

**TRUMP**

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# The Perils of Painting Now

**Jed Perl**

SEPTEMBER 24, 2015 ISSUE

*The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*

an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, December 14, 2014–April 5, 2015

Catalog of the exhibition by Laura Hoptman. Museum of Modern Art, 184 pp., \$50.00

Like the reports of the end of history that we have been hearing, the many reports of the death of painting have no basis in reality. Painting flourishes—in the studios of artists, in galleries in New York’s Chelsea, Lower East Side, Williamsburg, and Bushwick, as well as in galleries around the world. Museums, whatever their ever-deepening engagement with installation and performance art and the cavernous spaces designed to accommodate such work, are hardly neglecting contemporary painting.

Since last summer, the Museum of Modern Art has presented a vast Sigmar Polke retrospective as well as “The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World.” A continuing fascination with painting fueled “In the Studio,” a historical survey of paintings of artists’ workplaces, mounted at the Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street over the winter. And this summer the New Museum—a New York institution that prides itself on its innovative programming—has organized a retrospective of the contemporary German painter Albert Oehlen. Although it sometimes seems that anything but painting is what arts professionals are most eager to put before the public, the truth is that when artists, critics, and curators want to take the pulse of contemporary art, painting inspires much of the deepest, most heartfelt, and heated discussion.

David Salle—a painter who came to prominence a generation ago, at another moment when painting was said by many to be dead—recently wrote that “the Web’s frenetic sprawl is opposite to the type of focus required to make a painting, or, for that matter, to look at one.” I think he’s right. And for this very reason painting becomes a steadying force—a source of stability in an art world where everything can seem to be up for grabs.



*Private Collection/The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation*

*Richard Diebenkorn: Studio Wall, 1963*

With performances, moving images, live and recorded music and sounds, as well as just about anything that can be pulled off the Internet appearing in the galleries, it is more difficult than ever before to grapple with the fundamental questions of style and meaning that are integral to art. The essentially plainspoken, artisanal nature of painting, which can't avoid registering all the pressures of the world around us, albeit sometimes by simply setting them aside, can help visitors to galleries and museums understand what is happening in art today.

It may well be this sense of painting's clarifying power that motivated the Museum of Modern Art to mount "The Forever Now," the first exhibition in the museum in at least thirty years that offered an expansive survey of contemporary painting. Laura Hoptman, who organized "The Forever Now," says as much in her introduction to the exhibition catalog. "The obsession with recuperating aspects of the past is the condition of culture in our time," she declares, "yet it appears in contemporary art at this moment most clearly in the field of painting." Although Hoptman and I do not agree when it comes to how to evaluate contemporary painting—we are interested in very different artists—I can see that we are reacting to the same seismic shifts.

For hundreds of years—probably since the Renaissance—a painter's style has implied a certain set of values, with Classicism, Romanticism, Naturalism, Cubism, and Expressionism each reflecting a generally agreed-upon worldview. In today's anything-goes art world a particular pictorial style no longer implies a particular worldview or set of values. Style has been dissociated from substance, so that while for one artist classicism still represents the timeless order it did for Poussin, for another artist classicism is a camp joke about the banality of history, and for yet another its muffled emotions suggest robotic, posthuman anomie. It is no longer enough for an artist to begin by embracing a style. Now an artist who believes in the inextricable link between style and substance has to almost single-handedly reconstruct the substance of that style.

**B**ut there is another approach, popular today and embraced by Hoptman. An artist can

forget about substance and celebrate style for its own sake, which seems to me to be the case with most of the painters in “The Forever Now.” Among them are Charline von Heyl, Laura Owens, Josh Smith, Mary Weatherford, and Michael Williams. Hoptman, who has brought these artists together along with a dozen others, believes that “the immediate and hugely expanded catalogue of visual information offered by the Internet has radically altered visual artists’ relationship to the history of art.” Style—and the substance it once implied—has become a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. And this phenomenon—which she dubs “atemporality,” a term borrowed from the science-fiction writer William Gibson—has created, she writes enthusiastically, “a *connoisseurship* of boundless information, a picking and choosing of elements of the past to resolve a problem or a task at hand.” In my view, the process Hoptman describes—I would characterize it as closer to scavenging than connoisseurship—has had a debilitating effect on both the artist’s and the audience’s relationship with questions of style.

