

BEYOND OVERCOMING: NOTES ON ABSTRACT PAINTING.

By John Bentley Mays

At the beginning of any inquiry is the question of power. Who holds it? Who does not?

Jonathan Lasker: The life of the artist is one of playing games and those games should be meaningful, and it should always be possible that someone can get hurt.

It must always be possible for someone to lose.

Peter Halley tells a story of Thomas Hamilton, who came from England to America in the 1830s and was struck by the mediocrity of a culture dominated by the utopian values of punctuality, measurement and calculation.

The inevitable outcome of all striving for utopia, for overcoming and overturning of any kind, is banality. A certain bland sterility of everyday life, a sense of stagnation within a morass of well-meaning bureaucracy--all of which is necessarily a topic addressed by abstract painting--are among the most conspicuous legacies of all modern political revolutions.

We may respect and even admire painters who aspire to "pure form," though we can never trust them.

During a conversation in his New York studio, Jonathan Lasker said to me, about abstract painting: The claim of presenting reality is withheld. There is no closure, but freedom in this existential painting--the ruins of a mythology, keeping it open.

He has written that there is a tragic side to the development of abstraction. It is the loss of the figure.

Wherein lies this tragic loss? What thing that we value have we lost? Nothing. The elimination of the figure in painting arose from an exhaustion with the false assurances of idolatry, closure, bourgeois finalities.

The extinction of the figure in art was performed (by Kandinsky, by the Russian avant-gardists) in the name of the spiritual, or that of the "new man" proposed by revolutionary socialism. Artists in the twenty-first century are fortunate to be free of spiritualizing fantasy and radical idealism, both poisonous.

Spirituality in art should not be sought. The "spiritual" state is dangerous for incarnate beings, and not particularly desirable.

It may be time for a rudimentary faith, Lasker has written, that being and consciousness have purpose and meaning.

Which is a notable aspiration, as far as it goes. But without doxology, any revival of such rudimentary faith instantly degenerates into the twaddle of liberal humanism, of soothing pieties. Human consciousness, and art and architecture, find their ends (as Ruskin taught us) in praise.

Lasker: At all times, [painting] is a singular image in an age of excessive proliferation and debasement. I view painting as a moral victory.

Abstract painting can nourish consciousness, but not change it. By the intelligence and beauty of its forms, it can do nothing; but it can expose the contemporary world's shabbiness and mediocrity for what they are.

Is it any wonder that abstract painting has always been hated by the police, the ideologues and propagandists, the hacks in art history departments? Abstraction's strength lies in its weakness, its incapacity for victories, moral or otherwise.

The once-stylish language of victory, of overcoming, is nowhere less fitting than in the discourses of artists, including Lasker, about their work. But the only alternative to victory need not be capitulation, or servility to the strategic language of the empowered.

Expanding upon hints in Heidegger, Gianni Vattimo proposes a pairing of two German words.

The first is *Überwindung*--overcoming, overwhelming, the obsessive goal of the Western political and intellectual projects.

The second word, that Vattimo would juxtapose with *Überwindung*, is *Verwindung*, which does not lend itself to simple translation into English. The word can mean twisting; it can mean convalescence; it can also mean resignation.

For Vattimo, the future of philosophy need not propose overcoming or mastering anything, whether the impurities or the purities of past thought, its systems and strategies. It need not even attempt to overcome the ancient and entrenched culture of overcoming.

Is there a similar freedom in the future of painting? We imagine an art that twists the structures of modernism, instead of denigrating or attempting to transcend the forms created in that decisive cultural epoch. We can imagine a time when the artist resigns himself to modernism as the grand historical project and failure that created the world we work and live in. We can imagine a new painting (to paraphrase Heidegger) in which the oldest of the old continually comes forward to meet us.

If artists cannot regenerate themselves or the world by acts of sheer will, they can provide a home where modernism's noble, weary attempts to overcome all obstacles can rest, and be nursed; where the "cancer of cynicism" (as David Urban has called the prevailing legacy of modernism's failure) can be treated, its victims comforted.

Jonathan Lasker proposes an art that operates according to the human metabolism; that moves at the speed of the heartbeat, not the speed of culture.

Painting is the clinic of wounded Being.

The reigning belief today writes critic and painter Peter Halley, who disbelieves it, is that closeness between persons is a moral good... [and that] the evils of society can all be understood as evils of impersonality, alienation and coldness... Warmth is our god.

Abstract painting engages us precisely when it refuses to be advertisement for false community, fantastic solidarities and ideological certainties marshalled to give ballast to our weightless situation in late modernity; when it refuses the temptation to become spiritual, uplifting. The most important painting is always cold.

All art is true to the extent that it corresponds to the movements of the body: blood, passion, intellection, disability, death. Liberal painting is a contradiction in terms; hack thinking.

Halley laments the disappearance of the anchorages of loyalty, marriage, country, the church, money, the military dead, work property, rank, monogamous love....

Painting did not unmoor us from these havens; nor can it tie us again in harbour.

We live in the devastation wreaked upon humankind by the Enlightenment, and there is no way out of the ruin. But painting can reflect the most serious responses to our predicament, by embracing it, by refusing to transcend it, by accepting ourselves as the illness from which we would escape.

