

In his 1995 video *Painter*, [Paul McCarthy](http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/20/paul-mccarthy/biography/) (<http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/20/paul-mccarthy/biography/>) is dressed as a disturbing, overblown absurdist cliché of an artist and is filmed in a cheap studio. He smears paint on a canvas with an oversized brush, mumbling “God” and blowing raspberries. He rubs a giant paint-tube against a canvas with his body like a sexed-up cat against a pole. The result is an abstract painting – the most ridiculous form of artwork McCarthy could think to parody. Yet over ten years later something has happened. Abstract painting feels fresh again.

Contemporary abstract painting is different to previous incarnations for a few reasons. It did not emerge in opposition to representational painting. It's not like we are living in times where painted images of the world are dominant. The grand history of paint is also not the point. It's almost 100 years since [Kazimir Malevich](http://www.kazimir-malevich.org/) (<http://www.kazimir-malevich.org/>) painted “[Black Square](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Malevich_black-square.jpg)” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Malevich_black-square.jpg), and its utopian aspects feel old-fashioned. Gone is the enticing communist idea that anti-representation meant anti-establishment. The modernist abstract paintings of the 1930s and 40s, the minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s, even the neo-abstract of the 1980s seem long past. And yet regular visitors to exhibitions or art fairs today can't help but notice the prominence of abstract artworks on the walls.

[Bob Nickas](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/bob_nickas/) (http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/bob_nickas/), a brilliant American art writer whose book *Painting Abstraction* (<http://www.phaidon.com/store/art/painting-abstraction-9780714849331/>) was published by Phaidon in 2009, argues that contemporary abstract paintings form an image of how the world feels. As he explains, “If one task of representation is to show us how the world looks, abstraction is free to do something else, and reflecting our sense of the world, rather than what's otherwise visible to the naked eye – whether on the part of the painter or the viewer – is key to its perpetual attraction.”

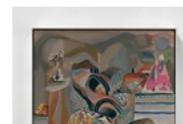
This spring a number of shows on the subject in major institutions give a serious stamp to contemporary abstract art. Painter Painter at Minneapolis's [Walker Art Centre](http://walkerartcentre.org) (<http://walkerartcentre.org>) is exhibiting new work by 15 abstract painters, including [Katy Moran](http://www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/katy-moran/) (<http://www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/katy-moran/>), [Molly Zuckerman-Hartung](http://www.mollyzuckermanhartung.com/) (<http://www.mollyzuckermanhartung.com/>) and [Matt Connors](http://mattconnors.info/) (<http://mattconnors.info/>). The show is intended as a snapshot of studio practice. “I think there's a sense of optimism in painting today that we've been lacking,” co-curator Eric Crosby points out. “The weight critically that's always implied by every gesture in the history of painting is dissolving in ways that are opening up new possibilities for the medium.”

Abstract Generation: Now in Print (<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1342>) at MoMA in New York brings together abstract print works in the museum's collection by artists including Wade Guyton, Haegue Yang and RH Quaytman. The show highlights a real sense of cross-media experimentation around contemporary abstract art. “There is certainly something significant about the era of image manipulation, Photoshop and now Instagram filters,” MoMA assistant curator Kim Conaty says. “There is a new relationship with the idea of image itself and with imagemaking, which I think also plays into this.”



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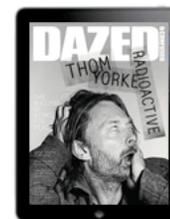


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SWIPE THIS ISSUE





Untitled, 2012, Alex Hubbard

So why abstraction now? It's not just the fickleness of fashion and taste. The most obvious attraction of abstract paintings is as a reaction against technology. It reflects our need for objects in a screen-based world. Real colour in paint is incredibly different to what you get from an inkjet printer or pixel. There's something about material realism that these paintings bring to the fore. Texture as an antidote to the texturelessness of our lives.

A good example of the appeal of texture is the work from New York-based painter [Keltie Ferris](http://hortongallery.com/artist/keltieferris) (<http://hortongallery.com/artist/keltieferris>). Her luminescent spotted canvases are layered with acrylic paint, oil pastel, oil paints applied with palette knives and spray-can splatters of colour. Layering is integral to Ferris, who desires to give "every square inch of the painting equal love and attention." Although her work appears non-representational, for Ferris the abstract results do relate to real things. "It's not just lines," she explains. "I'm really interested in radiation, like an energy bouncing around a canvas. Or I'll want them to stack up like a tower, like a monument."