Confusion reigns. Let me give an example. Recently, the Gladstone Gallery presented an exhibition of rather accomplished paintings by Victor Man, a Romanian artist who was born in 1974 and has shown a good deal in Europe. Each of Man’s small, dark, realist figure paintings includes a highly disturbing twist, such as a face with a third eye or a woman’s head in the lap of a woman whose own head we don’t see. The canvases suggest the dour sobriety of works by half-forgotten Neo-Romantics of the 1930s and 1940s, especially Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugene Berman. I was interested in Man’s paintings—and befuddled by them as well. I had no way of knowing if he meant me to take his capable, prosaic realism at face value, with the absurdist or Surrealist elements suggesting impinging nightmares, or if the violations of realistic logic were meant to mock realism itself. Style offered no guide to substance. I left the gallery bemused.

I am not the only one who is bemused by a lot of contemporary painting. Among the most widely read essays and reviews that have dealt with painting in the past few years there are more than a few that at least begin in a state of bewilderment. The critic Raphael Rubenstein, in his much-discussed essay “Provisional Painting,” writes about a group of abstract painters—they include Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilmann, Albert Oehlen, and Christopher Wool—who “all deliberately turn away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse.”\* Rubenstein wonders: “Why would an artist demur at the prospect of a finished work, court self-sabotaging strategies, sign his or her name to a painting that looks, from some perspectives, like an utter failure?” The styles of the works to which Rubenstein refers have become enigmas, even to those in the know. An assortment of clever terms—almost sobriquets—have been devised to describe the anti-styles and un-styles in painting, among them Crapstraction and Zombie Formalism.

Sometimes it seems that the only way painters have of adequately conveying their sense of crisis is by attacking the basic elements of previous works of art, doing away with paint,

canvas, and a stable support. A few years ago, the Luxembourg & Dayan gallery hosted a show of “Unpainted Paintings,” featuring works made using Kool-Aid, urine, fire, and silver foil, on supports that included a piece of shag rug. Massimiliano Gionio, the New Museum curator who organized the retrospective of Albert Oehlen’s work, which is a mash-up of glib pop culture references and scabrous abstract brushwork, writes that the artist’s goal is “to paint while at the same time denouncing the inadequacy of painting.” Painting remains the primal artistic act, which certain artists apparently seek to violate and even annihilate. Oehlen’s canvases, with their silk-screened digital images and scraps and scrawls of paint, manage to be simultaneously brash and bland. Oehlen, Gionio observes, “paints against painting—he paints to kill painting.” But painting will survive.

Looking at the work of the seventeen contemporary painters Hoptman gathered together in “The Forever Now,” my feeling was that style was mostly designed to function as a bulwark, screen, or curtain. The show opened with works by Joe Bradley that could only in the most tenuous way be referred to as paintings. Each consists of a minimal sign—a rudimentary cross; the number twenty-three; a stick figure—inscribed in grease pencil on bare canvas.

While Bradley certainly presents an extreme case of visual emptiness, even the painterly pleasures offered at “The Forever Now” suggested not so much sensuous openness as narcissistic resistance. The thickly worked compositions of Mark Grotjahn, with their elaborately tangled and riotously colored skeins, swags, and drapes of paint, evoke grandiose rope tricks or an Arabian Nights caravan. Although Grotjahn knows how to engage the eye, the engagement is somehow sterile, a visual game or puzzle without any discernible emotional texture. Are Grotjahn’s pictures gladdening or saddening? I cannot say.

