Lois Lane: *Moon Shadow*, 2010, oil on linen, 84 by 71¾ inches.

All artworks this article in "Painting After Postmodernism | Belgium—USA," at the Vanderborght Building, Brussels, Sept. 15–Nov. 13. 2016.

SAVED BY ABSTRACTION?

Curating a recent show in Brussels, Barbara Rose reasserted her controversial, decades-long faith in the spiritual nature of abstract art.

by Eleanor Heartney

"PAINTING AFTER Postmodernism | Belgium—USA," curated last fall in Brussels, by American critic and art historian Barbara Rose, was characterized in its press materials as a "manifesto exhibition." Its main venue, the Vanderborght Building, a former bank recently renovated by the city as the future home of the modern and contemporary collections of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, provided six grand, light-filled floors for Rose's sweeping reconsideration of the present state of painting.

The show's 256 works, by eight American and eight Belgian artists, were equally bold. Large, at times even mural-scale, these paintings explore the tactile, labor-intensive version of abstraction that Rose posits as the salvation of a modernist tradition nearly laid low by formalism, conceptualism, and postmodernism. Her selections defy any simple categorization. Their paint is brushed, sprayed, dripped, stenciled, and scraped; materials include beeswax, plywood, leather, buttons, and rope. What the works share is perhaps less important than what they resist—namely irony, industrial sheen, and the quick take.

In her catalogue essay, Rose reaches back to Miró and Malevich, signaling her urge to engage in battles that have swirled about modernist painting since its inception. She is, as a seminal interpreter of Minimalism, a famed veteran of those battles. Her article "ABC Art," first published in this magazine in October–November 1965, remains required reading in many art schools. Even as Minimalism's critics were howling over its alleged abdication of meaning, Rose offered a more spiritually based interpretation. In a disquisition on the new art's debt to such figures as Gertrude Stein, John Cage, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, she remarked:

> The art I have been talking about is obviously a negative art of denial and renunciation. Such protracted asceticism is normally the activity of contemplatives or mystics. . . . Like the mystic, in their work these artists deny the ego and the individual personality, seeking to evoke, it would seem, that semi-hypnotic state of blank unconsciousness.[1]

Rose's reading was, of course, deeply at odds with the formalist orthodoxy of the time. Seemingly unfazed, she continued to be an outlier, taking a metaphysical approach to artists like Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Jackson Pollock, and Ad Reinhardt. This orientation got her into trouble when she curated an exhibition titled "American Painting: The Eighties" for New York University's Grey Art Gallery in 1979, proclaiming her support for a "transcendental high art . . . in conscious opposition to photography and all forms of mechanical reproduction which seek to deprive the art work of its unique 'aura.'"[2] Many of the forty painters in the show have faded from view, but others—such as Nancy Graves, Bill Jensen, Elizabeth Murray, Sam Gilliam, and Susan Rothenberg—went on to have substantial careers. Nevertheless, arriving precisely at the dawn of the postmodern era, Rose's praise for works that, in her words, were "based on continuity instead of rupture" and "dedicated to the preservation of painting as a transcendental high art"[3] was seen as a wrong call in an era that brought irony, appropriation, deconstruction, and post-structuralism to the fore. This stance sent her into the theoretical wilderness for years.

But Rose was unrepentant. In 1991, she revisited her self-described "infamous eighties show" in "Abstract Painting: The '90s" at André Emmerich Gallery, New York, bringing most of the artists back for a new look. Holding that the earlier exhibition was wrongly interpreted as her prescription for a future that didn't happen, Rose argued that, in fact, she had produced "a multiculturalist, feminist show" before its time. But while her emphasis on diversity in "American Painting: The Eighties"—half of the show's artists were female and one was African-American—certainly paralleled art world thinking at the dawn of the '90s, Rose's rejection of overtly political art ("a central idea in modernist aesthetics is that art criticized itself, not the world") was not.[4]

