

symbolically violent act is one that often seems futile, since photographs are notoriously resistant to letting go of their subject. We still see traces of figures and features in some of the strips. The relationship of these thin photo fragments to the meaty, solidly painted forms she usually prefers is still under development, but the tension is promising. SARAH PARSONS

John Kissick

◀◀ LEO KAMEN GALLERY, TORONTO

For some decades, abstract painting has been tricky terrain to negotiate. In the 1980s, the art historian Yve-Alain Bois termed it the emblem of modernism. Recently, the *New Yorker's* Peter Schjeldahl described it as having been the prow of art history. Adding to the sense of its now fallen state, we might also recall the American abstract artist Brice Marden's lament about the "pain" in painting. Nonetheless, John Kissick bravely wades into the territory.

Kissick is a late re-starter as a painter, having worked a good part of his career in the realm of conceptual art. In the mid-1990s, after reaching a point where he wanted to free up control over the meaning in his work, he backed his way into painting, all the while concerned about its attendant thorny issues. His thinking about these continues to evolve.

One idea central to the paintings in this exhibition came from the artist's conversation about abstraction last year with the Toronto art critic John Bentley Mays, and Mays's use of Martin Heidegger's term *Verwindung*, which can mean "convalescence." The artist says he enjoys imagining the various licks and riffs from and on the old, enfeebled visual language of abstract painting from the last century, collaged together in his own recent paintings as though they have been gathered in a convalescent home.

Whether this image holds appeal or not, a strategy is only that. Ultimately an artist's work must be judged upon our experience of it, and happily, despite his intellectual and theoretical hyper-vigilance, Kissick's work sings with visual complexities and pleasures. His critical awareness and strategic decisions make it all the more enjoyable.

The exhibition consisted of six paintings, each five and a half feet square. Kissick chose the square format hoping it would open up readings for the viewer; the horizontal rectangles of some of his earlier abstract paintings have been interpreted as landscapes. Although some of his painted shapes seem quirky and lighthearted, the tone of the paintings, overall, is serious. Their energy is held within the edges of each canvas; the works are not expansive. In fact, each painting seems almost to be incubating.

The space Kissick creates is cubist: very shallow, with that lovely slight shuffling-forward of flat elements. The works are awkward, not elegant, however, and the colours are idiosyncratic, some verging on muddy. There is no evidence anywhere of that dumb poison, expressive touch—all traces and forms seem anonymously formed. Yet there are social references; the ubiquitous looping garden hose/intestine shape was actually inspired by an image of a maze in one of his daughter's picture books.

A gifted and skilled artist, Kissick could probably dispense with strategies and just do whatever came to him in the studio. His paintings would still be challenging and engaging. LIZ WYLIE



JOHN KISSICK *No. 2 (Then you chop it up small...)* 2004 Acrylic on canvas 1.67 x 1.67 m

Stephen Schofield

◀◀ OPTICA, MONTREAL

There was simply too much work in this exhibition given that it was all in one room. The show could have occupied three spaces, and allowed each of the groupings, which I'll call the drawings, the swings and the figures, to be viewed to its best advantage. I found it almost impossible to really look at one piece without those in my peripheral vision leaking in.

The drawings were small, free-associative doodles in various media and had the intimacy of a sketchbook. Because of the way the show was set up, less light fell on the drawings, making them a footnote to the sculptures.