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The Zombies: Contemporary Abstraction and Its Critics

by Noah Dillon

What's at Stake for Abstract Painting — and Where Do We Go from Here? at the Jewish Museum

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1109 5th Avenue (between 92nd and 93rd streets)

New York, 212 423 3200



Bob Nickas, Joanne Greenbaum, Philip Taaffe, and Stanley Whitney. Photo by Roger Kamholz, the Jewish Museum.

At the Jewish Museum, on the night of October 23, a large crowd turned out to hear “What’s at Stake for Abstract Painting Today — and Where Do We Go from Here?” The panel featured a discussion among painters Joanne Greenbaum, Philip Taaffe, and Stanley Whitney, responding to prompts from the writer, critic, and curator Bob Nickas, who was the moderator. It was followed by questions from the audience. I showed up just moments before the program’s commencement, and after an onerous check-in process I was happy to see several friends in attendance. Nickas focused the conversation especially on young abstractionists, who he identified in his opening remarks as men born between 1980 and ’89. Other critics have likewise been eager to harp on a highly visible cadre of such boys: Parker Ito, Jacob Kassay, Lucien Smith, Oscar Murillo, David Ostrowski, Fredrik Vaerslev, and others. Their work has been given many monikers, including [“Zombie Formalism” by the artist and critic Walter Robinson](#), or Jerry Saltz’s minimally clearer and more incisive term, [“MFA-clever” painting](#).^[1]

No artist of that cohort sat on the panel, which Nickas explained by saying, “I considered inviting some of them, but it felt like setting them up and not a good thing to do in public. They can have a panel of their own and talk about how we’re wrong or don’t understand.” Neither were any of them mentioned by name during the discussion, though images of the artists and their work (as well as the work of the panelists) were shown in a slide presentation that was paged through by Nickas mostly without commentary during the conversation. In his introductory remarks, Nickas emphasized his dislike of those artists as vogueish and robotic by describing their careers as suffering a [Menudo Problem](#): every artist as a boy band (a brand), “in a rush to be famous and therefore in a rush to be forgotten.”

The conversants were affable and their sharp quips were balanced with genuine acquisitiveness — an interest in what one another saw as the predominating problems and issues of contemporary painting, and seeing what insights they had gleaned from or about younger artists. Each was sure to reiterate, unequivocally, that there are younger artists they appreciate and admire. Nickas and Greenbaum were both quick to proclaim explicitly that they’re not generational.

Criticisms of the aforementioned youths were varied and most were well deserved, albeit delivered with what to my ear sounded tinged with a kind of “what’s wrong with the kids these days?” ageism, though perhaps I’m mistaken. Whitney and Taaffe noted that there have been bad artists in every era. Whitney offered that, “Painting changes, but not very much.” Nickas remarked that in *The Afternoon Interviews*, a series of conversations between Calvin Tomkins and Marcel Duchamp published in 1964, that many of Duchamp’s complaints are identical to those being made about today’s arts, and that “the [arts’ economic structure] has remained continuous.” Indeed, commoditization, cynicism, and repetition were perhaps as common in that era as they are today. However, Nickas went on to say that there is little similarity between today’s art market and the



Lucien Smith, *Witch Bitch Would You Like to be Like?*, 2012.
Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 24 x 18 inches. © Lucien Smith.

one Duchamp experienced a century ago: during the Armory Show, for a short time, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) was one of the most famous and shocking new paintings in the world, after which it wasn't displayed publicly for a very long time and Duchamp didn't exhibit for several years. Nickas speculated that today — 50 years after Tomkins's conversations with Duchamp, and 100 years after the first Armory Show — if a painting achieved the same level of fame it would likely be immediately repeated by the artist a dozen times over and shown as much as possible.



Jacob Kassay, *Studio View*, 2012. Acrylic and silver deposit on canvas. © Jacob Kassay.