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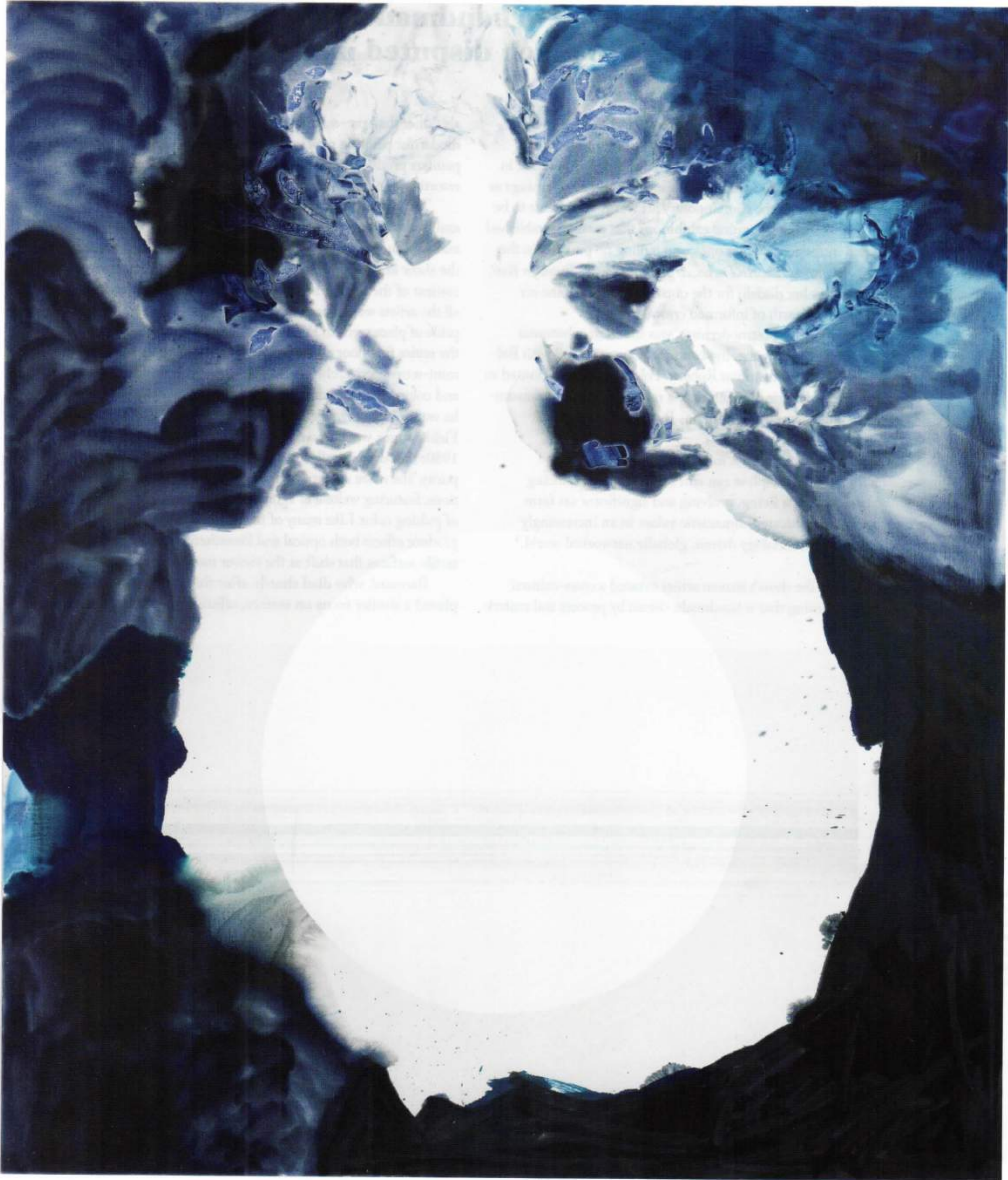


The show presented work that is handmade, driven by process and materials, and connected to much disputed modernist ideals.

TODAY THE PEJORATIVE dismissals and sharp disputes of the postmodern era are an increasingly distant memory, and painting, expression, authenticity, and even spirituality are back in fashion. Rose has taken advantage of the sea change to reemerge as a formidable force in the contemporary art world. She seems to be everywhere these days, curating exhibitions that reassess established artists and introduce younger ones, and pulling no punches in the pages of *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, and the *Brooklyn Rail*, as she expresses her disdain for the outsize influence of the art market and the dearth of informed critical thinking.

