

Abstraktion

... *Wit*

This exhibition and catalogue would not have been possible without the generous support of:

The Wolf Kahn & Emily Mason Foundation
The Renate, Hans & Maria Hofmann Foundation

My thanks also to the lenders of the exhibition whose generosity made this exhibition possible. A special thanks to Shazzi Thomas and Edward Shalala for their assistance in the preparation of the exhibition, and to Cecily Kahn, President of The Painting Center Advisory Board for her initial enthusiasm, advice and encouragement for the project.

Joanne Freeman
Curator



Marina Adams
Polly Apfelbaum
Joanne Freeman
Joe Fyfe
Barbara Gallucci
Phillis Ideal
Jonathan Lasker
Sarah Lutz
Doreen McCarthy
Mario Naves
Thomas Nozkowski
Paul Pagk
Ruth Root
Fran Shalom
Stephen Westfall

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January 29 – February 23, 2013

The Painting Center

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Hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 to 6 pm

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it is defined as a natural aptitude for using words and ideas in a quick and inventive way to create humor. Abstract language is not immediately associated with humor, as pictorial and narrative language can seem more accessible. Why certain shapes and colors appear humorous depends on context, cultural associations or individual experience. But sometimes the reason is not tangible, or sensible, some things are just funny.

Analyzing wit in reference to abstract art and language is a sure way to diffuse its potency, since its delivery feeds on the novel and unexpected. Disruption of the status quo helps to define humor. Modernist aesthetics surrounding form, balance and proportion still provide a common reference point from which to view abstract art. This shared visual language has become part of our collective consciousness and dictates our expectations. When preconceived standards are disrupted they can alter assumptions, surprise, reinvent and communicate wit.

The conversation between artist and viewer is enhanced by recognition and discovery. A small gesture like a nod or wink can provide a link with the mindset of the artist and set the tone of the conversation. It is a mistake to polarize humor and intellect since they work best in unison. Wit suggests qualities of the human spirit in an overly synchronized world, be it the slip, the twist, the pratfall, it's the imperfection that identifies the personality.

The artists selected for this show share a sense of humanity and amusement that resonates in their work. You could call it a "twinkle in the eye" or a joy that permeates through what they do. I think of it as an inner wit that can't be kept down, as long as someone is willing to play.

Joanne Freeman is a painter and curator who lives and works in New York City.

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it, huh? It seems an unlikely peg on which to organize an exhibition of abstract paintings and sculptures. We've been taught, after all, that abstract art is serious business. Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich, the holy trinity of modernist abstraction, scuttled representation in the cause of philosophical and sociological ideals--as a means of changing the world. The New York School, having seen how resolutely the world crushed their aspirations, redefined abstraction as a conduit for interiority--as a forum for primordial longings, universal symbols, that sort of thing. They did so to impressive effect—until, that is, the world went pop!

Here in the wobbly days of the early twenty-first century, abstraction is no longer viewed as a driving historical force or the necessary culmination of twenty thousand years of creative endeavor. Though you might hear otherwise from isolated outposts—variations on “my kid could paint that” being the most predominant—abstraction is pretty much a non-issue, and not a moment too soon. Shouldering the burden of tradition can occasion significant art, but it can also stifle artistic independence and skew perception, public and otherwise. Be grateful that abstraction with a capital “A” is over and done with. Painters and sculptors dedicated to the cause can now work with astonishing freedom. The King is dead. Now let's see where we can go with this thing.

Eschewing the purity that was once abstraction's sine qua non, the artists featured in Wit opt for an almost promiscuous inclusivity. No inspiration is suspect. High-flown ambitions--sure, we got 'em; historical cognizance, too. But these artists are also characterized by a willingness to embrace a veritable laundry list of references: nature, narrative, comics, design, technology, science, representation and, not least, humor. Not that humor has been entirely absent from the history of abstract art: Malevich pranked Mona Lisa five years before Duchamp and Mondrian paid winning homage, in oil and canvas, to his beloved boogie-woogie music. Still, abstraction nowadays is more and more a repository of quirks, tics and pictorial double entendres, having as much in common with Buster Keaton, say, as Neo-Plasticism.