Abstract painting, or any art, which attempts to compensate for our historic loss is doomed to irrelevance, a kind of inner death. But painting can revisit our catastrophe, and help us make sense of it. Abstract painting, supremely, can become a recollection and interrogation of the forces that tore everything apart.

Every serious abstract painter is an heir of Goya. In the Spanish town of Zaragoza during the autumn of 1808, shortly after the forces of the French Republic had passed through, horrifically imposing the Enlightenment ideals of equality, liberty and emancipation, Goya witnessed first-hand the unspeakable crimes of which the soldiers of liberal humanism are capable. His Disasters of War bear witness to the bloody birth of our modernity. Abstract painting surveys the aftermath, which has not ceased to unfold. This painterly practice takes its stand in the midst of the wasteland, ignoring nothing.

When one speaks of abstract art, Halley says, it is essential to remember that it is only a reflection of a physical environment that has also become essentially abstract.... Abstract art is nothing other than the reality of the abstract world.

In an appreciation of Mondrian, Peter Halley describes the Mondrian-we-know as a fabrication of the Museum of Modern Art, and the capitalist powers the museum represents. The powers wanted an art that seemed to transcend the tumultuous energies of mass culture. Mondrian fit: he was not politically active, and his art was one of "stasis," a "refusal to change." He became an exemplar of values in a world of shaken values.

But Halley sees in Mondrian a penetrating diagnosis of capitalist violence and disruption. Art based on stasis expresses a longing for the sameness and predictable repetition that neither "modern life" nor modern ideologies can provide. From Mondrian to the present time, the presence of these static systems expresses a fearful desire to achieve safety and security through the incantatory action of doing the same thing over and over again.

When it invokes such incantatory action, or "pure" geometrizing, contemporary abstraction recalls an historical proposal for ending our anxiety, not a viable option: as banality, not movement toward transcendence.

Ortega y Gasset: Music had to be relieved of private sentiments. This was the deed of Debussy. Owing to him, it became possible to listen to music serenely, without swoons and tears.

Among artists whom Halley identifies as exemplars of the change Ortega points to: Ad Reinhardt, who advocated a painting of no sadism or slashing, no therapy, no kicking-of-effigy,... central, frontal, regular, repetitive... The Ortegan painter is completely unconcerned.

His painting is necessarily cold.

In Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, we witness a change in abstract practice from giving prescriptions for utopias beyond culture to playing a seismographic role within culture.

The high culture of the post-war world recognized that the traditional certainties by which Western civilization had lived for a very long time--the imperishability of the soul, the nobility of the body, God--could be depended on no longer. The onset of this dissolution began during the decade between 1945 and 1955. Its visible signs were the gush of flashy new appliances and gadgets onto the consumer market, the appearance of instant-built suburbs laid out on mathematical grids, and the explosion of exciting new technologies of diversion, from Disney-land and chrome-embellished cars to television and Playboy. Within the gleam and fabulous imagery of it all, human consciousness was left adrift on the glowing churn of data and images, with humanity itself evolving into pure information.

Pollock created our first compelling images of the decentred, abstract, remorselessly dynamic turmoil of image and information we have been living in ever since. He was a reporter who sent back the first great pictures of a new, disoriented culture, made before most people even knew what was happening. In his most powerful images, we glimpse

the earliest moment of that flowing instability in which we now must live and move and negotiate our salvations.

We can accept meaninglessness in nature. We find it difficult to accept in human activities, though the value of meaninglessness in human life is inestimable.

Abstract painting perhaps had to pass through a period of impoverishment, then a period of excess, then a period of exhaustion, before becoming what it is now: still a young art, but a wise one.

There is too much meaningfulness in the world.

Painting has always been a gratification of taste, or a defiance of taste. New abstract painting is a querying of taste, which is another way to talk of our satisfaction at having our worst fears confirmed, or our appetites satiated.

The best new abstract painting, that is. Some painting is mere illustration of cultural theories manufactured in academic seminars, without any recognition that people are dying.

There is no common strategy or conviction informing new abstraction. There is only a common gaze toward an inventory of images made during a remarkably brief moment in time; resigned to living in the world as it is, hopeful but not optimistic, offering each other opportunities for convalescence from the disasters of modernization.

Painting goes on at the rate of heartbeat.

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Postscript

The paintings by Toronto artist John Kissick that accompany this text are not illustrations of anything in it. Nor is the writing a gloss on Kissick's painting. Both the artworks and the shape of my commentary--a compilation of scraps from a much larger notebook on abstract painting--emerged in the course of a fruitful dialogue with John Kissick in the summer and autumn of 2002. The real work, in writing and art and conversation, is unfinished.

*Sources of this text include conversations with painters David Urban and Gina Rorai, Jonathan Lasker and Peter Halley; Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (1988); Jonathan Lasker, *Complete Essays 1984-1998* (1998); Peter Halley, *Collected Essays 1981-1987* (1988); Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (1996); William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture, Mythical Landscapes & Ancient Ruins* (1997); and, throughout, the writings and thought of Martin Heidegger.*

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