

FEATURES ► ROUNDTABLE

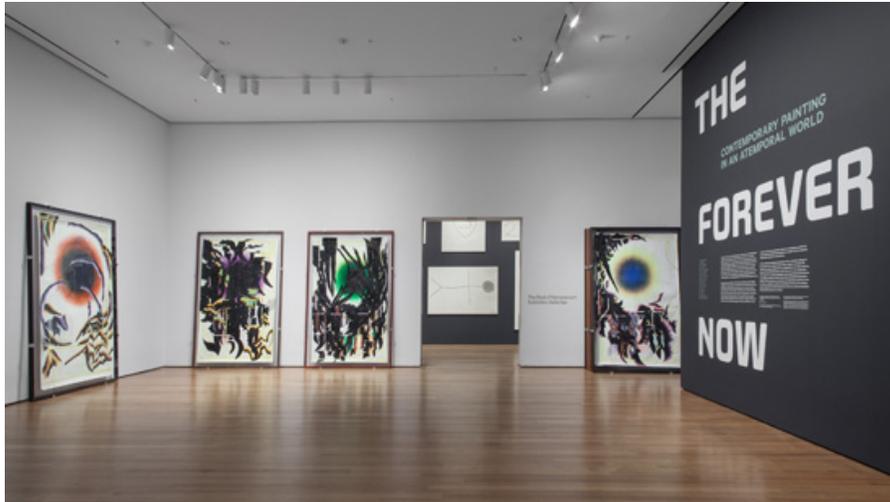
Monday, February 9th, 2015

Roundtable: "The Forever Now" at MoMA

by Nora Griffin

Moderator Nora Griffin is joined by Becky Brown, Dennis Kardon, Carrie Moyer, Raphael Rubinstein, and Jason Stopa to discuss MoMA's first survey of contemporary painting in 30 years.

The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World, organized by Laura Hoptman and Margaret Ewing, at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, December 14, 2014 to April 5, 2015.



Kerstin Brätsch installation in *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at MoMA

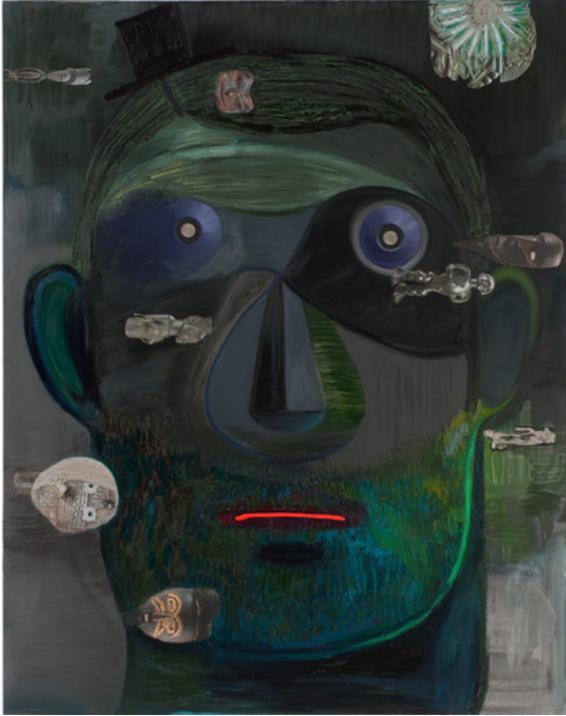
NORA GRIFFIN: My first response to "The Forever Now" was to separate the paintings from the show's conceptual framework of atemporality and emphasis on the digital present, because to me this language seem too reductive and denies the embodied experience of looking at and making a painting. It seems unjust to paintings to try and make them illustrate and speak to these broad, intangible, and global phenomena. Painting begins with a specific subjectivity, that of its maker, and I come to a painting to have a communion with that subjectivity. I think this is the first essay I've read where Zombies and Cannibals are celebrated instead of feared. Where's the human in all this? There was a pervasive "betterment through technology" refrain in Hoptman's text that was troubling because I don't think painters agree with this model. Painting has a ton of longing in it, the medium is a form of longing, and the burden (and joy) of history is not lightened by its digital accessibility. Laura Owens and Matt Connors were standouts to me in that they both seemed to push the medium forward with rigor, while keeping a human strangeness alive. And Amy Sillman's work had the presence of humility and calibrated choices. I'm wondering where each of you locate subjectivity in this show?

