

Traffic in Abstraction

Gallery-Going: Philip Taaffe and John Bauer

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Abstract painting was spreading again this spring, much like the rest of the art market. It has suspended irony long enough to look for forgotten ancestors. It has abandoned disciplined geometry for the exuberant darkness of pixels, urban traffic, and installations. It has sought the textbook to explain away modern art.

Philip Taaffe and John Bauer allow abstraction to look garish or even banal, especially in reproduction. Yet they have grand designs of their own. Julian Lethbridge recalls Abstract Expressionism as a kind of crazy quilt. Jonathan Lasker keeps it simple as a graphic novel, with squiggly black lines and bright impasto in place of the fight scenes. Have they put aside the rigor of Robert Mangold for good, or have they just told it how to behave?

Totem and taboo

What do you get when you mix Op Art, drips, silkscreens, and Native American carvings? In the case of Philip Taaffe, you get aspirations to major abstract painting. This artist wants people to take him seriously.

Taaffe has not always evoked the big boys. In fact, he made a career taking them down a notch. He thrived before the alleged death of irony, with sickly hues and then some. His off-kilter pattern and decoration had more to do with Ross Bleckner or late Richard Pousette-Dart, than Abstract Expressionism like Pousette-Dart in white, much less the luminosity of the Pacific Northwest. The washes of saturated color beneath transferred images derived from Andy Warhol, but they held even Warhol and Warhol's influence at an ironic remove. Now, however, Taaffe is going for the knockout punch.

Taaffe is determined to awe. If that takes formal overload or a piling on of references, all the better. He works on a large scale, its vertical axis reinforced by the imagery itself, derived from totem poles. The repeated wheeling spikes could just as well belong to any civilization, however. If you share a politically correct concern for cultural imperialism, call it Native American. If you prefer something more fitting downtown, call it Tantric.

Taaffe can lay claim to ironic ancestors of a more recent sort, too. Warped or not, the patterns link his work to textbook abstraction. Adolph Gottlieb had totemic grids in the 1940s, and Sue Williams has been simulating Willem de Kooning in carpets of sex objects for some time now. Obscure, apocalyptic wallpaper fits with any number of younger artists, too, such as Matthew Ritchie. For good measure, one painting quotes Bridget Riley. Perhaps Taaffe, too, finds staring at his art for long a bit nauseating.

I still see art with a short attention span. Is he too good at last for conceptual art or the other way around? Taaffe now has too *many* concepts to take any of them all that seriously. And none has Williams's sharp eye for art history and mass culture—or, for that matter, de Kooning's.

Taaffe can boast at once of irony and tradition, like a kind of John Currin for abstraction. He can just run his art up the totem pole and see who salutes. Does a jpeg render it bland, accessible, or meaningless. Does a viewer's memory? At least this art looks better than in reproduction.

Black and silver

So does John Bauer's. His abstractions looked so boring in the invitation that I almost skipped his show. I almost walked out in no time, too, because their black and silver seemed so garish. Luckily, the sheer disconnect in my own reactions held me. In that alone, Bauer is on to something.

Banal and *ugly* may not sound like a recommendation, but they sum up the old "shock of the new." For skeptics, modern art still offers a choice between wallpaper and human excreta. With Marilyn and urine, Warhol managed both. So, in a sense, did Jackson Pollock with drips alone. Now, when art has to try that much harder to shock, Bauer crisscrosses the surface with everything in the book. From digital graphics, with pixels the size of a small insect, he builds to stencils, silkscreens, and brushwork. I could almost understand why a gallery handout crams in practically every theoretical framework since Plato, as if desperate to keep up—or perhaps desperate to rescue painting from banality and ugliness.

Bauer appropriates late Modernism's appropriations, but not its defiant plainness. He makes it hard to know what one is seeing and which technique is which. I could see little reason the paintings could not hang backward or upside down, other than his signature at the bottom. Even so, this gesture appears in reverse half the time. Bauer's palette suggests another kind of reversal, too, that of a photographic negative. But what have these simulacra inverted and reproduced?

With his weave of black lines over bright lights, one could be looking at Times Square through the old iron frame of the el. However, Bauer's images refuse to coalesce, not even into a representation of chaos. Count the sinister, all-seeing networks of Peter Halley and Robert Smithson's entropy as just more remnants of the past. Bauer gets away with a lot of echoes and a lot of debris without much variety or clarity, but perhaps that *is* their sense. Stranger still, after a while the unreal cities look halfway pretty. Who needs pure, banal, or ugly old abstraction anyway?

Actually, quite a few people, for the form is having yet another revival. As one sign of what is selling, Josh Smith's cheesy replay of Helen Frankenthaler made it to Chelsea's fanciest block. Without even working on all that large a scale, he filled both rooms of his West 24th Street gallery with large, facile brushstrokes of thinly applied, bright color and no apparent shape. They looked as if he had executed them all one morning—because, as Bill Clinton might say, he could.

Come to think of it, such a performance might translate into terrific conceptual art one day. For now, however, one must settle for stubbornly cheerful decoration, churned out quickly for a premium market. It adapts painting for the same novice buyers who fawn over Jeff Koons's puppies. Hey, someone has to keep abstraction alive. At least someone has to claim credit for doing so, especially when it sells like hot cakes.