

The Something as a Painting

By Raphael Noz

I don't believe in the term abstract painting, at least most of the time. When we talk about the abstract of something, we are talking about what's left when you take everything away. So, now writing that, I believe in abstract painting. When you take everything away from painting, at least when you take the image away, you're just left with the materials, what they do and how they are in relation to each other. So then, there's no idea of an image to hang all of the marks on, to distract from the surface. Let me start over...

A painter looks out over a small lane, the smooth flow of the road punctuated by houses. Surveying the play of light, the faint breeze, looking out and across the bay, then up into a summer morning sky, he pauses. The scene glimpsed in its entirety caught the eye, and now, lingering there, the painter takes in what had attracted his eye in the first place, so suddenly: the relationships of colors, forms and light, a visual choreography danced only by the eye's movement from form to form. "This is the movement inside me, manifest in the world

around me." He picks up his brush...

Whatever the painting looks like, it will remain beholden to this view, to this starting place. The object that is 'the painting' will always be a disappeared window to look through, the paint, a stand in for the real thing, a copy of the life glimpsed by the painter.

When we look at this painting hung on a wall, we -as the artist even- we have a mental image as a comparison to the painting. We see the painted representation of a house- we think of the houses we have seen, perhaps the particular real reference for this particular house. We compare the two, we judge the painted image, and in so doing, we look beyond it. We look through it. The real painting is the comparison of this optical arrangement to the image we already have in our head.

Ken Kesey, in his cross country travels on the bus Further, said that "we came to look at and not to look for." That's not exactly it, but my point is that when we are looking for we often are unable to just look at. In this case, we are looking for how the painted image of the house agrees with what we know of houses, with our extensive image bank of house that we have accumulated through a life of having seen many houses. We look at the painting as to how it compares to our image of house rather than look at the forms just as they are. It is almost impossible to look at the painting and not be drawn in by the likeness, sliding right by the painted surface. This is the problem with

representation, even the very simplified formal paintings often called 'abstract'.

The problem with this, as a painter, is that the painted surface is the only place we physically touch, the only place we can manipulate to create our work. Long after we leave that little lane, after even the light has left that little lane, we walk back to our studio, our thin, square, opaque window carried wet and held from behind by the stretcher bars. We hold up our little window to the real thing, and poised there, for however long, it comes away from that place, an image effectively burned there by our labor, our labor of looking.

Every representational painting is therefore always an abstract. It can never be more than the distillation of some of the elements of a visual scene, fixed onto a painted surface, usually canvas. We take it away from what it references. But what it references- that image bank inside of us- we can never leave. We are left with only a beautiful bounty of details at best, a curation of the important impressions, organized, executed, perhaps, but in relation to our ideal.

But there is another looking, there is another painting.

When as painters we move away from re-presenting an image, when we remove all reference points to something beyond the materials we are working with, we face painting again for the first time. The first first time that

most of us did this was when we tried to represent something on paper or canvas, for most of us happening back in the distance of childhood. We picked up a brush and tried to draw a person first, usually, then perhaps a house, or a cat, a car. We grew in ability, those of us that kept at it, until we reached a maturity of working with materials and an enviable ability to represent nature.

When we decide to drop all that, that's when we're really dabbling in existentialism- if not for ourselves, most definitely for what a painting actually is. That, by extension is, at least metaphorically, a stand in for the self, a self fixed in a situation. A self held in a gestural response to life. So now we've smashed the window so to speak, and notice that a painting is an object; that as an object it has integrity in being itself, however humbly. The loss of the image comes with the gift of seeing the painting for what it is- an object, like us, another being in this material world.

But there are more gifts here. The loss of the image also lets colors, forms, and materials speak to one another just as they are. No longer forced into the labor of appearing as something they are not, they can finally just be what they are. They can be thin and drawn down by gravity into drips, thick and stuck heavily to the support, they can be brushed down remnant of a previous mark, something half covered, or stroked through by another form. They are liberated, and anything truly liberated has a chance at dignity.