The panelists' lamentations were primarily aimed at the mindless production-line work of those certain young artists: paintings that are churned out in large quantities, using the repetition of a few simple gimmicks. Such work is often described as conceptual, but with an abusive use of the term; this "conceptualism" conflates process and content, prioritizing the former at the latter's expense. It typically employs expressive-like gestures, their formalism pre-slotted into a post-war art-historical genealogy. Greenbaum especially hypothesized that the young men are underformed and that their work is rushed from brainstorm to execution to market.[2]

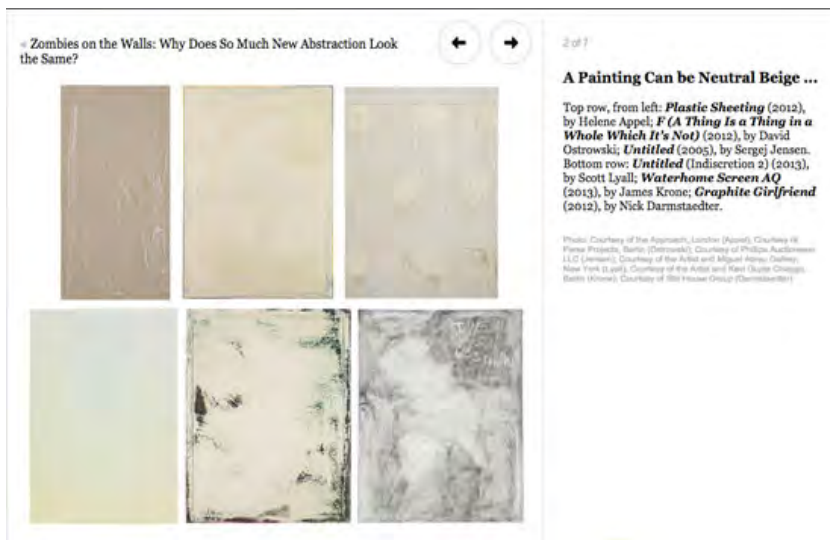
The sum of all these features is decoration: canvases that are speckled or monochromatic or heavily worked into atmospheric mush or inscribed with a solitary line of colorful spray paint, pigment shot from fire extinguishers, athletic line markers, or whatever. Images that are nominally painterly, but essentially just expensive color swatches, follow not only formally but also ideologically from Abstract Expressionism,

which the art historian TJ Clark lamented for its undying endurance and described as "vulgar," the more successful for its greater vulgarity:

Seen in normal surroundings, past the unobtrusive sofas and calla lilies, as part of the unique blend of opulence and spareness that is the taste of the picture-buying [bourgeoisie] of America, a good Hoffmann seems always to be blurring out a dirty secret which the rest of the décor is conspiring to keep. It makes a false compact with its destination. It takes up the language of its users and exemplifies it ... For what it shows is the world its users inhabit in their heart of hearts. It is a picture of their 'interiors,' of the visceral-cum-spiritual upholstery of the rich. And above all it can have no illusions about its own status as part of that upholstery. It is made out of the materials it deploys. Take them or leave them, these ciphers of plenitude — they are all painting at present has to offer.[3]

It should come as no surprise that Lucien Smith's "rain paintings" resemble Pollock or that Jacob Kassay's reflective monochromes allude to Newman or Stella. Their work fulfills a nearly identical role.

In a recent essay for *New York Magazine's Vulture blog*, Jerry Saltz averred that the Internet, speculators, and schools are in some way coacting to make contemporary abstraction more dull and painters more conservatively similar. (He did not hypothesize a specific mechanism.) By way of example, Saltz selected more than a dozen works by the cohort in question, compiling a *Buzzfeed-* or *Huffington Post-*like slideshow. Others in the slideshow included Mark Flood and Charline von Heyl, both of whom are about a generation older than the artists in question, as well as Helene Appel, whose work is spare and minimal, but trompe-l'œil, except if viewed as a 200-by-300-pixel jpeg. So the definitional boundaries of abstract painting's contemporary problem children may be up for debate, depending on the peculiar tastes of a critic, curator, or artist. Or it may simply be dependent on the particular formal affinities that make for a contemptuously banal clickbait slideshow.[4]



A slideshow that accompanied Jerry Saltz's "Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?" on *New York Magazine's Vulture blog*. Courtesy of *New York Magazine*.

