

'Phantom Limb' exhibition at MCA not at all what it sounds like

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With a title like "Phantom Limb," you'd be forgiven for expecting the Museum of Contemporary Art's current painting show to be filled with images of severed body parts and other ghoulish fare. Rest assured, there's nothing frightening about this survey of post-1960 works, organized by James W. Alsdorf curator Michael Darling, though its central conceit may initially seem confusing.



Subtitled "Approaches to Painting Today," the exhibition in fact charts the dramatic post-war shifts that took painting from an almost exclusively handmade, brush-centric medium to one that now just as often relies on mechanical processes like silk-screening and tools such as spray paint. The "phantom limb" is metaphorical, although it references a real condition experienced by some amputees who continue to feel sensation in a missing limb. But in this show, the absent limb in question becomes the painter's own hand, which no longer plays the vital role in painting it once did even as it continues to signal its presence, albeit in less-direct ways than before.

If the idea still puzzles, think of how critics and art historians will talk about the way a painter "handles" paint, or how artists like Vincent Van Gogh or Willem de Kooning are recognized for their brushwork. Even Jackson Pollock, who used paintbrushes and other tools to "drip" rather than directly brush paint onto his canvases, saw the act of painting as fundamentally connected to the hand (and in Pollock's case, his entire body). Pollock and de Kooning, like their fellow abstract expressionists (who are sometimes also referred to as "gestural expressionists") pushed the expressive potential of hand and brush as far as they could.

But by the early 1960s, a new generation of painters abandoned the quest for individualistic methods of mark-making in order to put painting in closer dialogue with mass culture. Why? Because the world was changing rapidly, and so were artists' ideas about originality. Mass media images were everywhere, and pop culture had penetrated the human imagination. For artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, popular imagery seemed as relevant — and in its own way, as expressive — a medium to "paint" with as oil and pigment, perhaps even more so.

Fittingly, then, "Phantom Limb" begins with two iconic pop art paintings by Rauschenberg and Warhol that, like many of the show's offerings, are drawn from the MCA's permanent collection. Rauschenberg's 1963 collage "Retroactive II" features an image of John F. Kennedy giving a speech, while Warhol's "Jackie Frieze," dated a year later, uses photos of Jacqueline Kennedy taken in the hours leading up to and immediately after her husband's assassination.

Both paintings were made with silk-screen processes that, at the time, were more common to advertising than art. Yet Rauschenberg put his mark on the composition by crudely encircling certain parts with thick white paint, and Warhol printed one of the Jackie images in a different color, and intentionally placed it askew, giving the resulting piece a jerky, disorienting quality.

Although the tragic historical event underlying these first two works starts "Phantom Limb" off on a grim note, the rest of the room and indeed the entire exhibition, abounds with so many other ebullient, playfully executed paintings one suspects Darling really meant his title to be taken lightheartedly. Yes, a 1990s-era painting by Sigmar Polke does have a bunch of hand-printed skulls all over it, but the piece also features commercially produced, polka-dot-patterned fabric on which Polke poured Rorschach-like blobs of white paint. Is Polke's punning use of the polka dot a sly nod to the old ways of making a signature mark? See in his gesture what you will.

In the same room, two works from the 1970s offer teasing rejoinders to the almighty paint brush. Richard Jackson's three-part work is a brush, palette and painting in one: He cut a canvas into three pieces, loaded up two of them with paint and used them to smear arcs of color across the middle one, then reattached the first two with their framed "backs" to the audience. Next to this is Jack Whitten's "Pink Psyche Queen," made by pulling layers of paint across a canvas with special tools. The results recall the better-known "squeegee paintings" of Gerhard Richter, but Whitten made his first.

The remaining galleries show that today's artists-of-the-moment approach painting in a similarly "anything goes" fashion, often by freely substituting unusual materials for traditional ones. William O'Brien carefully pinned dozens of fabric strips over a brown cloth, then spattered paint droplets over the resulting homespun "canvas." Aaron Curry's 3-D "Figure Drawing" is freestanding, and Kerstin Bratsch's painting on clear Mylar is hung from the ceiling, so that her brush strokes appear as if they were made on air alone. Wade Guyton's black stripe paintings don't use paint at all — instead, he runs canvas through an Epson printer until the machine jams. John Henderson's works also dispense with paint, or at least his finished products do — the small silver monochrome displayed here is cast from

A configuration of objects by Sterling Ruby consists of red, white and blue stuffed pillows placed on a large pedestal. It doesn't look much like a painting. The pedestal's pristine whiteness is marred by dirt smudges, puffs of black and red aerosol paint, and graffiti. They're the kind of marks that are spray-painted or scratched out by people on walls, newspaper boxes and bathroom stalls, and like it or not, that may be the most democratic form of gestural expression there is.

Both times I visited the show, I was struck by the number of visitors who posed for photographs directly in front of paintings, using them as backdrops. One young man stood before a second work by Ruby, raised his hand and made a sign with his fingers as his friend snapped away. I don't know what his gesture meant, but there's no doubt that the phantom limb was once again making its presence known.

"Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today," through Oct. 21 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave., 312-280-2660 or mcachicago.org