Just don't hold your breath expecting Marina Adams, Polly Apfelbaum, Joanne Freeman, Joe Fyfe, Barbara Gallucci, Phillis Ideal, Jonathan Lasker, Sarah Lutz, Doreen McCarthy, Thomas Nozkowski, Paul Pagk, Ruth Root, Fran Shalom, Stephen Westfall and myself to sign a manifesto of purpose. Making art is hard work and individual visions aren't easily won; few of us like (or want) to be pegged. But the work here is unified and engaging in ways that are somewhat sneaky, maybe contrarian and decidedly offbeat. Watch as these artists juggle forms, tweak relationships, disassemble materials, cajole surfaces and elicit a staggering amount of allusions. It's enough to make you think that abstraction, as a historical and artistic phenomenon, is barely off the ground. At the very least, we should be grateful that it's being carried on with clarity, sophistication and, yes, wit.

Mario Naves is a painter, critic and teacher who lives and works in New York City.

THE CONVERSATION

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it cuts in different directions. In contemporary usage, “wit” implies a light and fast species of humor, most often in conversation. The members of the Round Table group at the Algonquin were wits. In earlier usage “wit” really meant self awareness or, as the OED has it in its first definition, “The seat of consciousness or thought, the mind: sometimes connoting one of its functions, as memory or attention.” There are ten more definitions and then another entry of the same word as a verb. The OED takes four pages to be done with “wit.” My favorite definition is number eight, “That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness . . . later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way.” So, we’re back to humor, but a kind of humor that, even if barbed, also calls attention to form. Wit is always bouncing off something and part of the pleasure is the sense of “Ah, you’ve done this before.”

That eighth definition unpacks the hybridity of wit. It is “apt” while “calculated to surprise and delight.” How can something be both apt and a surprise? Wit takes the measure of surprise and delight and cheerfully announces the results. For the audience, there has to be both an expectation and a willingness to be delighted, so the surprise is in fact anticipated, which is a contradiction. So wit depends on some kind of prior, or pro forma agreement, an understanding that is the basis of a community. As in jazz, the best improvisation gives the sense of being anticipatory. Because wit ornaments a communal architecture it can never be ultimately cruel. When it is cruel, its target is cruelty itself, or at least oafishness. And even then its performance is playful and in defense of community. But, look here, I digress when talking about wit in speech and writing because we’re supposed to be talking about wit in relation to painting and painting is non-verbal.

Or is it? The life of forms in painting is at least in major part syntactical. Shapes, color, and composition have sources in vast ranges of prior contacts both with the life world and painting itself. Fresh iterations arise as painters brood about balancing how much of the outside world they want to get into their paintings with how much they want to invoke of painting lore: who they’re looking at, who they’ve learned from, what they’ve learned, how their painting works as a rejoinder to this “conversation” about painting they’re having in their heads and with fellow travellers. This is true for abstraction as much as it is for mimetic realism. Paintings that are made to be in conversation with other paintings and the world at large are more apt to be witty than paintings that are conceived as stepping-stones laid by logic or existential will to some as yet out of reach truth. But even the latter are contextualized by each artist’s syntax and historical location.

The artists in this show make what appear to be abstract paintings and things that relate to paintings. None of them can abide the fiction of a pure art, though almost all of them can respect the austere achievements of those who’ve labored and intermittently triumphed under such a burden. But if those paintings bring us to a place of silence, the present artists will wink and bid you to follow them to another room where we can continue to talk. The work here is looking for a rejoinder.