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN: Does painting have a greater capacity for longing or for subjectivity than any other medium? I don't think so. Surely a photograph, a video or an installation can embody as much (or as little) longing and subjectivity as a canvas. The properties specific to painting are, I think, of a different order (and, let me hasten to add, these specific properties encompass much more than allowed by the Greenbergian notion of "areas of competence"). My first response to this show's contention that contemporary painters are "atemporal" because they can so easily access the art of all periods and styles was to think: Didn't André Malraux make a similar observation in the late 1940s with his notion of the "museum without walls"? Inspired in part by Walter Benjamin, Malraux argued that photographic reproductions of artworks had made all periods equally available. It may be true that digital technology and the Internet have vastly expanded and accelerated our access to art history, but I don't think that "atemporality" is such a novel idea.

BECKY BROWN: It is easy to undermine the premise of atemporality in any number of ways, most obviously for its not being as new or original as the show claims. Of course related ideas are at the heart of quintessentially Modern movements like Futurism and Cubism, not to mention Postmodernism, but I give the show credit for attempting to tackle

something of what is undeniably unique about our current moment. Perhaps the word "atemporality" isn't quite right, but the range and quantity of information that we have access to every minute — and perhaps even take for granted — needs to be addressed. Along with access, it is the *form* (or formlessness) of this information that distinguishes our moment from earlier ones — libraries and museums present organizational systems while the Internet allows each individual to create his/her own in a space where information is ubiquitous but completely dematerialized.

JASON STOPA: I agree that the conceptual framework was somewhat limiting, but it remains that these works were made during a specific time in Western history. No doubt the cultural environment they were produced under has had some effect, consciously or unconsciously. The idea of atemporality seems to have some merit insofar as there seems to be a struggle to attach an over-arching narrative to our moment. Lately, I feel there are nearly as many sub-narratives in art as there are individual subjectivities. This may be closer to our lived sense of reality, but it also makes it difficult to apply a wide-reaching criterion. For me, the artists that embodied subjective concerns were Michael Williams and Nicole Eisenman. Both painters exhibited a few strange, quasi-figurative paintings that were formally exciting. Their resulting images struck me as irreverent and a little spooky.



Nicole Eisenman, *Guy Capitalist*, 2011, oil and cut-and-pasted printed paper on canvas 76 × 60". Collection Noel Kirnon and Michael Paley

DENNIS KARDON: Nora, I would like to expand on that a little, because I think you have hit the most troubling aspect of the show, which is the general attitude of the Modern to painting. First, for me the pantheon of the subjectivity you suggest, would be Charline Von Heyl (though not her best work), Sillman (looking better, and more focused than in her retrospective), Mark Grotjahn who for me is amazing, and Eisenman (whose work was curatorially pigeonholed in a way calculated to ignore just how strongly it's been animated by narrative). As a painter what fascinates me, looking at a painting, is parsing the huge number of decisions a painter continuously makes, builds on, revises. It is a perception-based process that directs, through those particularities of decision-making, the attention of a viewer. Those attention-directing decisions construct a consciousness that communicates with a viewer's consciousness. It is why I can look at a painting again and again — because these decisions not only can take on new meaning as the cultural context changes, but also as new ones reveal themselves. The fact that Eisenman's paintings were hung extremely high out of the range of intimate examination, and that Josh Smith's were exhibited in a big grid, as though no particular one was interesting, or that Kerstin Brätsch's huge paintings were stacked against the wall, or a bunch of Oscar Murillo canvases were piled on the floor to be "interacted with" by museum-goers, is indicative that to the curators at MoMA painting is just an idea, and not a physical communication of consciousness.

CARRIE MOYER: The notion of subjectivity has been changed by the Internet and digital culture in that we are now "curators" of our own influences. Therefore the Superfan is the normative, subject position from which to paint. (Just ask any art student who has had to map out their own artistic family tree.) Add this to the fact that contemporary painting continues to be self-reflexive — despite the long drubbing of Greenberg. In other words, information gathering (research) resulting in strategic positioning has become as big a part of one's subjectivity as any other social marker or life event. Perhaps this is why Eisenman, one of the least hermetic artists in "The Forever Now," and who very rarely speaks about her influences, gets a mere two paragraphs near the end of the Laura Hoptman's catalog essay.