Looking at the vibrancy and intensity of colours Ferris uses, it makes sense that she studied at Yale under [Peter Halley](http://www.peterhalley.com/) (<http://www.peterhalley.com/>), an abstract artist known for fluorescent graphic paintings that explore ideas of circuitry and systems. "I think there's a lot of colour in American culture," she says, "in the physical world, the printed world, the digital world, the visual world and the media world. It's almost infinite. Whereas black and white and grey, that seems so much more contrived."

Part of the attraction is how open the abstract is to interpretation. Some artists are intentionally playing on that openness, or, in German painter [David Ostrowski](http://david-ostrowski.com/) (<http://david-ostrowski.com/>)'s case, that nothingness. Working on a solo show which opens at [Peres Projects](http://peresprojects.com) (<http://peresprojects.com>) in Berlin this March, he says wryly, "Currently I'm doing paintings about nothing. I have no ideas, no motivation and no inspiration. This is a good circumstance!" He quotes some wisdom from Seinfeld's George Costanza: "Everybody's doing something, we'll do nothing."

Ostrowski's raw, haphazardly painted canvases reflect an obvious interest in mistakes and speed. "I build and destroy the picture by adding and discarding canvas, colours, found fragments and dust without regard to any strategy or chronology. I strive to reduce my own decision-making power to the physicality of my actions." The artist, who studied under [Albert Oehlen](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/albert_ohlen.htm) (http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/albert_ohlen.htm), adds, "It's an ongoing struggle to unlearn and rediscover. I

like to surprise myself but usually the only one who is astonished about my paintings is my housekeeper, who thinks I just started my finished paintings.”

Ostrowski has shown his paintings online in a zine format, playing with context and presentation. His F series paintings are shown as if on pages, interspersed with black-and-white photographs of German mullets, fragments of text or images of sporadic spraycan vandalism. The spraycan feels like it is being reinvented by this generation. Tauba Auerbach, who has a major show opening at Wiels this March, gained serious following for her Folds series of canvases folded and sprayed with an industrial wash of colour to create works that are flat and 3D when stretched.



F (Beauty Mantra), 2012, David Ostrowski

The main thing this new generation of painters is using to rethink abstraction is an emphasis on Process with a capital P. The journey appears to be the focus far more than the results these days. There is a fascination with materials that borders on fetishism. How the work is made is arguably the whole point. [Alex Hubbard](http://www.simonleegallery.com/Artists/Alex_Hubbard/Biography) (http://www.simonleegallery.com/Artists/Alex_Hubbard/Biography)’s practice is a fascinating riff on ideas around process. His paintings are made of fibreglass, resin and oil paint. “I had worked with resin and fibreglass in my failed attempts to make my own surfboards,” the artist recalls. “They were shortboards made out of broken longboards. They failed as surfboards but I love the material. I love the texture of fibreglass and the quick nature of resin, it condenses the painting process into almost mechanical gestures.” The intensity of colour in his paintings is partly a reaction of the dominance and dullness of ubiquitous black – his [Just Like Pants](http://www.standardoslo.no/en/exhibitions/just_like_pants) (http://www.standardoslo.no/en/exhibitions/just_like_pants) exhibition included work with a palette taken from Four Loko cans.

Making the process of creation visible is not Hubbard’s central purpose, but it’s hard not to be aware of that aspect when presented with his works. Lively video pieces Hubbard created in the past document the artist piling objects, paint, and materials on board or in sculptural forms for the camera. It’s hard not to feel that sense of experimentation and freedom when you see his paintings. “When I see a painting I love, or any artwork, it’s the unpacking of artistic or conceptual decisions that I enjoy,” he says.

An obvious reason abstract paintings might resonate now is because of the ongoing financial crisis; people with money are buying paintings. As Nickas points out, “Abstraction is probably desirable for certain buyers because it doesn’t demand too much. There’s no disturbing content, nothing overtly