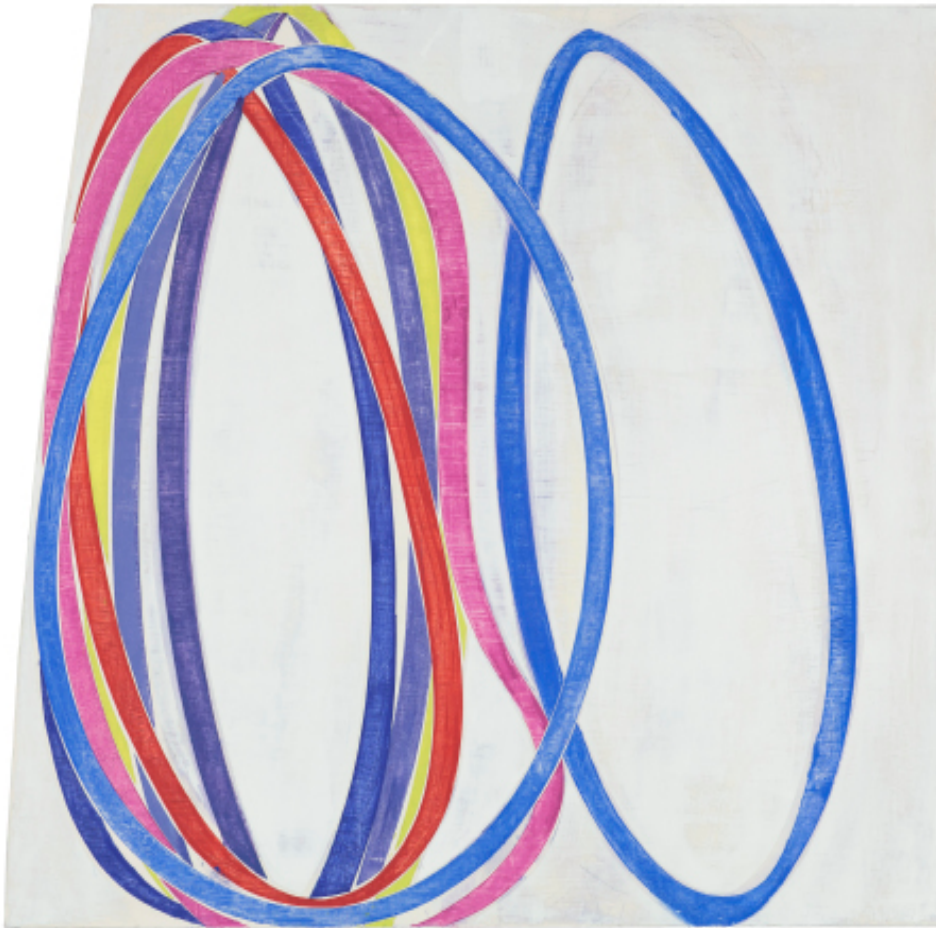
Stephen Westfall is a painter, critic and teacher who lives and works in New York City.



