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ART REVIEW | 'HIGH TIMES, HARD TIMES'

Painting in the Heady Days, After It Was Proclaimed Dead

By ROBERTA SMITH

New York painting from the late 1960s and early '70s — when the medium supposedly was dead — is one of the biggest elephants in the room of recent art history. The nonpainting trends of those years have been relentlessly celebrated and valorized by museums, art historians and biennials. The multiple strands of Post-Minimalism that ended painting's dominance — Conceptual, Process, Performance, Earth and video art — have coalesced into a canon and master narrative of their own. The king is dead, long live the king.

But painting? What happened to painting after the final big bangs of Pop and Minimalism, as Modernism wound down, is both exceedingly complicated and relatively unexamined. Enter “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975,” a brave if deficient exhibition organized by Independent Curators International, which concludes its three-stop tour at the National Academy Museum.

Burdened by a big title that broadcasts a level of ambition and comprehensiveness it does not fulfill, this show arbitrarily skips across the surface of an immense subject while suffering from too much agenda, too little research and inappropriate architecture. The scale and physical eccentricity of the work do not take well to wainscoting and other unavoidable facts of the academy's busy Beaux-Arts interior. Several paintings are forced onto curved walls.

The show passes over the artists who dominated painting during this period, like [Jasper Johns](#), Frank Stella, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman. Young Turks of that moment, like David Diao and Peter Young, are here, but the whole project feels a bit hollow at the center, like a time capsule from a time that didn't quite exist.

Still, with 42 works by 37 artists, “High Times, Hard Times” is a start and should inspire further attempts. It was proposed by the painter David Reed and assembled by the art historian and critic Katy Siegel in consultation with Mr. Reed. Sketchy as the final outcome often is, they and Independent Curators International are to be commended for tackling a job that a flush New York museum should have taken on about 10 years ago. Whatever its problems, this exhibition demonstrates a central truth: far from being dead during the period in question, painting was in an uproar.

Sure, Donald Judd and Frank Stella had announced the medium's obsolescence in a famous radio interview in 1964, and Clement Greenberg's directives had purified it to a shadow of its formalist self. But painters were painting, on canvas and off it, on the wall and off that, too. Some were trying out unusual materials and techniques — cotton balls, fake jewels, pigmented wax, spray guns, squeegees — either to make painting more perversely objectlike or to reopen the spatial illusions shut down by the Judd-Stella-Greenberg juggernaut.

Others were sneaking up on painting from the direction of Process, Performance and Conceptual art and video, as if it were a fort that needed to be retaken. Feminists and others were expanding it by introducing aspects of beading, sewing, quilting, rug-making and more performance, thereby introducing elements of craft, the body and personal identity, and forcefully defining creators as nonmale or nonwhite.

“High Times, Hard Times” accounts for many of these developments in a scattershot, erratic manner that still manages to convey some of painting’s peregrinations between energy and bewilderment, liberation and loss. It conjures up a much, much smaller art world than today’s, when artists were galvanized by the antiwar movement, and abstraction, in one form or another, was still the lingua franca of painting.

Ms. Siegel has done her best with the academy’s galleries, carefully sorting artists who stuck to canvas on stretchers and those who set out for points unknown, including the floor and the video monitor. Yet the show demonstrates that certain techniques endured. Important among them was the propensity to get very physical with paint and to take into new terrain the pours and drips of [Jackson Pollock](#) and the staining technique of Color Field painting. In one large gallery stain painting is rebelliously pushed off the stretched canvas in vibrantly colored and variously two-sided, sewn, beaded and torn works by Manny Farber, Alan Shields and Alvin Loving. In another, harder push, pigment is suspended in cast-polyester resin in a wall piece by Richard Van Buren and in latex in a bright, rubbery floor piece by Lynda Benglis. Nearby, Harmony Hammond translates formalism’s saturated colors into vibrant hooked rugs that look as fresh and obstreperous as the day they were made.

A large gallery upstairs is suffused with a kind of desperate elegance, as artists who remained true to the stretched canvas tried to figure out ways for simple gestures to build up into pictorial complexity. As with Pollock, part of the viewing pleasure stems from the instant comprehension of cause and effect. Spray guns, spray cans and tape figure in works by Mr. Diao, Lawrence Stafford, Michael Venezia and Roy Colmer, who combined stripes and spray to achieve an unlikely hybrid of Op Art and lyrical abstraction.

Gerhard Richter has nothing on Jack Whitten’s atmospheric yet completely tactile layers of paint, blurred by horizontal pulls so taut that the surface periodically splits, like wounds, revealing rich deposits of contrasting colors underneath.

In the next gallery, “Intersection” by Dorothea Rockburne, one of the most widely admired artists from this period, returns to the floor, reiterating the staining vocabulary in crude oil sandwiched between clear plastic. The results provocatively hover between real and pictorial, imply performance and disdain any sort of traditional structuring. Nearby, the big, floppy black-canvas pages of a little-known work by Mary Heilmann, titled “The Book of Night,” reiterate similar interests more poetically.

The show is rife with works, like the Rockburne and the Heilmann, that you probably haven’t seen lately and probably won’t see again any time soon. Other standouts include an especially loopy, disorienting example of Dan Christensen’s signature spray-gun paintings, splitting the difference among Pollock, Color Field painting, Process and graffiti art.

Also present: one of Ralph Humphrey’s rarely shown surfboard paintings from 1969, with the rounded corners and stylized Day-Glo strokes that suggest fruity, sun-kissed waves slithering past.

In other instances the selected works are minor, as derivative now as they were then. Or the ideas are so literal or reduced that the artists couldn't go anywhere with them. Some inclusions seem almost ludicrous, given certain rather obvious absences. It could be argued that neither Mary Corse, a Los Angeles painter, nor Franz Erhard Walter, a German sculptor who worked with canvas, should be here. Even if they did spend time in New York, their work was not especially visible and seems much less pertinent to the show's focus than that of Judy Rifka, Bill Jensen or Gary Stephan, whose efforts, like that of Harriet Korman (who is in the show), were among the most closely watched developments of the early '70s.

It doesn't help that the biographies in the catalog often don't indicate how much time the artists were in New York. More distressingly, they don't consistently specify when and where their work was exhibited in New York; that is, how visible it was beyond the artists' immediate circles of friends.

Ms. Siegel's organization of the show proposes that painting progressed from stretched, rectangular canvases to loosey-goosey off-the-stretcher works and back, culminating in stretched paintings by Elizabeth Murray, Pat Steir and Ron Gorchov, and finally in an unusually incoherent work by Joan Snyder.

This sequencing feels a little too tidy and is not confirmed by the dates of most works in the show. And numerous artists continued to work off canvas. Jennifer Bartlett, to cite another of the show's omissions, was still painting on 12-inch-square steel plates; her 987-plate extravaganza, "Rhapsody," would be shown in May 1976. Another instance of too much neatness: Louise Fishman's small sewn painting functions as a footnote here; she would have been better represented by one of her plywood paintings from this period.

In the end, this exhibition would have been better titled "New York Painting, 1967-75: The Untold Story." Its problem, simply, is that the larger, more familiar story of the painting of this period has yet to be told.

But this exhibition, pulled off by a small nonprofit art organization with no gallery space of its own, has taken the plunge, and it suggests all kinds of possible exhibitions: surveys of Ralph Humphrey's or Ms. Fishman's career, for example, or of New York painting in the late 1970s and even the '80s. Perhaps it will remind New York's big museums to think outside the box of the blue-chip retrospective or the sampling of current gallery trends and examine painting's neglected recent past in ways that might benefit its present and future.

"High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975" runs through April 22 at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 369-4880.