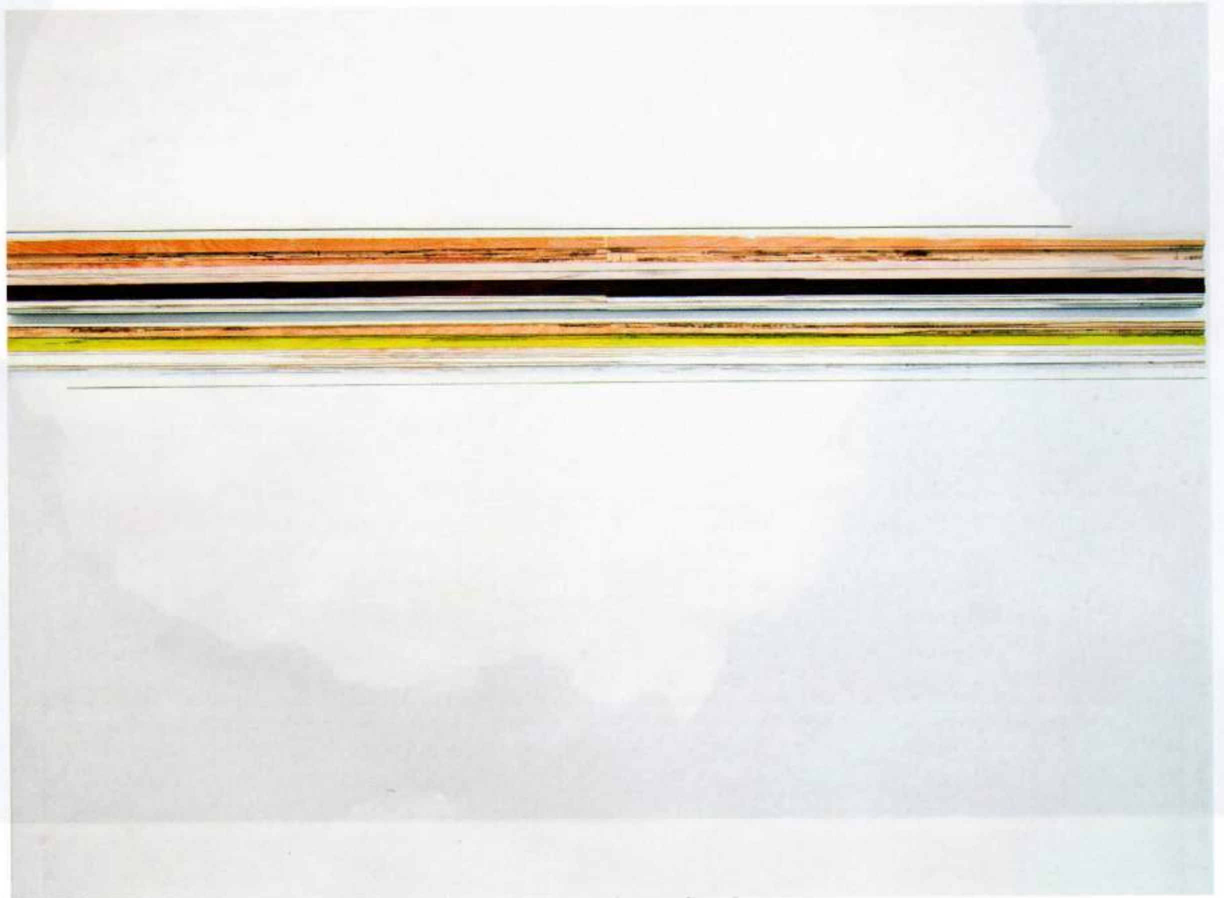
"Painting After Postmodernism" was the most substantial statement yet of Rose's ongoing concerns. Co-organized with Belgian gallerist and art historian Roberto Polo, the show amounted to a full-throated defense of painting as a means of creating transcendent meaning. Its catalogue contains Rose's call to arms:

> This exhibition intends to prove that painting as an autonomous discipline can still make fresh, convincing statements as a living, evolving and significant art form that communicates humanistic values in an increasingly inhuman, technology driven, globally networked world.[5]

Together, the show's sixteen artists evinced a cross-cultural interest in painting that is handmade, driven by process and materials rather than pre-existing concepts, and connected to the ideals of modernist painting now under fire in a more skeptical age. These painters produce art that flirts with recognizable imagery without resorting to narrative or irony and sees visual complexity as a virtue.

The Americans included senior artists Larry Poons, Ed Moses, and Walter Darby Bannard, whose careers stretch back to the 1950s and '60s, and who have long been part of Rose's pantheon. She used the show as an opportunity to update and reconsider them in the context of the current revival of interest in abstract painting. While all the artists were represented by a generous selection of works, pride of place went to Poons, whose sixteen paintings, spread over the entire first floor of the massive exhibition space in a kind of mini-retrospective, chronicled his ongoing experiments with surface and color. One poured painting from 1979, an example of the work he was doing when Clement Greenberg lionized him as a Color Field painter, was followed by heavily textured works from the 1980s that dramatically violate the formalist gospel of flatness and purity. The more recent Poons works displayed are looser compositions, featuring welters of agitated brushstrokes and flickering fields of pulsing color. Like many of the pieces shown in Brussels, they produce effects both optical and kinesthetic, with an emphasis on tactile surfaces that shift as the viewer moves through space.