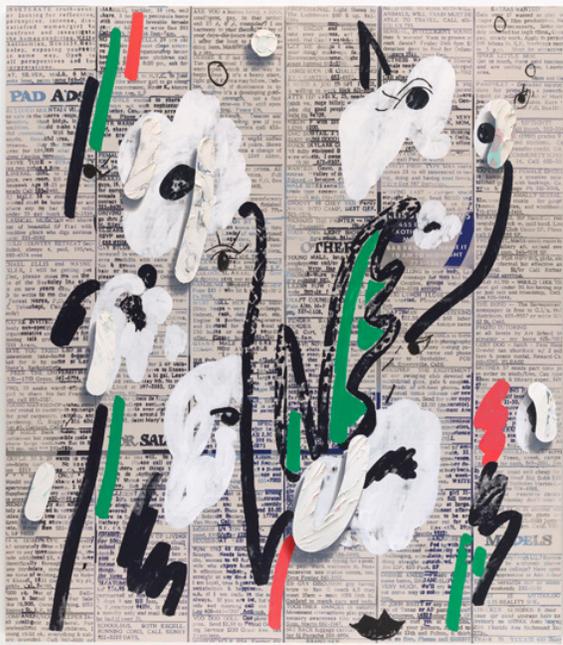
BROWN: I disagree that "unconventional" hangings and installations (Murillo, Brätsch, Smith, Connors, Eisenman, Joe Bradley) prevented individual communions with these works. I was happy to see painting open itself up to different modes of address. Certainly this is pretty common these days — as it should be — but I am hardly less likely to have a meaningful experience with a painting if it is propped rather than hung on a wall, as Brätsch and Connors made clear; or if it is hung in a group rather than by itself (as Bradley and Smith made clear). For me, there was an uncanny, maybe tongue-in-cheek picture of subjectivity in the theme of heads and faces, in different forms, throughout the show — physically present or notably absent. Eisenman's faces/masks most obviously; the obscured faces that were supposedly starting points for Grotjahn's sweeping compositions; the mask-like face that appears out of nowhere in Charline von Heyl's *Carlotta* (2013); the floating faces that keep coming to the surface in Michael Williams' paintings; and Michaela Eichwald's frightening Louis XIV-like face whose small scale and high placement on the wall makes it jump out like a nightmare in a window. Since there is very little figuration in this show, it felt relevant to me that much of it seemed to take this often ghostly or disembodied shape.

GRIFFIN: Becky's noting of the faces being the main figurative element represented in the show is really interesting. Were there any bodies? (And a side note, I agree with Dennis that I find Eisenman's groups of people, her "Beer Drinkers" series, carries more weight and social meaning than these disembodied heads. There's something definitely "spooky," to use Jason's word, about the heads, but also light and easily digestible.) I think the high hanging of many of the works made them unnecessarily monumental. Why do we have to see Bradley's paintings hung like they are resplendent with meaning on the first wall of the exhibition, when their only saving grace might be in their off-hand childlike whimsy, and whatever pleasure I could've gleaned from the work was dampened by the accompanying wall text's far-reaching references to Abstract Expressionism and Jungian imagery.



Charline Von Heyl, *Carlotta*, 2013, oil, synthetic polymer paint and charcoal on canvas 82 x 76." Promised gift of Michael Ovitz

object at all if it is not going to announce its status as such? I am not particularly invested in Smith's work, but I think the way he plays with presentation suggests a certain tongue-in-cheek humor.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, synthetic polymer paint and oil stick on canvas 137 3/8 x 119 7/8", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Enid A. Haupt Fund

but I don't believe that means that the search for originality and establishing criteria should be dismissed. This is a half-thought, so take it with a grain of salt, but I believe that what happens in the virtual realm is a kind of leveling. In the so-called democratic sphere of social media, where popular consensus equals good, and the good equals important/valuable, locating the important issues is tricky business for curators and critics to parse out.

MOYER: Our notion of subjectivity has to change as a result of how much time artists spend mining for data to support and/or differentiate their position and/or work. This occurred to me after I read this passage in the catalog essay: "Connors points to a genealogy of influences that includes artists from a large section of the postwar art-historical

KARDON: It was the desire to privilege this "unconventionality" of presentation that annoyed me, especially when it seemed designed to diminish the actual work. The salon-style Bradley installation, emphasized the iconic aspects and played down the awkward qualities and large scale embodied by the "Schmagoo" label that the works possessed when originally exhibited serially, at ground level, at CANADA in 2008 (and not really representative of the rest of his work). I have seen grids of Smith paintings that made more sense, but not these, again with the intention not to have to engage with any one of them. When Brätsch had about five of those giant frames stacked against a wall one on top of the other, why should I look at any one of them? Why does painting need to open itself up to "different modes of address" if not to try to make the presentation usurp the actual painting? Why don't we display books on the ceiling? Wouldn't that make them more exciting?