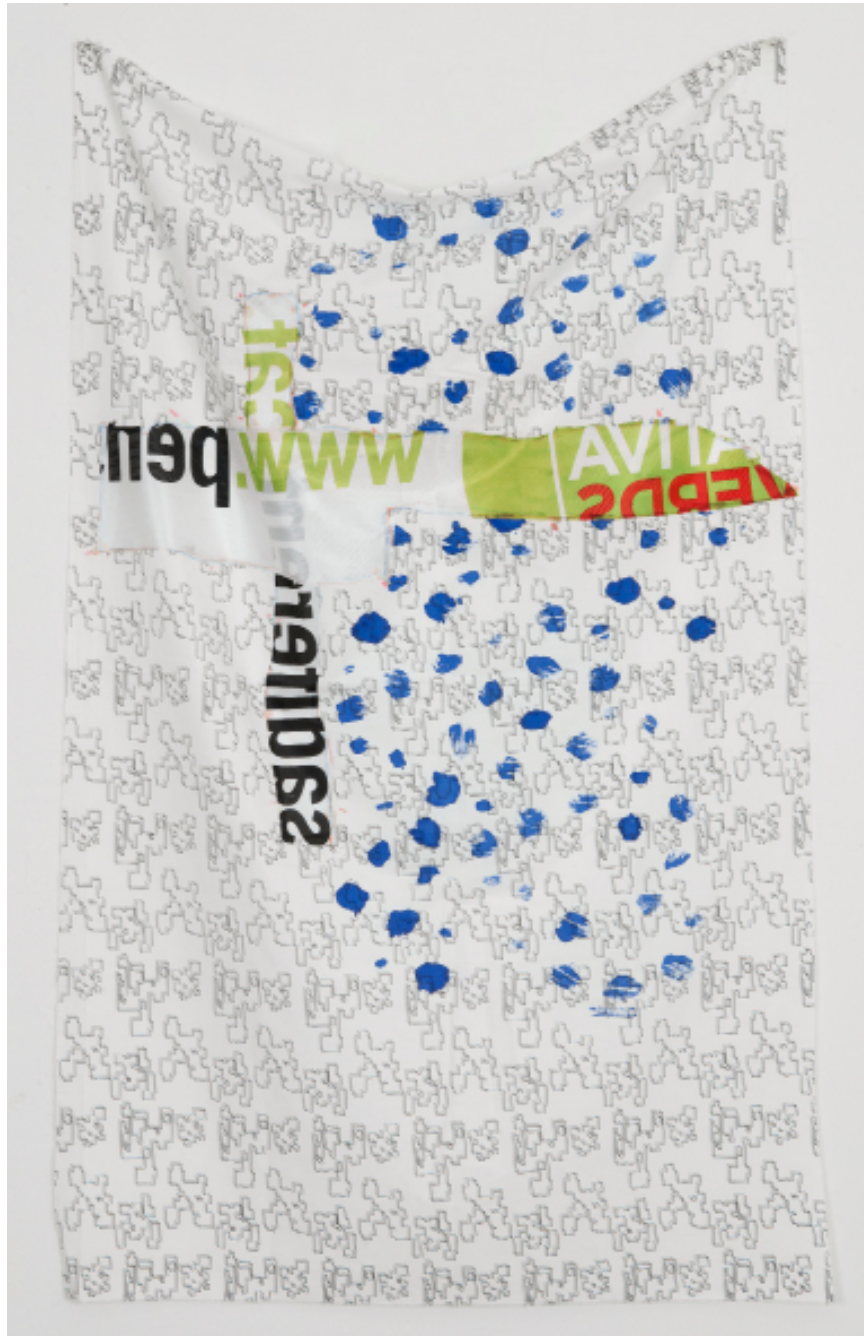
Marina Adams
Newtown Creek Echo, 2011
Acrylic on linen
48 x 48 inches



Polly Apfelbaum
Yellow Day, 2011
Dye, velvet, cotton
12 x 10 inches
Courtesy of D'Amelio Gallery



Joanne Freeman
Sweet Spot, 2012
Oil on shaped canvas
30 x 33 inches



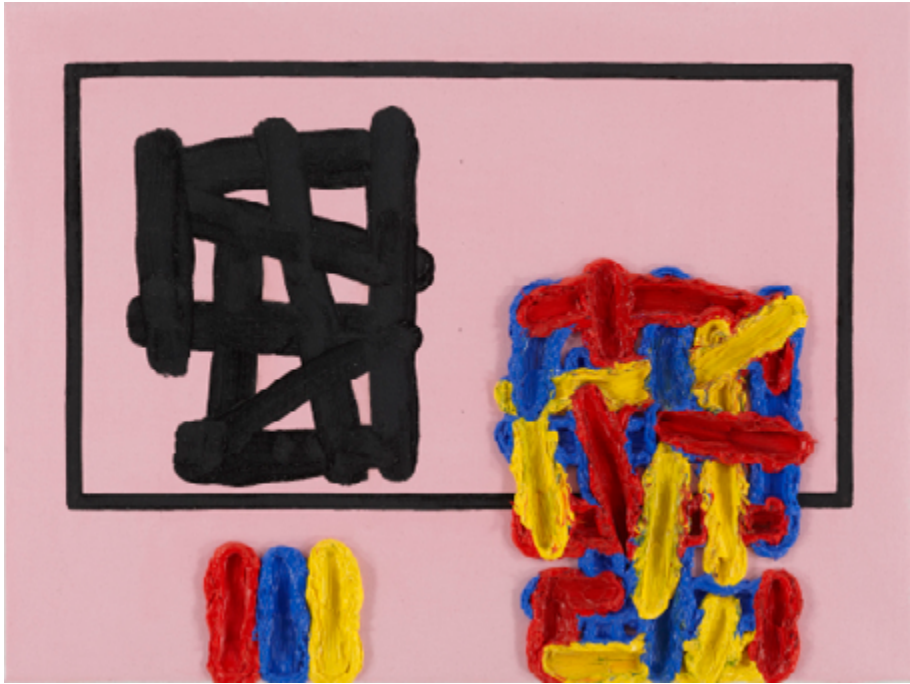
Joe Fyfe
Pauvre Pierre, 2010
Cotton, nylon, ink
58 3/4 x 36 3/8 inches



