

HYPERALLERGIC

The Line Is a Circle: Painting at the Threshold



by Jason Stopa
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Jackie Gendel, "Between the Acts" (2013) (courtesy of Horton Gallery)

Liminal \ˈli-mə-nəl\; *of or relating to a sensory threshold.*

I was born in 1983. Just shy of my 31st birthday, it occurred to me that somewhere after 1984 — virtually my entire lifetime — painting disappears almost entirely from most books on contemporary art history.

You've heard the arguments: That painting's objecthood is too complicit with a hyper-capitalist system. Or that painting is an outmoded medium devoid of relevance in contemporary society. What can I say ... haters gonna hate. Yet, taking these arguments seriously, one could counter, as demonstrated by Marina Abramović's and Chris Burden's recent retrospectives in New York, any form of art can be sold to the highest bidder.

Painting's disappearance is more than a Puritanical aversion to the sensuality of Matisse, or a response to Descartes' mind/body problems. Rather, it finds its roots in the privileging of the analytic mind over human emotion. I'm not arguing that the cornerstones of analysis — deduction and rationale — are to be

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avoided. The problem is that analytic thinking can also build ivory towers. History has taught us that such totems are eventually abandoned and left to crumble.

In contrast is emotional intelligence — perception, intuition and associative reasoning. Here is where we grasp reality. And what is reality if not a series of fleeting chance events. Underscoring those events is a complex emotional web that takes in desire, dreams, memory and the ineffable sensations of the present moment. Beyond the particularities of our respective identities, we know ourselves in the world by being with others in the world. Experience is acquired by touching and being touched, holding and being held, crying and laughing, aging and dying. Life is tactile.

Visual intimacy is among the most honest, primal relationships we have with our perceptual world. Edmund Husserl referred to the concept as bracketing: taking a fragment of our perceived world to examine its underlying essence. In doing so, we form a relationship between self and image that is naked, without assumption, without pretense.

When we approach visual art with this kind of intent, we open ourselves up to its vast range of subtlety. In our technological age, we are in retreat from direct experience, choosing instead the anodyne interactions of virtual realities. The danger here is one of emotional import. We understand our world by engagement with others and through the firsthand experience of events. Virtual interactions, by their nature, are not physical at all. Such interactions allow no room for the sacred — mystery, emotion, spirituality and sexuality. Intuition predates the analytic mind. And it is at threat in a culture that values logic over emotion. It is at threat in an art world that values conceptualization over visual intimacy.

The key to significant painting in a problematic time lies in its ability to be liminal. Liminality doesn't build the highest tower; it creates connections. If we look at history as a circle, instead of as a line, we open up possibilities. In basic geometry, we can draw a line between any two points of a circle and the distance remains the same. What the Postmodernists fail to recognize is that painting, along with any other art, is without a telos, that is to say, an endpoint outside of itself. There is no endpoint on the line. And further still, there is no line, only points on a circle.

A group of artists as different as Katherine Bradford, Katherine Bernhardt, Peter Gallo, Jackie Gendel and Merlin James has taken the helm of a certain kind of painting that seeks to mend our fragmented relationship with images. For years they operated on the periphery of the art world. Loosely grouped as figurative painters, their work engages the liminality of painting practices. They have found new models for figuration that neither evoke the ironic pastiche of 1980s Neo-Expressionism nor replay the heroic, expressive heyday of early 20th-century Expressionism.

They've done this by scouring the perimeter of the narrative for what had been marginalized, and finding in it new ways to advance. Their range of influence includes fashion magazines, urban culture, Moroccan rugs and Aboriginal art. Their imagery is by turns personal, poetic, humorous, bold, but most of all, without pretense. Collectively, their work demonstrates a shift away from analytic thinking in contemporary art. And it should come as no surprise that the majority of painters advancing this dialog are women.

Liminal painting seeks to capture sensations and thoughts in order to distill them into basic formal languages that anyone can access. It emerges not as a stylistic movement per se as much as it is a tendency to create tangential relationships through imagery. In doing so, it collapses long held distinctions. Twentieth-century figurative painting maintained a unified sense of style. Liminality is concerned with varied tactile sensations, capturing atmospheres and bridging the abstract and representational. In the process, these artists are creating works that are neither retroactively utopian nor fashionably disaffected.

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In the West, the rise of conceptualization, however ill-fated, grew out a utopian impulse, which eventually slipped into the ether of technology, where it was co-opted by a capitalist system and reintroduced as identity/commodity fetishism. Platonically speaking, we imaginatively project utopia every day — the ideal partner, house, job — and attempt to realize that which exists only in the mind (utopia), forever falling short.

The Internet, however, allows us to vicariously live out our individual utopias. Our dreams can be realized, albeit without a corporeal body, engendering a state of suspended bliss without satisfaction from direct experience, and ultimately without fulfillment.

Utopian idealism, with its series of failed revolutions, was the modernist cross. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, there were systems of hierarchy (primarily political and religious) reinforced through pictorial narratives. With the waning influence of the Church, painters replaced religion with a secular metaphysics, which was replaced by the sublime, replaced by romanticism, replaced by mysticism, replaced by existentialism, replaced by formalism, then nothingness. We wanted to empty painting out. It was the search for the absolute, if the absolute can ever be found.

And then along come the 1980s, where we attempted to bring everything in. Art sought banality, the everyday, graffiti, pornography, humor, media, technology, the grotesque, the horrific. The seeds of Pop Art came to fruition in '80s pluralism and flowered through the '90s into the cultural anthropology we see in so many galleries today. Artists who advanced a particular painterly dialog, like Elizabeth Murray, Mary Heilmann, Howard Hodgkin, and Jonathan Lasker, or geometric tendencies like Linda Francis, Dan Walsh, Al Held and Helmut Federle, until recently, were patently ignored.

For the present, our sophisticated mediums of fragmentation lead to detachment; detachment from oneself and others. In a sense, contemporary society is pulling apart the evolutionary threshold formed by interdependence, and not by an absurd dream of self-sufficiency. Long ago, someone first began creating "art" secure in the knowledge that someone was paying attention. And that their hearts beat to the same sensitivity, however briefly, to feel close.