STOPA: I think this discussion surrounding the presentation of painting is interesting and appropriate given the manifold ways in which we view artwork today. Hoptman makes this statement early in her essay: "What atemporal painters do *not* do is use a past style in an uninflected manner, in other words, as a readymade." I would argue that this is actually what Murillo is up to, particularly in his choice to exhibit a work on the floor. In general, his work employs a set of all-too-familiar Neo-Expressionist mannerisms in a collage-like manner. Unfortunately for him, it produces diminishing returns. The issue in pulling from historical styles without understanding what that particular genre's conceptual aim was, is that it runs the risk of being an image that is simply "all dressed up." That is to say, it has the right look, but doesn't attempt to get any deeper than its artistic ancestors (both formally or conceptually). It's a surface-over-substance argument. The two aren't mutually exclusive, but if you don't satisfy the latter, then you might be making paintings for the quick read of a computer screen, which raises the question: why is it an

RUBINSTEIN: As Jason notes, the show was thick with revivals of past manners. Grotjahn = Jean-Paul Riopelle; Rashid Johnson = Antoni Tàpies; Julie Mehretu = Cy Twombly; Murillo = Julian Schnabel. To my eye, only one of these four painters, Grotjahn, offers enough newness (of content, technique, forms) to escape looking derivative. But Hoptman would have it that to make such comparisons, to insist on originality, to want something "new" is to fall into nostalgia for a vanished era. My question is: are we really in a cultural moment when originality doesn't matter? I would suggest that the old criteria are still operative. They certainly are for me. If Murillo seems to me the weakest artist in the show it is largely because his work doesn't seem to have made something new out of its obvious influences, and if Owens seems to me one of the strongest, it is because her paintings don't look like any I have seen before.

BROWN: I think we still desire originality in painting, despite its being supposedly passé. It is necessary not just as newness for its own sake, but because we want art that speaks specifically, and sincerely, to our time. Works that are not original cannot do this because whatever earlier ideas or styles they choose to rehash (or whatever variant on "re-" you want to employ, and Hoptman gives us a lot of options), cannot speak specifically to our time, unless the rehashing truly results in something new. I would agree about Owens' work stands out in this respect. Its alien-quality comes from the fact that it provokes new ways of seeing and thinking about our world: how we conceive depth and dimensionality today (2D, 3D and virtual space); the scale and architecture of the Internet, operations of reading versus seeing and their total integration; the new spectrum of HD sharpness for images, Photoshop filters, the difference between blurry, pixelated, grainy, etc. as ways of being out of focus, and so on.

STOPA: I like Raphael's comment here: "I would suggest that the old criteria [for originality] are still operative. They certainly are for me." I have to agree. We might be living in a creative free-for-all moment,

map: in addition to the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters whom he mentions generally, he cites Henri Matisse, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Feeley, Kenneth Noland, Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, Martin Barré, Olivier Mosset, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, Martin Kippenberger, Imi Knoebel and Sigmar Polke. Looking at one of his highly saturated monochromes in the color of a Los Angeles sunset, one can only agree, that against the better judgment of our teleologically programmed brains, all of the references are there." Kippenberger? Really? What contemporary abstract painter *hasn't* been influenced by Matisse? This list practically begs to be critiqued. There is no doubt that to become a really good painter, one must be catholic in the study of other painters. What makes Connors' list unique to the Age of the Selfie, is how completely it de-contextualizes and flattens the individual artists cited (both obvious and obscure) and converts them into data points on a personal rhizome. The sheer sweep of influences cited by Connors renders each one so nonspecific as to be meaningless.

BROWN: I agree with Carrie's point about the "flattening" of one's influences and references in a way that completely drains them of meaning. Similarly disheartening were the "data points" listed on the wall texts next to the works of Johnson and Richard Aldrich. How exactly do these paintings have anything to do with the Berlin Conference, *Black Orpheus*, Franz Kline or Kanye West? This list provides insight into his "personal rhizome," or his particular path through the Internet on a given afternoon, but has little relation to his own artistic output, which to me has little else to stand on. Works by von Heyl and Brätsch might be wise to put their references to Lucio Fontana and Polke aside for different reasons: their works speak strongly for themselves, and it's hard to hear them with all that background noise.



