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Walter Darby Bannard, *Yalta*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas.

## “Painting After Post-Modernism”

by Karen Wilkin

*On the recent exhibition at the Vanderborght and Cinéma Galleries.*

**W**hile visiting an old friend in Belgium, the art historian Barbara Rose met Roberto Polo, a Cuban-born, American-educated artist, connoisseur, and art collector who directs an important gallery in Brussels. I suspect the two dedicated art lovers initially found common ground in their shared disgust with the present-day art world and their dislike of the great majority of the art, usually termed Post-Modernist, deemed admirable and desirable by that art world. But what seem to have solidified their connection were the abstract paintings by contemporary Belgian artists that Rose saw in Polo’s apartment. Their authors were unknown to her, yet, she later wrote, she found their work “fascinating, and in

some strange way . . . oddly familiar.” The Belgians’ paintings seemed to embody values that Rose admired in the work of the American artists she had enthusiastically followed over the years—serious painters, committed to abstraction, whom she described as “making complex and layered works, requiring many years of skill and training.”

The highly individual, varied approaches of both the Americans who interested Rose and the Belgians she had just discovered posited fresh ideas about space, surface, and materiality in abstract terms, without rejecting the possibility of suggestive allusions and ambiguous associations. Unlike most contemporary art considered worthy of attention today, these works celebrated the act of painting itself instead of illustrating social, political, and ecological “issues.” Rather than deploying “alternative media” to present concepts that could be verbally stated, works of this kind emphasized the wordless physical expressiveness of more or less traditional painting media, often applied in untraditional ways. As a result, while completely of the moment, these paintings, both American and Belgian, suggested a seamless connection with the best modernist art of the past—an idea anathema to most Post-Modernists, who, while insisting that their work represents a rupture with the past, treat the history of art as a sort of grab bag to be pillaged at will, with the captured elements forced into the service of non-aesthetic concerns.

Rose and Polo began exchanging images of works by the American and Belgian artists they found compelling, acquainting each other with practitioners on two continents who, uncannily, seemed to be exploring similar ideas without any knowledge of one another. The question, of course, was whether these unexpected, unlooked-for affinities were evidence of a kind of under-the-radar-Zeitgeist or whether Rose and Polo had, as the gallerist put it, “unconsciously stumbled on the first international

pictorial movement in years.” However we choose to think about the relationships among the artists Rose and Polo presented to each other, their serendipitous discoveries were made visible in “Painting After Post-Modernism: Belgium–USA,” an extraordinarily ambitious, large, provocative exhibition organized by Rose: major works by eight American artists (Walter Darby Bannard, Karen Gunderson, Martin Kline, Melissa Kretschmer, Lois Lane, Paul Manes, Ed Moses, and Larry Poons) and eight Belgian (Mil Ceulemans, Joris Ghekiere, Bernard Gilbert, Marc Maet, Werner Mannaers, Xavier Noiret-Thomé, Bart Vandevijvere, and Jan Vanriet), elegantly installed in the Vanderborcht, a handsome 1930s industrial building in the center of Brussels, generously made available by the city; a concurrent installation of mainly smaller examples was on view at the Cinéma Galleries, an equally handsome, neighboring “alternative space.”<sup>1</sup> Seen in Brussels last fall, the show will travel to the Palacio Episcopal, in Málaga, Spain, this summer; other European venues are being arranged for the future.

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**T**he show presents Rose’s thesis with substantial numbers of works, usually spanning many years, by each artist, so that “Painting After Post-Modernism” could be described as a series of miniature one-person surveys, handsomely installed in the generous, well-lit spaces of the Vanderborcht. The placement of each grouping encouraged us to think about the connections among the exhibited selections, with the artists’ intentions and obsessions underscored by often informative wall-texts by the artists themselves or by critics and colleagues. Commonalities

became visible, yet, at the same time, the individual character of each artist's approach became equally clear, so that as we moved through the six floors of galleries surrounding the center light-filled atrium, we were constantly negotiating ideas about likeness and unlikeness, similarity and difference, even about what might possibly distinguish European art from American in an age of globalism and instantaneous worldwide communication. We noted common affection for the physical character of materials; richly inflected surfaces bore witness to the artists' fascination with the liquidity, responsiveness, or resistance of paint. We noted, too, repeated flirtations with illusionism; floating, angled planes hinted at perspectival rendering, while recognizable but often dislocated or fractured images presented more explicit suggestions of reference.

