

HYPERALLERGIC

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Painting on the Cusp: Abstraction of the 1980s

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on July 6, 2013



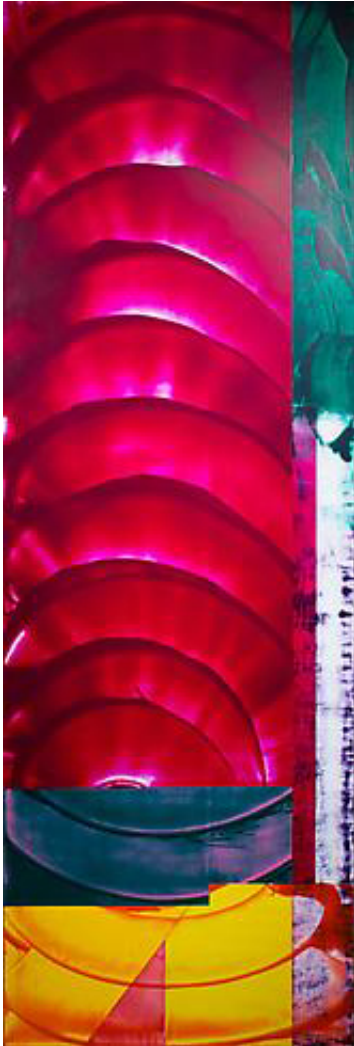
Mary Heilmann, "Rio Nido" (1987), acrylic and oil on canvas, 39 x 58 in (all images via [cheimread.com](#))

Before there were the New Casualists, there were the Provisional Painters, and before there were the Provisional Painters, there were the 1980s.

Last week I wrote about *[Dying on Stage: New Painting in New York](#)*, which was billed as "the first large gallery show in New York that brings together a group of artists specifically engaging with this new mode of abstraction."

The mode of abstraction is identified in the press release as the New Casualism, an appellation cooked up by Sharon Butler in an essay, "[Abstract Painting: The New Casualists](#)," published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2011.

In her first paragraph, Butler acknowledges that art “exuding a kind of calculated tentativeness” is not freshly plowed terrain, citing Raphael Rubinstein, Stephen Maine and the curatorial team of Kris Chatterson and Vince Contarino, going under the name Progress Report, as having been there before her.



David Reed, “No. 230 (for Beccafumi)” (1985-1986), oil and alkyd on canvas, 108 x 36 in

Rubinstein’s essay, “[Provisional Painting](#),” published in 2009 in *Art in America* (followed by a London exhibition in 2011) is the most conspicuous antecedent to Butler’s thesis, but there is a crucial distinction between her point of view, which addresses an artist’s personal development and philosophical outlook, and Rubinstein’s, which is more focused on historical and cultural associations as well as the ever-present marketplace.

Butler defines the Casualists as “restless, their thrust less intensive and more expansive” than painters who spend years developing a signature style:

[The Casualists] are unfazed by ill-defined parameters or truncated lines of thought. Like the philosopher-mathematicians who devised “fuzzy logic,” new casualists, like Suprematists, seek to accommodate a world in which there is often no clear truth or falseness.

In contrast, Rubinstein recognizes similar tendencies but portrays the Provisional Painters as if they were caught in a web of context:

I take such work to be, in part, a struggle with a medium that can seem too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the fine arts “fine.”

Where Butler sees artists using “their experience of everyday life [as] the filter through which they focus their paintings, entertaining multiple contradictory ideas at once,” Rubinstein finds “strategies of refusal and acts of negation.”

In other words, at the risk of simplification, Butler casts the Casualists as engaged in modes of inquiry, while Rubinstein places a premium on the Provisionals’ “casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling” approach to making an object.

What both tendencies have in common is a rejection, or at least a deep skepticism, of formalism — a defining idea that Rubinstein’s latest curatorial effort, *Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s* at Cheim & Read, gets to the heart of.

Of the fifteen artists in the show, Rubinstein discusses one (Mary Heilmann) in “Provisional Painting” and Butler mentions two (Thomas Nozkowski and Elizabeth Murray) in “The New Casualists,” but the genome of this generation of post-minimal abstractionists, who were born between 1939 and 1949, is embedded in the Provisional/Casual DNA.

It’s worth quoting the [press release](#) at length:

For these artists, who were in their 30s and 40s during the 1980s, it was not a question of a “return to painting,” but, rather, of finding a bridge between the radical, deconstructive abstraction of the late 1960s and 1970s (which many of them had been marked by) with a larger painting history and more subjective approaches. They opened their work to elements that had been largely excluded from abstraction in the previous decade, beginning with a reinvestigation of the conventional rectangular support. They were unafraid to explore gesture, improvisation, relational compositions, allusions to figuration and landscape, as well as art historical and cultural allusions, high and low.