Looking through back issues of arts magazines it's easy to find faddish similarities between artists, curatorial experiments, and even exhibition advertisements from every time prior to the web's arrival and the market's recent rapid growth. In the 1960s and '70s every zombified manner of grid, dash, monochrome, and unconventional canvas could be

found on gallery walls and in print. Today's scholars, critics, and curators are apparently eager to rediscover middling parishioners from the church of the grid and rectangle who have since fallen by the historical wayside. They should, and we shouldn't be surprised if many new painters are consigned to such fates in the near and distant future. What is different about the contemporary, readily-digitized era is our ability to easily index and examine a vast array of artists and their work, both past and present. Greenbaum asserted that she believes many of the young artists she speaks with are mostly looking at work that was made in the past 18 months, on their computers and at art fairs.



Marcia Haiff, January 01, 1972, 1972. Pencil on paper, 24 x 18 inches. © Marcia Haiff.

Perhaps even more so, as far as I can tell, a bigger problem is the profusion of superfluous rhetoric that substitutes for... uh... *discourse*. Published in Triple Canopy last year, Alix Rule and David Levine's "International Art English" identified the way that fuzzy, otiose language has become the argot of arts conversations from press releases to the academy and everywhere between. The willing abrogation of critical talk to artists, consultants, and markets virtually guarantees that phony explanations will be offered in lieu of considered content, that buzzwords stand as simulacra of thought rather than leading to any idea, that every kind of nonsense is spoonfed to people willing to buy into it, and that ambiguity is prized over staking a claim.[5] That has nothing to do with the bogeymen that are more often worried over: fairs, auctions, speculators, dealers, and so on.[6] As Nickas asserted at one point, this relatively contemporary ethos of de-skilling, and the seemingly accepted truism that anyone can be an artist, "teaches naïve people that they're also talented." [7] My feeling is, tangentially, that the actual sin is to try to persuade people, by way of inane jargon, that naïveté and redundancy are actually relevant.

Toward the end of the event, a young woman asked if the panelists still believe that a group of boys sits at the apex of contemporary painting. Nickas answered Yes, and then smirkingly added that he takes this from a good source: Phillips auction catalogues.[8] I don't know whether this is earnest or not, but the people who probably benefit most from the confusion of cultural capital with an investment strategy are investors. It would be far better, as I see it, to note that those young men are a symptom of lazy allowances for people seeking highbrow excuses to decorate their homes with banalities, and who might make a profit on later resale. Nickas quoted John Miller's aphorism that painting is a "service industry," which I think gets at this very problem — not a new one, nor an invention of young men painting today, and one that is propped up by rhetorical structure that acts like a Fuck You to any thinking viewer. One would hope, though, that the wizened representatives of earlier generations, some of whom have actively supported a few of these young men and

their peers, can take responsibility in their laxity, and that we can as well,[9] and that perhaps we could all demand more from what we look at, calling out bullshit where it is found.



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[1] Fashionable painting has begotten a fashionable dispute.

[2] This judgment is probably true, but is likewise applicable to earlier generations, such as Stella, Serra, Close and others who emerged from grad school and more or less walked straight into the gallery system. And anyway, this problem isn't one owned by any particular party, and both the artists and galleries share in the responsibility of prematurity.

[3] Clark, TJ "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism." In *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, 397. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

[4] The unspoken flipside of Saltz's critique is the equally vapid and arbitrary cheerleading promotional apparatus, including much of recent criticism. Saltz even tempers his critique with an apologia, noting that while he thinks such work is a problem, he likes the way it looks.

[5] My preferred example of this kind of thing is [the press release for Jacob Kassay's 2013 exhibition at 303 Gallery](#), which is so riddled with typos and *non sequiturs* that it's absolutely depressing that such a document can hope to explain or even entice the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on such work.

[6] In fact, despite their problems, galleries have historically done a great deal to protect the artists that they represent (again, taking into consideration the disparities in who they choose to represent and other very serious crimes). And the expansion of the art market since the 1980s, while concentrating wealth among a small class of artists, collectors, and dealers, has also sparked an enormous widening of opportunities that allows for more artists, more writers, more artist-run spaces, more non-profits, marginally greater diversity, greater museum attendance, and on and on.

[7] About all of these phenomena and propositions I'm basically agnostic.

[8] In September, Nickas, with artist Ryan Foerster, released a zine made from collaged Phillips catalogues, inscribed with marginalia poking fun at many of the young male artists featured therein and also discussed on the panel.

[9] This includes me, by the way.