Barbara Gallucci
Topia Chairs, 2010
Shag chenille carpet filled with recycled, shredded foam
4 x 4 x 3 feet



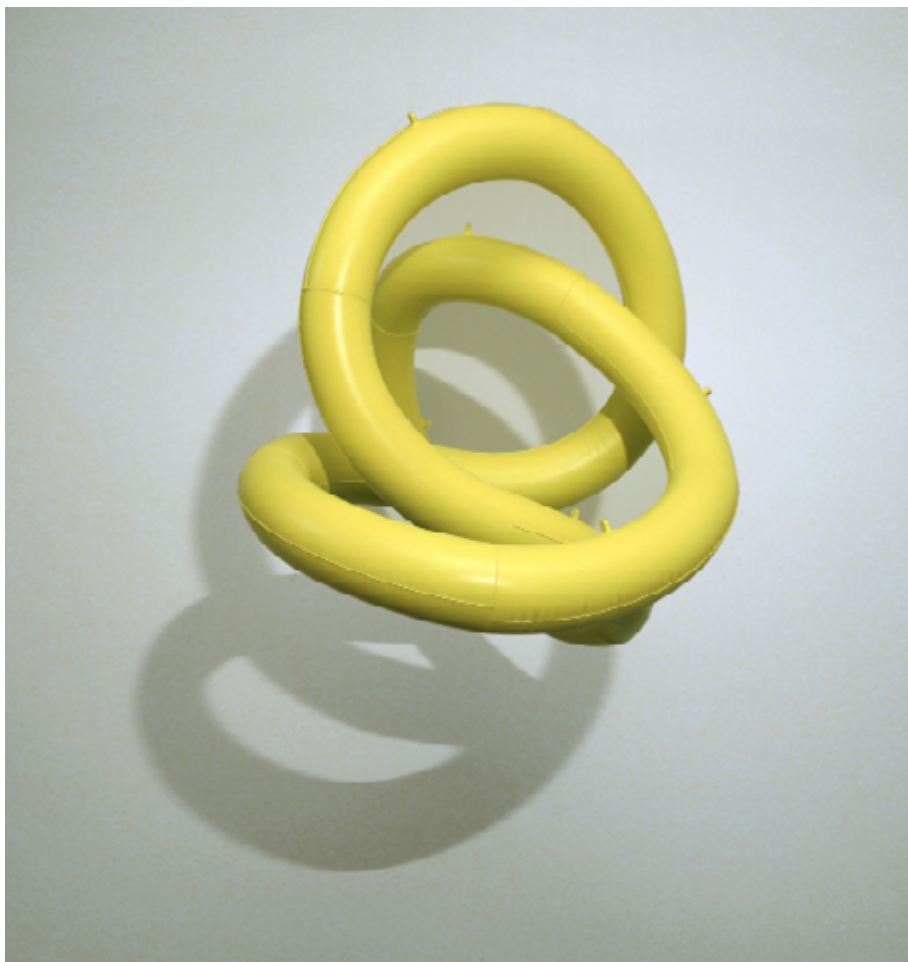
Phillis Ideal
She Said; He Said, 2012
Acrylic, collage, resin on panels
20 x 16 inches each



Jonathan Lasker
Unequal Partners, 2010
Oil on linen
12 x 16 inches
Courtesy of Cheim and Read Gallery



Sarah Lutz
Coyaba, 2012
Oil on panel
16 x 12 inches



Doreen McCarthy
Tortrix, 2013
Inflated vinyl
36 x 30 x 30 inches



Mario Naves
Tart and Toff, 2012
Oil on Canvas
20 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery



Thomas Nozkowski
Untitled (8-44), 2003
Oil on linen on panel
16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of Pace Gallery



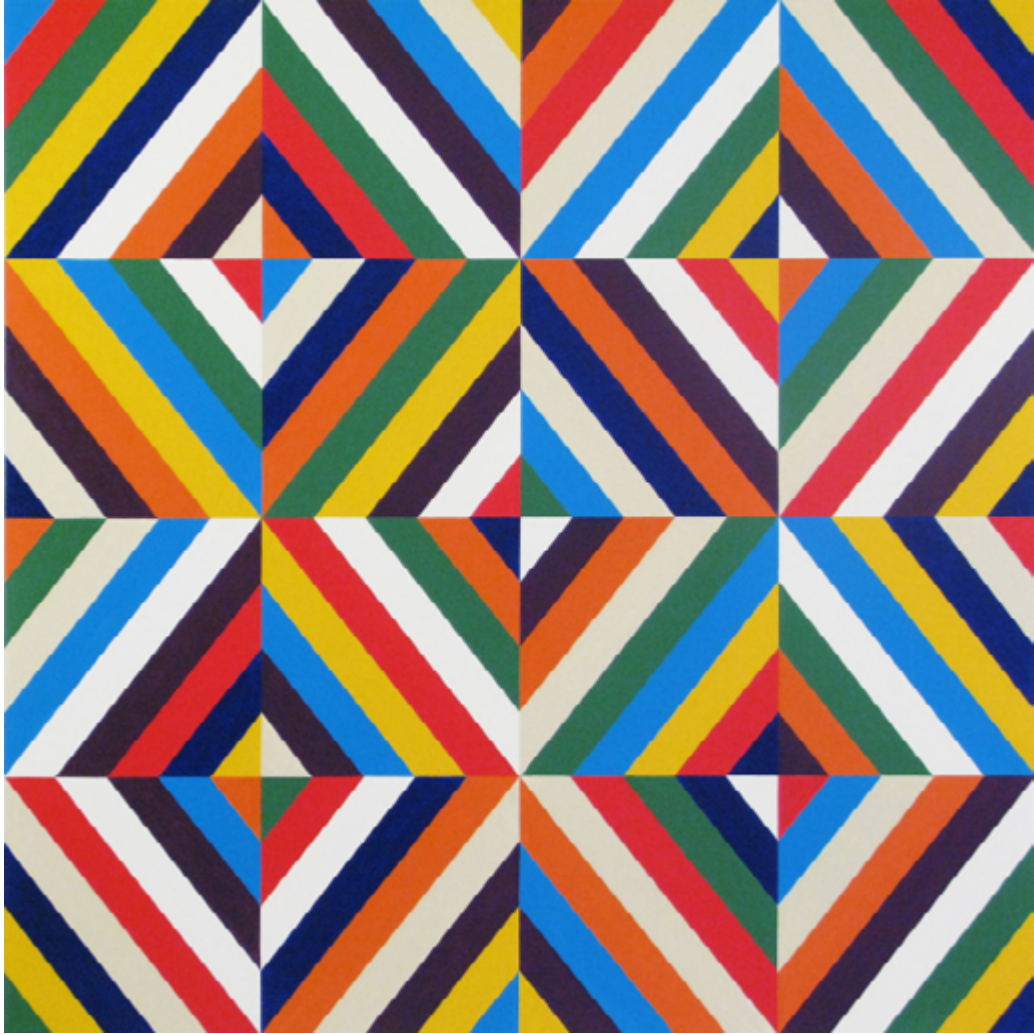
Paul Pagk
o g l s 29, 2006
Oil on linen
25 x 24 inches



Ruth Root
Untitled, 2009
Enamel on aluminum
24 x 39 inches
Courtesy of Ruth Root and
Andrew Kreps Gallery



Fran Shalom
Yield, 2012
Oil on wood
18 x 18 inches



Stephen Westfall
Forest (For Franz Marc) 2010
Oil and alkyd on canvas
59 x 59 inches
Courtesy of Lennon Weinberg Gallery

In memory of Sidney Freeman
1918 - 2012

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