The conversations among the included artists were often surprising. The selection of works by Walter Darby Bannard, made between 1986 and 2016, announced how a series of rhythmically varied, unpredictable paint applications—combing, sweeping, scraping, wiping out, and more, always with overscaled, rather anonymous tools—could conjure up fictive planes that pulse against one another, making the literal surface of the canvas unstable, while, at the same time, declaring both the material character of the medium and the agency of the person manipulating that medium. Perhaps the most remarkable of Bannard's paintings on view, the most complex and intensely colored of the group, were the most recent, completed not long before "Painting After Post-Modernism" opened and only a few months before his death last year, at eighty-two. They combined elusive, widely dispersed pools and brushy patches of color, trickled lines, and bold, crisp-edged planes into a free-wheeling dance whose exuberance belied the painter's declining health at the time of their making. Bannard's work acquired new resonance when we encountered the mixed

media canvases of the much younger Belgian painters Mil Ceulemans and Bernard Gilbert (both born in the 1970s)—the former characterized by broad swipes and rows of controlled drips, overlaid with schematic, space-carving drawn planes and notes of rainbow hues; the latter by geometric figures and indeterminate color incidents hovering against grounds that fused the mechanical and the accidental. Bannard's concerns began to look not only personal but also entirely current, as if they had entered the consciousness of a new generation of artists on the other side of the Atlantic, despite their almost certainly never having seen his work. Something similar was intimated by the Antwerp-based Werner Mannaers's most recent paintings. A generation older than Ceulemans or Gilbert, Mannaers levitates colored angles, discs, and bars against densely patterned, complicated, obsessive grounds that evoke such contradictory sources as Australian Aboriginal painting, Northwest Coast Native American carvings, and Paul Klee.

In the same way, correspondences of attitude, along with flexible definitions of abstractness and reference, could be found when Ed Moses's repetitive, layered confluences of pattern and elusive images or Karen Gunderson's disquisitions on the color black, surface inflection, and now-you-see-it, now-you-don't imagery, were seen with the wide-ranging explorations of Jan Vanriet—everything from riffs on Cézanne's bathers to a vast "flame" strewn expanse that made us read Gunderson's evocations of night skies and tossing waves differently. Lois Lane's eerie, dramatic, overscaled images of flowers, fairy tale figures, and the occasional animal also began to take on new associations in this context, evoking the imperfect images of early photography as much as they did paintings.

At the other end of the spectrum were Melissa Kretschmer's pale, delicate constructed paintings, built of wood, vellum,

gesso, and gouache. From a distance, across the generous spaces of the Vanderborcht, Kretschmer's constructions read as elegant meditations on interval and proportion, enacted by horizontal expanses subdivided and punctuated by slender vertical bands of restrained color. As we approached, we realized the complexity of these subtle works, which proved to depend on shifts in level, both excavated and built up, so that our perception of the colored bars was altered by changes in plane. With closer inspection, we discovered nuances of surface, fragile edges, and evidence of aggressive manipulation of materials. Kretschmer's work spoke quietly, slowly declaring its presence among more raucous neighbors and more than holding its own. Among the Belgian artists, the closest cognate in mood, feeling, tone, and even, in some ways, material character, could be found, unexpectedly, in Marc Maet's strikingly diverse paintings. Like Kretschmer's pieces, Maet's canvases initially seemed reticent and pared down, but became more complex and assertive over time. Some were generous, seemingly neutral expanses of white and off-white, interrupted at wide intervals by touches of the brush, economical shapes, or words, sometimes reversed, as if to confound our relationship, as beholders, to the canvas. A few works proposed ideas about all-overness, darkness, and even the familiar tension between figure and ground. Maet died in 2000, a few days short of his forty-fifth birthday; the paintings at the Vanderbrought seemed like the efforts of a young artist dissecting his chosen discipline in order to discover its components. They made us wonder what he might have done next.