In her catalog essay, Hoptman summons that most fashionable of images—the zombie. “The undead,” she writes, apparently in dead earnest, “are the perfect embodiments of the atemporal.” And she goes on to argue that

the metaphor of the zombie—a resurrected body without a soul that feeds on other bodies—is useful: it evokes the voracious hunger for ideas and images from the past that, in some paintings today, are consumed, digested, and re-presented in guises that resemble their original forms, but are somehow changed.

But most of the artists in “The Forever Now” have a sense of history that goes back no more than a couple of generations—which is a split second in the history of art. Painters such as Matt Connors, Charline von Heyl, Julie Mehretu, Josh Smith, and Michael Williams seem mostly aware of Abstract Expressionism and the various developments, from Pop to Minimalism, that arrived in its wake. For them, tradition is puddle deep.



Hoptman may feel that in presenting what she calls “the zombie paradigm”—and she admits it can be seen as a “pejorative”—she is making a case for a changed understanding of the role of the artist, much as Oscar Wilde did when he troubled late Victorian audiences by comparing works of art to masks. Wilde’s idea was that the stylizations of the mask revealed a truth that was dissembled by life’s quotidian confusions. For Hoptman, truth is itself a kind of confusion, which artists reflect through their willful eclecticism. Closing her essay, she writes of artists who are “in search of a broader, bolder notion of culture.” The paintings she brings together, to the extent that they are not merely bland (which many of them are), function as mirrors of contemporary turmoil; personal style tends to reflect many of the styles chronicled on the Internet. What is lacking is pictorial style as a guide to private feelings, private emotions. And that is a great loss—the greatest loss of all.

Hoptman’s fascination with atemporality put “The Forever Now” on a collision course with painting itself, which is nothing if it is not timebound, the workings of the artist’s hand at a particular moment, attesting to the authenticity of the artist’s experience. In painting, the autograph of the artist—the sense of the surface as constructed piece by piece—is an assurance of authenticity. Of course authenticity can also become a trap, an oppressive expression of the narcissistic personality. This is an idea that was argued quite forcefully by Lionel Trilling in a fascinating series of speculations, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, presented as the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1970 and published in book form in 1972. I had never read *Sincerity and Authenticity*—the title suggested a critic who was resolutely burying his head in the sand at a time when camp and kitsch were already entrenched—but after the stylistic free-for-all of “The Forever Now,” Trilling’s ideas seem to have a contemporary point.

Most substantial conversations about painting today—they often appear online, in magazines such as *artcritical*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Painters’ Table*, and on Raphael Rubinstein’s blog *The Silo*—cannot avoid the question of authenticity, whether explicitly or implicitly. As for sincerity, the other pillar of Trilling’s discussion, however alien it may be to contemporary sensibilities, he persuades me that it is, in the complex sense he means it, precisely what is missing in a lot of contemporary painting. Reading *Sincerity and Authenticity* now, more than forty years after it appeared, I realize that far from blindly upholding values already imperiled when he was writing, Trilling was writing out of an awareness that the time had come to decide what might still be worth saving. While *Sincerity and Authenticity* is far from a complete



Adam Reich/Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York City

Brett Baker: Night Table, 2013–2015

success—Trilling goes off on too many tangents, his wide-ranging ideas sometimes drawing attention away from the arguments they are meant to advance—the book is a bold provocation.

Trilling's argument was grounded in the strong opposition he saw between the nature of sincerity and the nature of authenticity. Sincerity, according to Trilling, is essentially social, "the necessity of expressing and guaranteeing" oneself to the public. Authenticity is a very different matter, an obsession with individual experience that Trilling believes has in modern times come more and more to overwhelm sincerity. Sincerity involves a "rhetoric of avowal"—a balancing, somehow, of "the troubled ambiguity of the personal life" and "the unshadowed manifestness of the public life." In this sense sincerity has much in common with pictorial style, which at least traditionally can be seen as reconciling the artist's inner experience with the public world. Artistic style is a public avowal.