Louise Fishman, "Navigation" (1981), oil on linen, 25 x 22 in

There isn't much that's casual or provisional about the paintings (one from each artist) on display, even though improvisation is their main *modus operandi*. Rubinstein's concern with the object — its history, context and fabrication — clearly registers in the show, which emphasizes the variety of application, surface and support ranging across the works.

Attempting to create a panorama of a generation while limiting each artist to a single work is a curatorial challenge that largely succeeds here, with an overall impression of upbeat, robust experimentation. There are no "strategies of refusal" or "acts of negation" except to the constraints of formalism.

When I saw the title of the show, I thought it was a play on the phenomenal [Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925](#), which ran from December 23, 2012, through April 15, 2013, at the Museum of Modern Art. While there may be some intentional referencing of the MoMA show, the title turns out to be a paraphrase of a line from the artist and writer Carrie Moyer. Again from the press release:

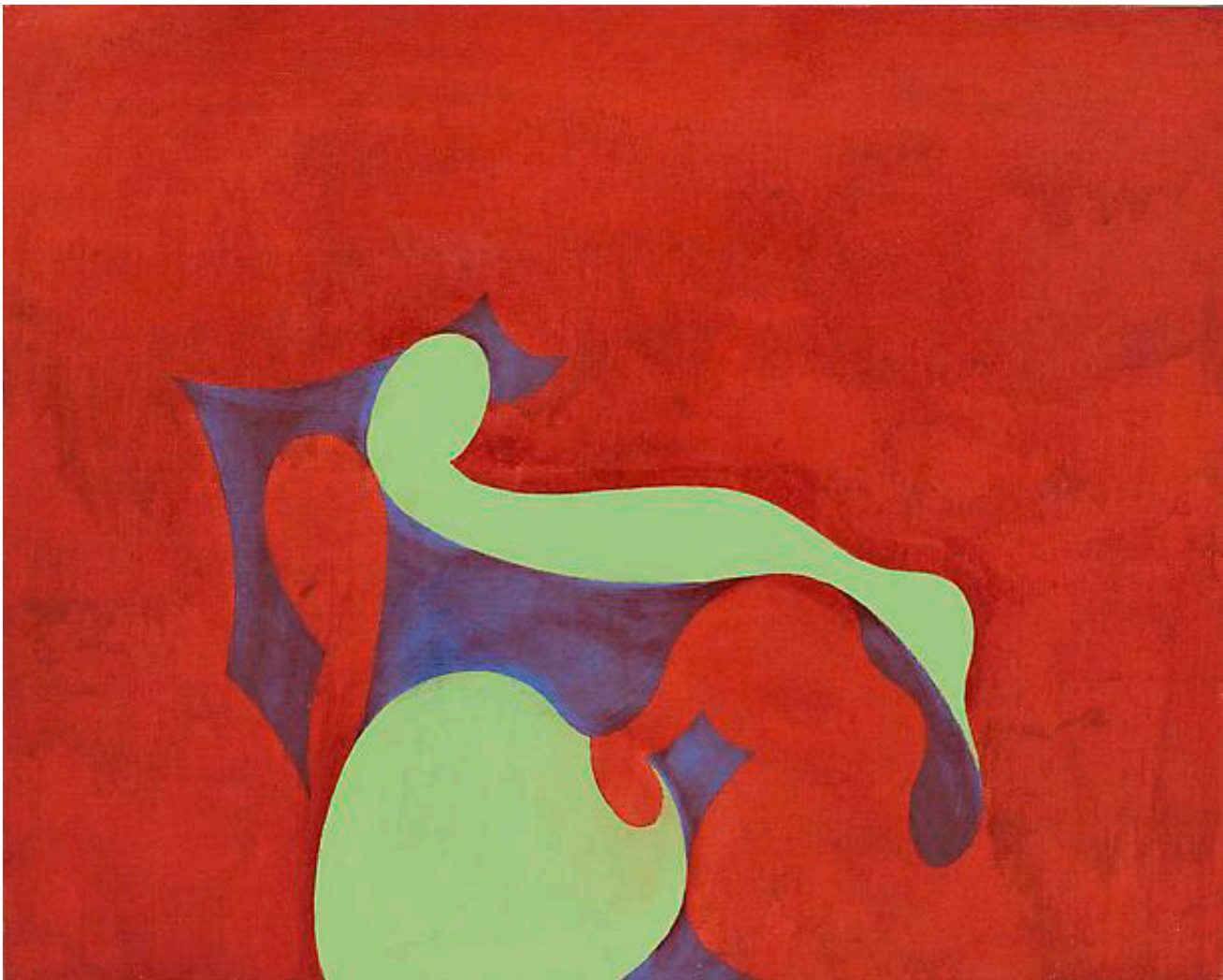
Although many artists in the show have received significant attention, "Reinventing Abstraction" challenges existing exclusionary histories by mapping out an artistic time and place that has yet to be canonized, or even acknowledged by the museum and academic mainstream. This exhibition also hopes to draw attention to the historical grounding of much recent work by younger painters. It's not by chance that the title takes its inspiration from painter Carrie Moyer, who, writing about Stephen Mueller in 2011, identified his as "the generation that reinvented American abstract painting."