When we release paint from being life's representative, we get to face just what it is. In this sense, what is often called 'abstract' painting is really more close to being realistic—at least in being realistic about what it is and is not, materially. It is real in the sense that it is just itself. It does not re-present anything, and so cannot be an abstract of anything. Because of this, I find the use of the term abstract to describe a painting to be inaccurate. I find the terms representational and non-representational closer to defining what a painting actually is.

Painting is always a negotiation. Sometimes, the painter thinks it can tell the paint exactly what to do. As if the material was not something to be worked with, and instead being something to be worked on. The painter has pre-set some specific end-goal image in mind. Other times, it is more of a conversation. You have something you want to say, so you start to paint. Then the brush makes a suggestion; the paint takes it a certain way and answers back. Then you respond to that, pretty soon the whole canvas is talking and carrying on and every color on the palette is ready to join in and add something. Some assert themselves while others just watch, spectators on the palette. When you pre-decide what the whole picture is going to be about before you begin, you've already set some end goal image in mind. End goals are fine enough for some things, mostly things we need to use, like bridges and telephones. We need bridges to carry loads, and telephones to carry a signal. While painting used to have

a job to do to- it used to illustrate battle scenes and represent people before photography, all that has been liberated now. While the technical revolution came with the promise of leisure time, the only thing it really liberated was art. Finally, paint could just be paint. I would argue that the history of contemporary art is a history of distilling out from art, all of its use and value, first dissolving the image, releasing its fix on time, later letting go of intrinsically valuable materials, then the whole situation of the place where art is experienced.

It is in this historical moment that we enter this exhibition, *The Possible*. What is next for the museum? What to show? And how to present it and for what kind of interaction with the audience? Bringing together local artists and artisans, the curator creates a platform for interactions based on experts and the curious. Many of the contributors to the show have an art practice based in materials that require techniques and processes. They function as the experts. The museum-goer is enticed by a loom, a rug, a ceramics studio. They expect to follow some instructions and to be allowed the temporary use of an expert's materials. The trick is to get the processes and materials in order, as there is generally a goal for making something. In this way, these artists' strategy can be likened to representational painters. They are organizing the material, controlling it for a focused goal. Although highly free in form, the result is a thing- a blanket, a ceramic pot, a woven rug.

Except for *The Something*. *The Something* is not a group of experts. While we have assembled a collection of electronic and musical instruments, costumes and video equipment, the goal is not to make music per se. The real goal here is much more akin to the painter who finally destroys the function of his window, however sadly, liberating both himself and the painting from the illusion agreement. We are a group of artists with the realization that we can turn off the goal conveyor belt. We control the switch, and if we have the courage to admit it, we are really not making anything that has value in the traditional capitalist sense. We are, in fact, sabotaging our whole product. Sabotage, from the French word *sabot*, meaning a wooden shoe, thus indicating the assembly line worker's act of throwing a wooden shoe to stop the gears. That we are in fact throwing a wooden shoe in the gears of our own self-made machine is an act of resistance, but not one directed at anyone other than ourselves. We are challenging our own ill-conceived process of thinking we have to make something. In fact, like art, we can choose to be liberated. We can choose to hold ourselves to the highest goals of what *The Possible* means. We can choose to stop the gears, let something die, and resume operations after a little retooling. If we truly believe in art as a living thing, a powerful thing, than we can kill it, or at least take it down if it isn't working. If we truly believe in art's vitality, it will reemerge.

A Building's Birthday

Outside of the Berkeley Art Museum, between the café's outdoor seating and the Peter Voulkas sculpture on the Durant Street side, there is a small metal plaque. It lies right up against the building. Its simplicity suggests the handmade, judging by the bounce that the letters have, the letters that spell out that the museum was dedicated on November 7, 1970. The Berkeley Art Museum has a November birthday.