In the 1970s, Trilling wanted to warn against the excesses of authenticity and reaffirm the importance of sincerity. He sees authenticity as emphasizing the individual's insistence on being true to "the troubled ambiguity of the personal life"—social norms can be challenged or put aside. He argues that the modern idea of authenticity grew out of an awareness of "how ruthless an act was required to assert autonomy in a culture schooled in duty and in obedience to peremptory and absolute law." But he fears that the dialectical pressure between sincerity and authenticity that originally gave modernism so much of its vitality was collapsing by the 1960s, replaced with an unfettered worship of authenticity, which could lead only to anarchy.

What was being lost was the dynamic relationship between sincerity and authenticity that had given the work of an artist such as Cézanne its slow-building power. For Cézanne, the sincerity of his commitment to traditional stylistic legibility was constantly challenged by the authenticity of his idiosyncratic experience of nature. It is Cézanne's double allegiance—to the sincerity of tradition and the authenticity of his own perceptions of form—that has made his work central for artists from Matisse, Picasso, and Braque down to our own day.

We cannot even begin to determine the authenticity of a painting until we have some sense of the artist's character—of the quality of the artist's sincerity. This brings me back to how utterly confounding I found Joe Bradley's glib graffiti in the "Forever Now" exhibition. Bradley's style—if we can call it that—is so stripped down that it offers no way to even begin to judge what Trilling called "attitude and posture." But it is not easy to judge the sincerity or authenticity of a work of art even when one is given more stylistic evidence. This is because in the arts what Trilling referred to as "peremptory and absolute laws" are never entirely peremptory or entirely absolute, at least not when they have any expressive value.

Some have argued for a return to traditional skills in painting and drawing, to what Robert Hughes once called “the nuts and bolts of the profession.” While there is much to be said for the skills on which Hughes insisted—for what Trilling might have called a legible rhetoric—we are all also perfectly aware that neither proficiency nor virtuosity is in and of itself a guarantee of either sincerity or authenticity. We know this from the history of art. Anthony Van Dyck, who was every bit as much a virtuoso as Rubens, can nonetheless strike us as glib and insincere in his mastery, something we hardly ever feel with Rubens. The awkwardness of the figure drawing in many of Claude Lorrain’s landscapes and in some of Poussin’s later pastorals may by some standards be judged a failure of proficiency, and yet the artists marshal their weaknesses (if that’s what they are) as a guarantee of both authenticity and sincerity.

To the extent that virtuosity can be seen as reflecting a respect for exacting standards, it is a form of sincerity. Certainly, this is how it was often interpreted during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. And yet virtuosity can also be a form of obfuscation, insincerity, or inauthenticity. Just think of the virtuosity of John Currin, the most tongue-in-cheek of contemporary figure painters. Currin’s nudes, with breasts and thighs so smooth and shiny as to suggest porcelain dolls, are a parody of erotic delight. His confectionary pink flesh and glittering highlights have a conventional “finish” that feels glib and perfunctory. With Currin, virtuosity is a sly gambit, not a hard-won accomplishment. Sincerity and authenticity must be communicated through a pictorial struggle, through the ways that stylistic traditions and qualities of line, color, and composition are embodied, enriched, and transformed. That’s missing in Currin.

One younger painter I think is really grappling with these difficult questions is Brett Baker. He was born in 1973 and has been showing his abstract canvases at the Elizabeth Harris Gallery in recent years. I have seen these small, heavily impastoed pictorial inventions a couple of times, with deepening interest and admiration. Their tight-packed, elongated rectangular forms—which are invariably based on a rather simple grid—bring to mind some of the layered compositions of Paul Klee as well as some of the textiles of Anni Albers. Working with orchestrations of jewel-rich blues, purples, and reds or forest-deep greens, oranges, and browns, Baker builds images that are simultaneously luxuriant and austere; the thickness of the paint is set in a tension with the limited nature of his structures. The vertically and diagonally aligned strokes of paint suggest geological layerings. The paintings have a Limoges-enamel intimacy.