Still, the feeling of release coming off these paintings, which signals their makers' liberation from a reductive and intellectualized form of abstraction, has a parallel to early abstraction's breakaway from the demands of mimesis. It's a headiness exploding with unforeseen possibilities.

The biomorphic forms that creep into the work of a number of these artists are a reminder that painting, like nature, is in an infinite state of flux that adheres to its own set of genetically determined rules. Like scientists, the painters in this show investigate the object's hidden truths rather than impose conceptual or procedural parameters dictating its creation.

With the exception of the pieces by Gary Stephan ["Untitled (#45418)," 1985–88], Stephen Mueller ("Delphic Hymn," 1989) and Terry Winters ("Point," 1985), which flirt with Provisional/Casual irresolution, the paintings in *Reinventing Abstraction* are all of a piece, though it is possible to detect here and there the threat of arbitrariness that hangs over much recent painting taking a similar anti-formalist stance.

I'm thinking in particular of Carroll Dunham's "Horizontal Bands" (1982), an agglomeration of root vegetables and overextended snouts that anticipate the genital-proboscises prominently featured in his later paintings. While an attractive piece, there isn't much justification for the graphic sectioning-off of the composition into the horizontal bands of the title. The painting has a lot of life, but it doesn't seem to arise from an intuited logic or emotional urgency.



Thomas Nozkowski, "Untitled (6-30)" (1988), oil on canvas board, 16 x 20 inch

The color in Thomas Nozkowski's "Untitled (6-30)" (1988) is just as hot as Dunham's, but its eloquent simplicity — interlocking twists of light green and blue-violet against a cherry red field — lays out just what needs to be said and nothing more.

Stanley Whitney's "Sixteen Songs" (1984) will startle anyone familiar with his saturated grid paintings. The clusters of loosely applied strokes from a flat, medium-width brush seem to be channeling Joan Mitchell, but in a range of high-keyed pastel color that recalls the French Impressionists as well as the Belgian Symbolist James Ensor.



Stanley Whitney, "Sixteen Songs" (1984), oil on linen, 66 x 108 in

David Reed's otherworldly "No. 230 (for Beccafumi)" (1985-86), a vertical shaft of radiating magenta arcs countered by slices of peacock green, canary yellow and slate blue, mirrors the ascending, abbreviated forms of "[The Fall of the Rebel Angels](#)" (ca. 1524) by the Italian Mannerist painter Domenico di Pace Beccafumi (ca. 1486-1551), vividly evoking Mannerism's intoxicating fusion of aesthetic artifice and spiritual conviction.

Beside it is Mary Heilmann's gem, "Rio Nido" (1987), which echoes Reed's color scheme but compiles it into an interlocking set of geometric shapes presided over by a large black wedge. The weightiness of the composition is softened by the looseness of the paint and the holes in the wedge revealing the colors beneath. Not a small painting (39 x 58 inches), it nevertheless feels warm and intimate—a simple but ravishing answer to the dehumanized precision of Neo-Geo, which dominated geometric painting at the time.