Amy Sillman, *Still Life 2*, 2014, oil on canvas, 75" x 66", Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Not new as a gimmick, but new as a radical departure from the everyday world outside the museum. For me, newness is equated with strangeness: is this a painting I have never seen before? As Becky and Raphael noted, Owens looked strong here because of the "alien quality" of her paintings, they cannot be readily equated with another painter or style.

KARDON: What exactly is our time? We have been conditioned to think it has something to do with (as Becky puts it): "new ways of seeing and thinking about our world: how we conceive depth and dimensionality today (2D, 3D and virtual space); the scale and architecture of the Internet, operations of reading versus seeing and their total integration; the new spectrum of 'sharpness' for images." But that leaves out a lot of life: all the relationships with other people, lovers, children, our relationship to growing old and dying, our fears, our sexuality and gender. If anything our time is about distraction, an inability to concentrate on anything for more than a short length of time. But despite the way our attention has been captured by the digital flattening, what stands out is what occurs in our experience of the physical world. We make our decisions of value and originality on what we experience physically, not digitally, which is why we all thought it was important to actually see this show rather than experience it on a screen. We might become aware of something digitally, but I don't think we really make a value decision about physical works of art unless we can experience them *in the flesh*. And, is our present moment forever? I think not. That is the paradox of positing an eternal present as a *zeitgeist*: it can't last forever.

GRIFFIN: I agree with Dennis about the human element missing from contemporary painting. This is what I was addressing in my first question about lack of a specific subjectivity in most work presented. But I would take a step to defend Owens' paintings as being about all of the human things you list (love, death, sex, time, and space), but her magic is that she makes them invisibly tied to the material and pictorial elements of her work. I found her paintings sad, almost tragic, they're not just a joyful celebration of the quirks of a computer screen and having fun with silkscreening; there is a pictorial content that comes from reading the words in the painting and meditating on the utter

absurdity of an Internet ad for a bird feeder with a two-way mirror that allows people to spy on birds eating. A thick blob of dark brown paint on the canvas was like the last remnant of something "living" in the work, but it could also be a stand-in for bird shit. I'm not equating her with Philip Guston, but the myriad of emotions and visual splendor that characterizes his work does have contemporary counterparts, we just have to open our minds to finding them through sustained looking.



Michael Williams, *Wall Dog*, 2013. Inkjet and airbrush on canvas. 82 1 1/4" x 67 6 1/8."

Private collection, New York. Courtesy CANADA

MOYER: It seems like one of the major anxieties of the past 20 years or so has been how painting will address, interact with, and/or avoid the digital. Computers have been ubiquitous in painters' studios for a long time now (no matter how "handmade" the work looks), one important tool among many. This seems to come as a surprise to many critics and curators — I would point you to Roberta Smith's review of Williams' show at CANADA where the majority of the text concerns itself with which parts of the picture are hand painted, spray painted or simply printed canvas. So if digital anxiety (the underside of "anxiety-free," fluid approach to history) is one of the subtexts of "The Forever Now," one could parse out all 17 artists in terms of their relationship to technology. One has to applaud MoMA for setting up Modernist painting in a manner that "problematizes" it in a new way, the investigation is limited to ideas we already know about the computer, i.e. a tool for graphic design and production (Owens), drawing (Williams, Sillman), and research (everybody else). The density of the installation attempts a cursory stab at how computers change the way we see paintings; even the jpegs of the installation look very similar to a screen of thumbnail images. The sight lines are set up on a grid as multiple windows that seem to slide in and out of view while moving through the space.

STOPA: One would hope that the first survey of contemporary painting at MoMA in 30 years would have been executed differently. The anxiety of the digital has been a topic of conversation ever since the computer came into the painter's studio. Ignoring it is not an option, but responses can and must be varied. Despite the technological condition that we live in, painters are still making objects. The project of museums, and I would argue of painting in general, is to set up conditions for sustained looking. Behind this, is the idea that the formal and conceptual content of a work reveals itself over time. And then there's the issue of space and place. The paintings in "The Forever Now," be they interesting or not, were so closely packed together that you could see everything and nothing at once. This sounds much like the arena of the Internet, where multiple browsers and images compete for quick attention spans. Doesn't this installation undermine everyone involved? It compromises the notion that the audiences' sustained

looking will reward them with an affect of emotional or intellectual import.