Bannard, who died shortly after the exhibition opened, placed a similar focus on surface, offering tactile paintings that



Melissa Kretschmer: *Conflux*, 2015, vellum, gesso, gouache, pencil, and plywood, 72¾ by 95¾ inches.

Larry Poons: *Monkey God's Vis[...]* 2006, acrylic on canvas, 67¾ by 113¾ inches.

revel in the sweep of heavy brushwork intercut with flatter geometric forms. In works from the 1980s, these shapes appear to have been created by scraping the paint down to the canvas; in more recent works, they are thickly painted hard-edge circles, triangles, and polyhedrons afloat on gestural grounds.

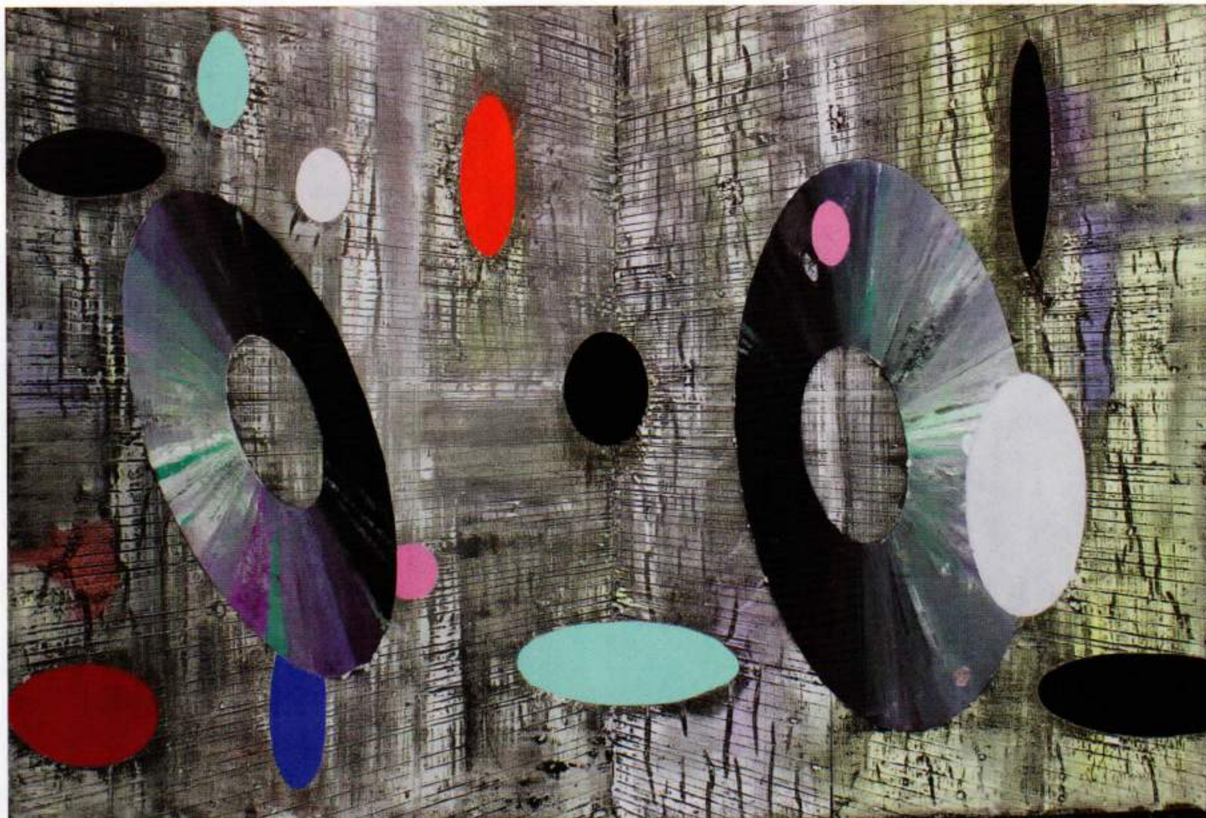
Ed Moses took a playful approach in profiles of heads over patterned fields. But his other works felt more elemental—some with fractured surfaces that bring to mind cracked veneer or the parched bottoms of dried up lakes, some pairing amorphous forms with painted panels that pay homage to the allover aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism.

