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The New York Times

Published June 28, 2012

ART REVIEW: LIKE WATCHING PAINT THRIVE
In Five Chelsea Galleries, the State of Painting

By Roberta Smith

Painting is a lot of things: resilient, vampiric, perverse, increasingly elastic, infinitely absorptive and, in one form or another, nearly as old as humankind. One thing it is not, it still seems necessary to say, is dead.

Maybe it appears that way if you spend much time in New York City's major museums, where large group shows of contemporary painting are breathtakingly rare, given how many curators are besotted with Conceptual Art and its many often-vibrant derivatives. These form a hegemony as dominant and one-sided as formalist abstraction ever was.

But that's another reason we have art galleries. Not just to sell art, but also to give alternate, less rigid and blinkered, less institutionally sanctioned views of what's going on.

Evidence of painting's lively persistence is on view in Chelsea in five ambitious group exhibitions organized by a range of people: art dealers, independent curators and art historians. Together these shows feature the work of more than 120 artists and indicate some of what is going on in and around the medium. Some are more coherent than others, and what they collectively reveal is hardly the whole story, not even close. (For one thing there's little attention to figuration; the prevailing tilt is toward abstraction of one sort or another.) A few of the shows take a diffuse approach, examining the ways painting can merge with sculpture or Conceptual Art and yield pictorial hybrids that may not even involve paint; others are more focused on the medium's traditional forms.

All told, these efforts release a lot of raw information into the Chelsea air, creating a messy conversation, a succession of curatorial arguments whose proximity makes it easy to move back and forth among them, sizing up the contributions of individual artists as well as the larger ethos.

The Big Picture

A penchant for small, modestly-scaled works that is often evident in these shows is at its most extreme at Sikkema Jenkins in "The Big Picture," a slyly titled show of works by eight artists whose efforts rarely exceed 20 inches on a side.

An implication here is that small is not only beautiful but also might actually be radical, or at least anti-establishment, in a time of immense, often spectacular artworks. Another suggestion is that there remains plenty to be done with paint applied to small, flat rectangular surfaces.

These arguments are made effectively and repeatedly, whether by Jeronimo Elespe's "Segundo T," whose scratched patterns suggest a text or a textile as much as a painting; Merlin James's resplendent "Yellow," which simply pulses with small, well-placed blooms of color; or Ann Pibal's latest, more forthright collusions of brushy and hard-edged abstraction. Through quietly inspired brushwork alone, David Schutter breathes his own kind of life into landscape-suggestive monochromes, while John Dilg brings the canvas weave to bear, almost pixelatedly, on his cartoon-visionary landscapes.

Robert Bordo, Josephine Halvorson and Ryan McLaughlin all make the case that art exists foremost for close looking and internalized experience and nothing does this better than painting. Other mediums can do it just as well, if we're lucky, but not better.

For the moment three solo exhibitions supplement the conversation among these group shows in nearly mutually exclusive ways. In Cheyney Thompson's installation (through Saturday) at Andrew Kreps (525 West 22nd Street) postwar gestural abstraction and Conceptual Art collide to bracing effect in a series of gaudy but weirdly methodical canvasses of identical height whose widths are proportioned to the walls on which they are displayed; never has Mr. Thompson's sardonic skepticism about painting and its processes looked so fierce or decorative.

At Derek Eller (615 West 27th Street) André Ethier's small canvasses (also through Saturday) mine the overlap between modernist and folk painting with a vibrant insouciance and could easily have been included in the Sikkema Jenkins show. And in her Manhattan gallery debut at Thomas Erben (526 West 26th Street) Whitney Claflin presents, through July 28, busily painted, also small canvasses enhanced by collage-poems, jewelry, sewn patches and feathers; they announce painting's ability to absorb all comers in a whisper that is also a joyful shout.