

After, Ever After

by Tom McGlynn

Painting After Postmodernism Belgium – USA

VANDEBORGHT, BRUSSELS
SEPTEMBER 15 – NOVEMBER 13, 2016

CINEMA GALLERIES/THE UNDERGROUND, BRUSSELS
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When exactly did postmodernism begin? For that matter, has the question of when modernism began ever been resolved? The precepts of so-called High Modernism, specifically in painting, which have variously included utopian disinterest, futurist transcendence, and reactionary primitivism, have never fully left us but have been sorted into conditional resolutions of the same intent: to establish for painting a discrete category of practice that both embodies tradition and simultaneously transcends it. One could make a convincing argument that postmodernism represents a formal extension and elaboration of The Modern, in that its reflexive critique of modernist discourse depends itself on the eternal return of “the new,” or the perpetual advent of tradition deferred (i.e. the avant-garde). How does one place periods on the often very fluid passages of painting’s constant rebirth?



Bernard Gilbert, *Number 113*, 2010. Acrylic on polyester canvas, 70.9 × 59.1 inches. Photo: Bernard Gilbert.

These are some of the persistent questions that arise when approaching the curatorial premise of curator, art historian, and critic Barbara Rose’s ambitious *Painting After Postmodernism*, organized with the integral assistance of the Brussels gallerist Roberto Polo. The curator’s summation in the show’s publicity explains the situation as such:

Postmodernism deprived painting of originality and first-hand experience at the same time that Greenberg’s disembodied abstraction, addressed to eyesight alone, collided with the

desire on the part of some artists to retain the wholeness of the aesthetic experience made available by the old masters in their fusion of the haptic quality of sensuous painterly surfaces with the optical melding of colour and light.¹

This agonistic pitting of the phenomenal qualities of paint against the theoretically dematerialized object of painting and the curious case for the phenomenal Real being rescued by a virtual practice (considering painting's rarified status among aesthetic disciplines), is not a new one but not one that has ever been particularly resolved either.

The substantial amount of works assembled here (almost three-hundred mostly large-scale paintings) consist of a blend of American and Belgian painters, which is interesting in itself for suggesting previously unconsidered questions of cultural rapprochement between the two countries. Such questions might include: How important has the "modern" reorganization and evolution of the respective cultural institutions of Belgium and the U.S. been resulting from their re-alignment post Marshall Plan?² Is there a boilerplate Belgian fatalism that parallels an American bloody-mindedness? How does an American sense of raw materiality correlate to a frank Flemish corporeality? There isn't space here to adequately trace the potential of such threads but there are some related stylistic and conceptual currents swirling in the exhibition that can be dipped in to.

The American painters chosen by Rose are primarily older, established artists and some have a prior history with her. Larry Poons, Walter Darby Bannard, Karen Gunderson, Paul Manes, Lois Lane, and Ed Moses have, for the most part, been associated with Rose since the late 1960s in New York when a Greenbergian "post-painterly" abstraction was giving way to multiform "pluralism," a phase that more or less pre-figured the detached discourses and attendant mélange of styles that came to be known as the postmodernism turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Martin Kline and Melissa Kretschmer represent a relatively younger generation of American process/image painters whose hybrid sculpture/painting work embodies the inheritance of such a turn. The Belgian artists, including Mil Ceulemans, Joris Ghekiere, Bernard Gilbert, Marc Maet, Werner Mannaers, Xavier Noiret-Thomé, Bart Vandevijvere, and Jan Vanriet are a mixture of younger and older artists who all share an interest in deriving their pictorial structure from immersive painterly experience, and foregrounding such experience as inherent to their aesthetic doxa. Lusciously stained tonal fields in their paintings are often offset by starkly graphic chromatic planes spliced with musical intervals of lines and masses that harken back to the buoyant abstractions of Kandinsky and Miró.



Ed Moses, *Dog-Flip*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 71.7 × 59.8 inches. Photo: Alan Shaffer.

In fact, the immediacy of material processes is everywhere evident in the exhibition and is a common tendency shared by the artists of both nationalities. Among the Europeans, Ceulemans, Ghekiere, Gilbert, Mannaers, Noiret-Thomé, and Vandevijvere offer strong figure/ground contrasts reminiscent of the hard/soft focus of late Hans Hoffman but also of contemporary artists like Thomas Nozkowski and Fiona Rae. Strident, often neon-color interaction energizes these fragmentary, neo-surrealist visions alternatively summoning the sublime order of the universe and its random, apocalyptic chaos. Works such as Ghekiere's *Untitled* (2016) and Gilbert's *Number 113* (2010) offer prime examples of this Cartesian breakdown. These works' chiasmic collisions resound, almost audibly, throughout the five floors of the Vanderborcht—a classically tectonic modernist structure built in 1932. The first floor of the building is solidly grounded with what amounts to a mini-retrospective of the serially upsetting yet, as revealed in the installation, conceptually progressive career of Larry Poons. Besides some examples of his heaped relief paintings dating from the '80s and '90s, one of the major surprises of the exhibition are Poon's most recent works that meld his long preoccupation with the haptic density of pigment to a chromatic and gestural fluency which is alternatively reminiscent of both Pierre Bonnard's lightly lyrical touch and Milton Resnick's darker gestural accretions.

Another more subtle thread of the exhibition involves artists for whom a cryptic symbolism nuanced by carefully constructed surfaces combine to form paintings of brooding intensity. Kline, Maet, Vanriet, Gunderson, and Lane each literally blur the boundaries between paint and sign to craft images that figuratively read like Mallarmé or Poe. Moses also seems interested in alchemically mixing symbolic messages with painterly phenomena in a work such as *Dog-Flip* (2009). The intimate conversations generated by this cabal of latter-day symbolists quietly sounds one of the major chords of the exhibition: that contingent sign and self-evident process, contemplative representation, and immersive abstraction are the shared means to navigate the roiling, subconscious sensibilities of both the American and Belgian painters present.

In her statements for the show, Rose draws a line-in-the-sand type of demarcation of this work from a postmodernist quagmire by “defining new modes of painting that reconstitute, rather than deconstruct the elements of painting in fresh new syntheses free of dogma and theoretical reduction.” The show contains compelling work which supports Rose’s significant re-implication of painting as a transcendent process, even if her claim to an epochal shift *past* postmodernism might seem premature. Rose’s considerable historical perspective gained from intimate experience of how successive trends in painting can capriciously deflate, reconstitute, and then often gain new traction qualifies her idiosyncratic stance. Some of the most compelling and radical turns in painting *will* have been made at a point of exhaustion with the status quo, rather than at a point of exuberant instantiation of its hegemonic zeitgeist. Ultimately, painting with a capital “P” offers its blank canvas to the future not as a discrete page in a proscribed chapter book, but as the continuous scroll of culture, disclosed ever again by the twists of unpredictable human gesture. As the Belgian painter Maet (1955 – 2000) has said, “Everything is painting. But Everything still has to be invented.”

Endnotes

1. Curator’s statement from the exhibition press release.
2. Paul Valéry, writing after World War I, had a premonition regarding American and European cultural relations that may or not be considered still relevant, “Not knowing how to rid ourselves of our history, we will be relieved of it by a fortunate people who have almost none. They are a happy people and they will force their happiness on us.” From *Extraneous Remarks* (1927).

McGlynn, Tom. “After, Ever After.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, 1 November 2016. [online]