**Poons's authoritative, wildly inventive works summed up the thesis of the show.**

Provocative as most of the comparisons suggested by “Painting After Post-Modernism” were, the star of the show was unquestionably Larry Poons. Seventeen paintings made between 1979 and 2016 were gorgeously installed in the light-washed ground floor of the Vanderborcht. It’s not an overstatement to say that Poons’s authoritative, wildly inventive works, quite apart from their individual excellences, summed up the thesis of the show, embodying so completely all of Rose’s desiderata of complexity, layering, ambiguous space, and material richness that just about everything else included in the show risked being delegated to the role of supporting cast. All the works by Poons in “Painting After Post-Modernism” were made after he abandoned the meticulous optically unstable Dot and Lozenge paintings that first established his reputation, for an uninhibited exploration of the character of paint, perhaps even the essential character of painting itself. We began with the vast, horizontal *Tantrum 2* (1979), in which the sheer physical presentness of dense, sensuous paint and the evidence of its ability to flow conspire to convey deep emotion, intellect, and energy. The surface of *Tantrum 2* shifts from a crusty wall to a cascading curtain of rivulets. In the same way, the color shifts from warm rose, tempered by surface inflections, to a cooler rose-tinged hue, veiled by gray-brown rivulets and luminous gray stabs. As the selections made clear, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Poons further co-opted gravity as an agent of drawing, applying a staggering range of elements to the surface to interrupt the trajectory of the cascading paint, creating counter-rhythms and syncopations in walls of shifting, broken color. Poons’s works of the last decade or so, while no less chromatically unexpected or complex than his earlier poured paintings, are dominated by his hand. They are loosely woven out of urgent, vigorous brushmarks, now cursive and sweeping, now angular and syncopated. The resulting flickering webs of color, like complicated polyphonic music, seem to change

when we look away, reconfiguring themselves, in the absence of our concentrated attention, to create new rhythms, new concentrations of hues, new triggers for emotion; it's as if we heard different voices in the polyphony with each encounter. We can give ourselves over wholly to the pure sensuous pleasure of these paintings, but, at the same time, they make us acutely aware of both their radical originality and their importance within the history of recent art. Poons has taken abstract painting to new expressive extremes, while concurrently, his scintillating fabrics of strokes appear to expand on the implications of Jackson Pollock's all-over poured skeins. Poons's friend, Frank Stella, has described him as "a defender of painting, perhaps even *the* defender of painting," adding that, "In our time, no one has extended the range of pictorial expression more than Larry Poons." The selection at the Vanderborcht wholly supported those statements.

**R**ose's essay, in the lavishly illustrated catalogue accompanying "Painting After Post-Modernism," rehearses developments in the visual arts over the past half century or so, providing both a context for the works in the exhibition and an explanation of how the artists in the show challenge current norms. The wide-ranging essay compares the trajectories of European and American post-war art with some surprising observations that seem designed primarily to bolster the importance of the works included in "Painting After Post-Modernism." Rose describes Color Field painting, for example, as "preplanned and serial," in contrast to work—which she implicitly prefers—that permitted "the process of paint application and removal to provoke ambivalent and multivalent forms." While "pre-planned and serial" might hold for such Color Field painters as Kenneth Noland or Morris Louis, who used predetermined compositions to explore the permutations of color, interval, edges, and the like, it's less convincing applied to the elusive

paintings, both ethereal and substantial, of Jules Olitski. It's even less convincing in relation to the work of Helen Frankenthaler (usually credited as the originator of Color Field abstraction) who relied entirely on intuition and the manipulation of her materials—and about whom Rose wrote an early monograph. Throughout, the admittedly abrasive critic Clement Greenberg's ideas about modernist painting are discussed as prescriptive rather than descriptive; it's a common misunderstanding, but I expected Rose to know better. More interesting are her conclusions about the works she has selected. She lists as a "common denominator" among the Belgians and Americans "a new pictorial space that may be described as cosmic, dreamlike, or poetic, that is above all imaginative and not tied to the images of this world." Ultimately, she asserts, the "ambitious singular works" in the exhibition "in no way constitute an organized movement, but rather, individual strategies for survival"—an admirable attitude in today's art world, where monetary value largely overrides notions of aesthetic excellence.

**C**oda: the Americans in "Painting After Post-Modernism" are mostly much older than their Belgian colleagues. Rose explains this as reflecting the emphasis current American art schools place on concept, at the expense of anything else; only older Americans, she suggests, still care about aesthetics and the expressive possibilities of materials. Yet there are younger Americans, many of them women, striving to address the same concerns as the artists in the exhibit. I'd suggest that she and Roberto Polo investigate the work of Fran O'Neill, Jill Nathanson, Jackie Saccocio, and Cecily Kahn, for starters. Maybe "Painting After Post-Modernism" will have a sequel.

<sup>1</sup> "Painting After Postmodernism: Belgium–USA" was on view at the Vanderborght and Cinéma Galleries, Brussels, from September 15 through November 13, 2016.

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.

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