BROWN: When I first walked around the show I felt energized by the range of possibilities and the vitality it seemed to put forth for the medium. However, on reflection, the work actually felt more the same than different. What it seems to share, in addition to this fuzzy notion of atemporality, is a position of being anti-language, anti-narrative and anti-history, in the sense that, as Hoptman proudly explains, these artists sample history without taking any position or any real responsibility. I would put forth Mike Cloud and R.H. Quayman as two painters who both make sincere attempts to use language to communicate, tell stories and address history through research and understanding rather than name- (or image-) dropping. "The Forever Now" offers a lot of disembodied heads, empty masks and nonsense scribbles (the I-look-like-writing-but-I'm-not-saying-anything approach of Murillo and Mehretu) as an approach to dealing with a uniquely present past. I am left wondering if there might be more productive ways for artists to take advantage of the incredible, albeit terrifying digital archive at our disposal.

KARDON: It has been an amazing 33 years since Thomas Lawson published "Last Exit: Painting" in *Artforum*. The text is an exhaustive cataloguing of all the strategies that comprised (in 1981!) the scope of art making, and this is well before the digital era, and my question now, is has the situation really changed? In his text Lawson addresses the problem of "originality" in painting: "Whatever their sources, these artists want to make paintings that look fresh, but not too alienating, so they take recognizable styles and make them over, on a larger scale, with brighter color and more pizzazz. Their work may look brash and simple, but it is meant to, and it is altogether too calculated to be as anarchistic as they pretend." These words could be applied to many of the artists on view in "The Forever Now." In our discussion, as in all the reviews I have read, I intuit that we all feel there must be something better than this exhibition to represent the possibilities of painting to portray how it feels to be alive right now.

MOYER: I keep coming back to our daily interactions with the computer. If the jpeg is now the new normal for seeing, understanding and interacting with painting, what effect does it have in the studio? Should we be trying to make paintings that are flatter, more graphic, and look great rendered in only 256 colors? Facebook's "5-day Art Challenge" (where an artist is asked to post three new images of unseen work for five consecutive days) is an interesting case study because most of the work posted has not been widely (if ever) reproduced, so there's no assumption of prior familiarity. After watching the endless flow of images over the past few months, the biggest takeaway is that the jpeg is its own entity, a kind fuzzy approximation of specific information that reveals very little. Perhaps this is why artists feel the need to stake out their own personal rhizome of associations, as a means of filling in the physical, optical, emotional, intellectual information needed to understand what they have a stake. Of course, the problem with this solution is that it treats the studio as an "autonomous zone" free of critical context, where self-selected affiliations are often not inherent to the work *per se* and depend instead on sloppy material and/or formal equivalencies or mangled histories. In other words: I pour paint. So did Morris Louis. Therefore my work concerns itself with the history of Color



Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2013, oil on panel, 60 x 48", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Donald B. Marron

Field painting. Back to those checked boxes...

GRIFFIN: Is it still possible to frame a group of painters under a single rubric? Raphael's naming of "Provisional Painting" in his 2009 essay in *Art in America* gave us a chance to examine a group of contemporary painters within a historical context and described a phenomenon, "major painting masquerading as minor painting," that is open enough to include a range of painting styles and conceptual intents. Terms can be useful because we can argue for or against them; they allow artists to talk about something other than their own personal universe, to see themselves as a group, collective, cohort, whatever you want to call it. The singularity of the artist in the digital age is maybe one of the more disquieting aspects of "The Forever Now." Not to revert to nostalgia (a distinctly bad word in Hoptman's essay), but we have to acknowledge that artists do not mix and mingle in the same way that they did in a pre-Internet world. The proof is in the pudding right here, with this email-based discussion!

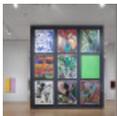
RUBINSTEIN: Thanks, Nora, for the shout-out. It suddenly occurs to me that maybe the real problem with this show is that it is a show of paintings! If, as Hoptman contends, we really do live in an "atemporal" moment, shouldn't this condition be evident in other mediums besides painting? Why wouldn't people who make sculptures, for instance, be equally subject to "this new economy of surplus historical references"? Although I have often been guilty of mono-medium grouping myself (writing articles about painting, curating shows with only paintings in them), I worry that every painting show risks reinforcing the notion that painting is a special case, a privileged medium, an activity that is constantly turning back in on itself. Maybe painting shows that are primarily about "painting," whether they come to celebrate it or to problematize it, help foster this exclusionary approach.



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