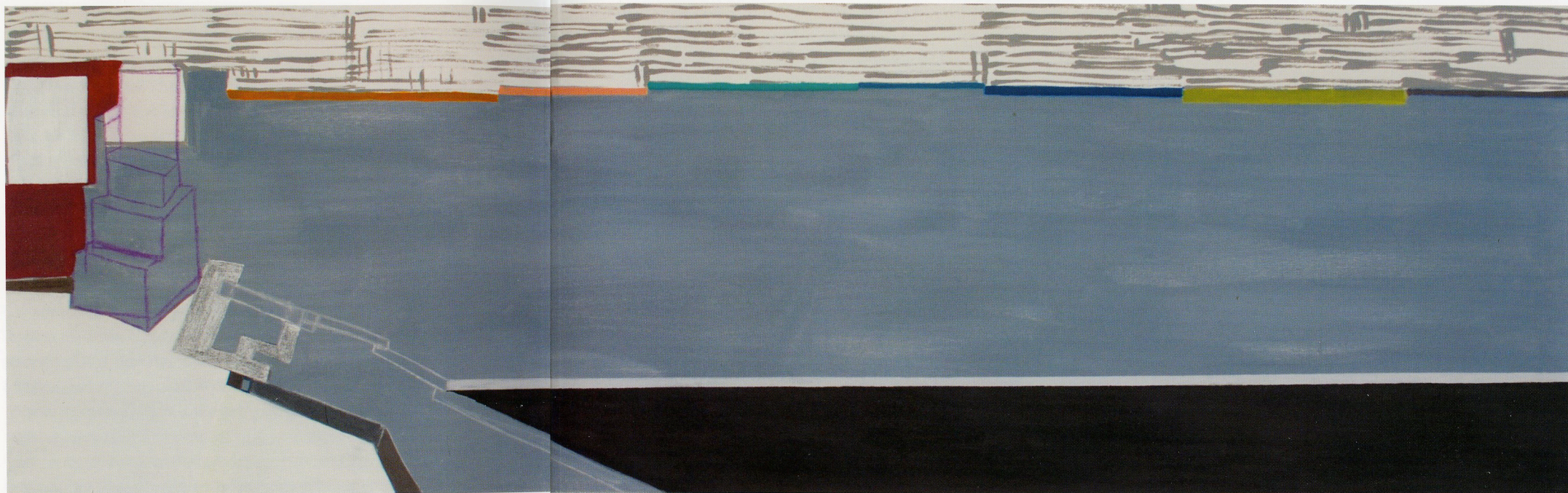
In his modestly sized but frequently monumental paintings, Nozkowski pits a staggeringly inventive lexicon of enigmatic imagery against surface-asserting or surface-warping grids, patterns, and diaphanous fields. In addition, he explores a wide range of painting languages, employing specific types of touch, shapes, and, on occasion, color harmonies that seem to reverberate as commentaries on the history of modernist art, at the same time that they seem newly invented to embody potent but incomprehensible narratives. These small, resonant images are always unmistakably "Nozkowskis" yet they are perhaps most notable for their apparently inexhaustible variety. We recognize particular configurations and events—clusters of spots, multi-lobed forms, checkerboards, stripings, bleeds, and more—yet these "signature" inventions always seem to be surprising and unprecedented, as well as to encapsulate different meanings with each use. Nozkowski's mysterious paintings are always abstract, yet, the artist asserts, always provoked by real experience: visual, non-visual, literary, colloquial—apparently, just about anything. The emotional resonance of these triggers survives, utterly transformed into eloquent, puzzling shapes, lines, and spaces that retain an aura of weird specificity. We are drawn into Nozkowski's universe, compelled to believe in the potency of his implicit narratives, and then dared to unravel their significance.

If, as I suggested earlier, Marioni's cerebral, disciplined monochromes represent one extreme of possibility for what painting can be in the first part of the 21st century, then Nozkowski's inclusive, richly allusive paintings represent an opposite extreme. Yet it is impossible to arrange the other painters neatly in relation to these defining statements. Each of them stakes out an individual territory. The sheer pictorial intelligence and variety of their work resists categorization. All we can safely say is that these diverse artists are united in their belief paintings are real things in the world with insistent properties. They are united, too, in their audacious reinventions, even redefinitions, of the modernist picture. They give us a lot to look at and a lot to think about.

FRANCES BARTH

Born in New York, Frances Barth received her B.F.A. and M.A. in painting from Hunter College. Early in her career, she performed with Yvonne Rainer and Joan Jonas in New York City. Barth has exhibited widely and her work is represented in numerous corporate and public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

Barth has received National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant, an Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation grant, two American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase awards, and an Anonymous Was a Woman grant. For the past four years she has also been working with animation. "End of the Day, End of the Day" is her first completed animation/video with dialogue. Her recent paintings will be seen January 2010 at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York. Barth is the Director of the Mt. Royal School of Art, Maryland Institute College of Art.



BEGINNING IN THE EARLY 1970'S I started investigating ideas in my painting to create a pictorial space with multiple perspective points of view. I wanted to introduce a non-specific narrative to abstraction. The complex space had attributes of both volume and flatness. The color was "non-determinable," made from layers of colors that were perceived as optically mixed. The interaction of this shifting space, color and scale, as well as the large horizontal format, made the paintings have a "slow time," a breathing presence, and the large horizontality forced the viewer to "read" the paintings from left to right and back again.

In the 1980's I began incorporating other forms and images that pushed my paintings into a realm that existed between landscape, mapping, and abstraction—ideas that have been present in my painting ever since. I want to chart a different time-based geologic story in each paint-

ing that could only exist in deep time. I incorporate methods of modeling, diagramming, mapping symbols and charting into the work. For example, in relation to geological structures, in one part of a painting a shift or fault would alter the landscape, and in another area water that had been there millions of years earlier would have left a deep canyon. These elements appearing coherently in the same painting create a new landscape, a narrative creation story, an image that looks experientially like a place, and color and light that feel like an actual phenomenon, sometimes even representing a time of day. I want to make natural light as a phenomenon, and abstract color act as light and location in the same painting, creating a believable space and experience that could never have existed in any other way.

—Frances Barth

grey edi, 2008

Acrylic, colored pencil, pastel on canvas, 24 x 78 inches