It has been noted by those interested in such things, that the horoscope is a useful tool in understanding people's character. But places and things also have birthdays, and might also be understood through the lense of the zodiac. Might they exhibit energy associated with a specific sign? Berlin, for instance has at least 3 important historical dates that fall on November 9. The abdication of the Weimar Republic to the Nazis, *Kristalnacht*, and the fall of the Berlin Wall all happened on November 9. That would suggest that it a scorpio city. Looking at the attributes of the scorpio, we find many of them in the energy of Berlin. Besides being a highly creative place, it is also a dark place, attracting extremes of sensual expression and drug use. It was also a city that was literally brought down to the ground and later rebuilt.

As buildings go, The Berkeley Art Museum is a scorpio, and an examination of the attributes of the scorpio sign might be valuable here. Here are some of the attributes and areas of interest of the scorpio: death, rebirth,

what is hidden, loyalty, creativity, excess, sensuality. "The phoenix rising from the ashes" is a common representation for scorpio. Things coming down, then rising back up anew; this is a common strategy for the energy of a scorpio. Compounding this is the scorpio energy that we have in our core group: three November scorpions. This strategy of death and rebirth, though challenging, is not foreign to us. In fact, the founding director of The Berkeley Art Museum, Peter Selz, whose name appears on the dedication plaque, is not a stranger to scorpio energy. Anecdotally, he authored a text for Barbara Chase-Riboud, the sculptor exhibiting in Gallery 5, with "The Malcolm X Stele". Years ago, while Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Selz oversaw an exhibition that, according to The Dictionary of Art Historians, "included the infamous 1960 Jean Tinguely "Homage to New York," a sculpture that destroyed itself (and started a fire) in the sculpture garden of the Museum." Surely a curator with this experience might be well prepared for a group of artists attempting to do the same, though metaphorically.

Let me return to a discussion of painting for a moment. In my experience as a painter, non-representational painting was repeatedly an exercise in death and rebirth. While painting a representation of something, a landscape for instance, once an area of the surface reached a pleasing level of likeness to the subject, I would avoid working back into that area. If for example, the sky's representation came out right, I

would no longer touch it, only working on other areas of the painting. I would continue to work on smaller and smaller areas until the painting was finished. Non-representational painting was completely different. If for example, a section of a painting was particularly pleasing, working around it always proved to be mistake. I would find myself more and more confined by small, precious areas that would not be working together. Like a hoarder, I had left little piles of preciousness all over the painting until there was no more room to sit. Every time, I would have to take down all of these areas of preciousness, destroy the whole thing. Inevitably, this would lead to a more unified whole, better than any of the small, preciousness scattered about a broken surface.

The Something operates like this, like a non-representational painting. In place of the tools and materials of a painting though, we have a palette of people, each a distinct and colorful personality. In place of a canvas support we have a gallery space at the Berkeley Art Museum. And perhaps more crucially to highlight, instead of a goal of re-presenting some predetermined goal, some previous experience, we are engaged in the self-reflexivity of a non-representational painting. Our 'goal' is not a thing. It is the honest expression of each person in the palette. We are not musicians, though we have musical instruments. We are not performance artists, though we have costumes and props. We are not video technicians though we have wires and cameras, boxes and knobs. As such, we are not organizing around

a specific person being 'the painter'. No one is in charge, and no one person is deciding what the goal is; what the 'image' should look like. Understanding this context frees us up to operate not as artisans but as artists. We don't have an order to fill, we have something to learn about ourselves, about each other, and about our group as a whole.

Gallery Four was getting full of preciousness. There were areas of expression that were beginning to claim space. We were starting to have to move around them, and the space was getting crowded. As our experiment was growing to include more people, in this case an entire class of graduate students at California College of the Arts, there was less and less room for people to move around. For a group full of scorpio energy, the natural thing was to tear it all down. We are all confident that the only way to bring about the birth of a true and unified work of art is to take it down, to till it under, to wait for new growth. I hope you will be there for the rebirth.