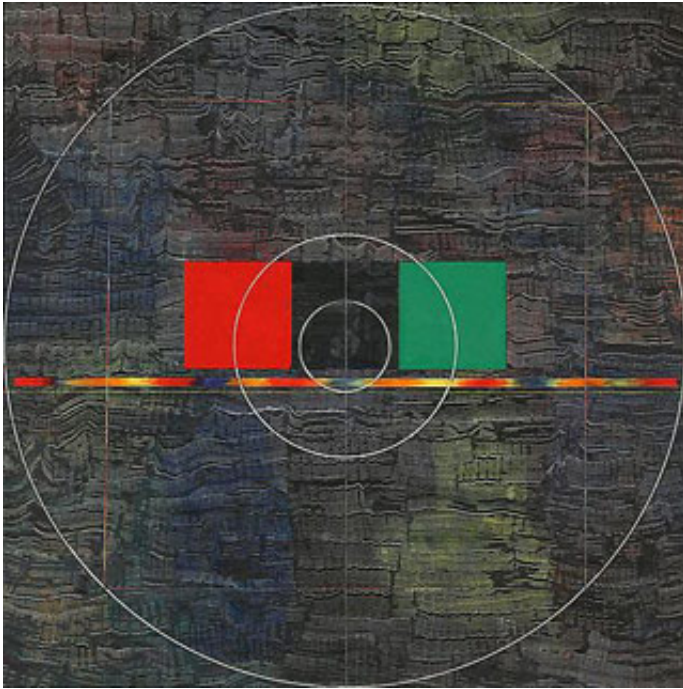
Elizabeth Murray, "Sentimental Education" (1982), oil on canvas, 127 x 96 in

Elizabeth Murray also deconstructs geometric abstraction with her kickass "Sentimental Education" (1982), a shaped canvas of zigzagging and ballooning forms that, despite its raucous energy, is virtually minimalist in comparison with her over-the-top later work. It is also entirely abstract — though edging toward allusion, it stops short of the teacups and shoes that crop up later on — which endows its black, red, yellow and blue forms with a liminal tension, even a poignancy, that intensifies its humor with a tug of the tragic.

Bill Jensen's tightly constructed, slightly crabbed "The Tempest" (1980–81), typical of his output during the 1980s, feels like a spring ready to snap, and snap it eventually did, bursting into the freewheeling swaths of paint that flood his current work. But Louise Fishman, with her small, stunning "Navigation" (1981), full of black swirls on maculate white, is already pointing toward the more open direction her painting would later take.

The most astringent canvases are by Jonathan Lasker, Pat Steir and Joan Snyder. Like Carroll Dunham's "Horizontal Bands," Lasker's painting, "Double Play" (1987), with its mirrored, map-like shapes and inverted pyramid of pink stripes against a solid ochre field, comes close to feeling arbitrary, while another symmetrical composition, Steir's 11-and-a-half-foot-long "Last Wave Painting: Wave Becoming a Waterfall" (1987-1988), hits home with a pair of huge, brushy circles that look like they're made out of rust and axle grease. Snyder's even longer (12 feet) "Beanfield with Music" (1984), rendered in slabs of blackened green over raw sienna, conjures up Monet's Giverny water lilies after they've gone to algae.

The earliest and perhaps the most alien object on display is Jack Whitten's "Red, Black, Green" (1979-80). Simultaneously process-oriented and political (the colors of the title, which appear in three squares in the center of the painting, refer to the Black Liberation flag as well as the Pan-African flag), its synthesis of precision and randomness merge the distilled forms of the 1970s with the more expressive gestures explored in the following decade.



Jack Whitten, "Red, Black, Green" (1979–80), acrylic and string on canvas, 64 x 64 in

Vertical bands of bright color act as a substrate for a thick coat of black paint, which is then raked by a comb in haphazard, horizontal sweeps, revealing the color beneath. This activity is overlaid by three white concentric circles, whose perfection only adds to the sense of discomfort pervading the work. But it's a discomfort rooted in a severe beauty that you don't want to stop poring over.

The presence of such an unfamiliar work by Whitten, who contributed a couple of knockout pieces to the recent [NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star](#) (February 13 – May 26, 2013) at the New Museum, makes you wonder about the artists who came up at the same time, especially those who were female and/or of color, but whose status in the marketplace is still tenuous or nonexistent. The painters in this show are here by dint of who they are now as much as what they did then.

The fifteen paintings in *Reinventing Abstraction* are poised on the cusp of an outmoded past and a chartless future. The bones of what came before still dot their spine, and the new muscles they're flexing have been conditioned by the old — a perfect illustration of T.S. Eliot's axiom that "freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation."

If more recent trends in painting, call them Provisionalist or Casualist or whatever you like, seem shallow or untethered by comparison, could it be because the factors they're reacting against, i.e., neo-Conceptualism and its evil twin, the neo-Pop excesses of Koons, Hirst et al., are that much thinner than the Minimalism and Conceptualism of the 1970s?

That is to say, how much of a counterargument can you muster in pigment and canvas to a [Carsten Höller](#) flotation tank or merry-go-round? What kind of traction can you gain if what you're opposing is friction-free in form and content? Is art, then, in the absence of common belief systems, only as powerful as the forces (aesthetic, commercial, social, philosophical or political) it resists?

[Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s](#) continues at [Cheim & Read](#) (547 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 30.