I report my impressions of Baker’s paintings in a speculative spirit. He sets his work securely within a tradition of geometric abstraction, and he embraces that tradition with a virtuosity that leaves us at the very least with a sense of his deep and considered commitment—with a sense of his sincerity. He carries off his chosen style with considerable panache. As for the more complex question of meaning, of emotion—of the work’s truth to something within—I feel it remains an open question. My second encounter



with Baker's work in a couple of years suggests that its style, however limited, registers an emotional amplitude through the growing confidence of his stained-glass color, with its plangent, mysterious tonalities.

Much of the trouble in the visual arts today comes from our increasing dependence on the Internet, where all the richness and complexity of an artist's painterly surfaces is reduced to pixels. Paintings are flattened out by the Internet. And the paintings that "take" to digital reproduction almost invariably trump the ones that demand the direct response of a human eye. The Internet, with its clicks and links, threatens to deny us the gradual, evolving, unmediated acquaintance with an artist's actual work that I've had with Baker's. In order to understand an artist's work, we need repeated opportunities to see how qualities of surface and texture—what might be called *facture*—do and do not reflect deeper impulses.

No recent exhibition in New York has represented more of an effort to reestablish some contact with the bedrock of painting than the extraordinarily ambitious "In the Studio: Paintings," mounted for the Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street by John Elderfield, formerly chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. A parallel show, "In the Studio: Photographs," was at Gagosian on Madison Avenue, curated by Peter Galassi. In Chelsea, Elderfield brought together works from the sixteenth century to nearly the present, and in his catalog essay he also discussed the studio paintings of Velázquez, Vermeer, and Courbet. Elderfield emphasized the etymological relationship between the studio and the idea of study, the studio as a place where artisanal and intellectual impulses are united. He underscored this idea with a powerful quotation from Delacroix, who envisioned the studio as a place where "nature" would be reimagined by "human genius at the apogee of its development."

"In the Studio," while too diffuse to be an altogether successful experience, tapped into the longing that so many people now feel for painting's primal power. In the Western tradition—where at least since the end of the Renaissance painting has been the essential visual art—the studio has become the place where questions of artistic sincerity and authenticity and their relationship are resolved. Even Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum curator whom nobody would accuse of being unwelcoming to new media, finds himself commenting in the catalog for the Albert Oehlen exhibition that

it is ironic—if not downright depressing or, perhaps, sadly illuminating—that one of the best descriptions of what life in the digital era feels like had to be captured in the old medium of painting rather than in some new, hyper-technological invention.

What I believe Gioni—and Laura Hoptman—are unable or perhaps embarrassed to see is the source of painting's enduring strength. Painting, with its many intertwined conventions, provides models of sincerity through which individual painters can communicate their particular experiences, attitudes, ideas, and ideals.

Among the most striking works Elderfield included in “In the Studio” was Richard Diebenkorn’s *Studio Wall* (1963; see illustration on page 55). For me this dark-toned canvas evokes the coffee-and-cigarette melancholy of fog-bound afternoons in Berkeley, California, where Diebenkorn painted some of his finest canvases in the years around 1960. Diebenkorn gives us a very austere view of the studio, with a humble folding chair and behind it the studio wall, on which a selection of the artist’s drawings has been hung, at least three of them figure studies. Among the objects leaning against the wall are probably a couple of canvases. This is a painting about the processes of the studio: the drawings that may or may not lead to paintings; the paintings that are unfinished or finished or abandoned; the chair on which to sit and draw or sit and reflect on the act of painting.

It is a wonderfully grave composition. The modest austerity with which Diebenkorn renders the various elements in his studio assures the authenticity of the artist’s experience, even as the subtle elegance of the composition guarantees the sincerity with which he addresses his audience. It’s no wonder that Diebenkorn, who died in 1993, is a painter for whom so many contemporary artists have especially warm feelings. He recognizes the perilous state of painting. He makes a painting that unmakes and then remakes painting’s traditions. While those traditions are very much under attack today, the challenges coming from so many different quarters only serve to reaffirm painting’s extraordinary vitality.

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\* *Art in America*, May 2009. ↵