The rest of the Americans were an eclectic group whose works draw on Minimalism, Expressionism, Romanticism, and American Transcendentalism. One artist, Lois Lane, also appeared in Rose's "Eighties" show. In pieces from the last six years, she skillfully manipulates various black and blue hues and matte and reflective surfaces to create mysterious compositions that place "feminine" imagery in cosmic space. Fans, orbs, leaf silhouettes, and a trademark dancing woman emerge out of dark voids or are defined by negative space in a manner that brings to mind early photograms.

Darkness feels similarly alive in the work of Karen Gunderson, whose all-black paintings offer pulsating landscape forms visible only when light catches their textured brushstrokes. Melissa Kretschmer gives minimalist reduction a personal, handcrafted touch, making incisions in large pieces of plywood and tinting them with beeswax, graphite, or pigments, so as to deliberately confuse our perception of flatness and dimensionality. Martin Kline employs encaustic to disperse honeycomb patterns across the canvas or, in several cases, to cover the surface of rope hammocks stretched flat within wooden frames. Paul Manes paints intricate mesh patterns that seem to hang over fluidly painted grounds like sagging fishing nets.

THE BELGIANS, all male, tended to be younger than the American artists. Their work was less engaged with a sense of enveloping nature or the abandonment of self to process than with a cerebral manipulation of form, material, illusion, and geometry. Common to all was a proclivity for contradictory spaces. Bernard Gilbert, for instance, makes immersive paintings that combine hard-edge geometric forms with several other elements, such as stencil or photogram silhouettes, gestural marks, and areas of visual limbo. His mix of airbrushed voids, textured patches, and sharply delineated forms, often built of striped or fractal patterns, resists the eye's desire to distinguish foreground and background.

This tendency to play geometry against indeterminate fields, jazzy patterns, or gestural grounds reappears in other artists' works as well. Werner Mannaers gives the approach a Pop spin, laying flat geometric forms on top of hand-drawn striped, pointillist, or interlocked geometric grounds. Marc Maet disavows any directly communicative purpose for his distinct shapes on indistinct backgrounds. Some of Joris Ghekiere's paintings with soft stripes against scored surfaces seem indebted to Op art, while others explore a more atmospheric glow.



Joris Ghekiere: Untitled, 2016, oil on canvas, 78¾ by 118 inches.

Bart Vandevijvere places flatly painted colored planes within murky grounds, as if to test different modes of seeing. Mil Ceulemans (at thirty-nine the youngest artist in the show) suggests recessed spaces built from layers of drips, broad swaths of paint, and unmoored geometric shapes. Providing a touch of levity to the proceedings was Xavier Noiret-Thomé, who adds buttons, jar tops, and sequins to his mix of geometry and gesture. Finally, Jan Vanriet seemed a bit out of place in the show, presenting rudimentary figures against expansive grounds or juxtaposing them with floral or oriental rug motifs.

Werner Mannaers: *The Palermo Series (Chapter 1)*, 2015, mixed mediums and collage on canvas, 74¾ by 63 inches.

WHAT DOES IT mean for art to be transcendent? Rose appears to equate it to the sublimation of imagery, materials, and texture to the creation of a distinctly pictorial rather than literal or representational space. Thus, in her "Eighties" essay, she commends the conjuring of "magical illusions that exist in an imaginative mental space."[6] This is a rather ineffable notion she shares with formalist philosophy, despite her sharp departure from Greenbergian standards of purity. And it sets her apart from the ironic deconstruction of the tropes of painterly language that is the hallmark of postmodernism. Contending that "the struggle to keep painting alive and moving that began with Cézanne and Manet remains a battle against cynicism and nihilism,"[7] Rose stakes out a place for her artists as the true progeny of the modernist tradition.

There is a tendency among critics today to be skeptical of grand claims for art. In a much cited *A.i.A.* article, critic Raphael Rubinstein has floated the notion of "provisional painting," a form of "major painting masquerading as minor painting."[8] "The Forever Now," a 2014 survey at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was accompanied by a catalogue rife with references to "atemporality," "cannibalism," and "reanimation," thus casting contemporary abstraction adrift from its moorings in art history, despite blatant visual echoes in the work itself. And, of course, there is artist-critic Walter Robinson's seriocomic notion of Zombie Formalism: art that reanimates—sometimes naively, sometimes knowingly—a moribund Greenbergian aesthetic.

Nevertheless, any quick survey of recent painting production (Louise Fishman's summer retrospective at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, comes to mind, as does Michelle Grabner's bracing presentation of female abstractionists in the 2014 Whitney Biennial), reveals that artists have not abandoned "important" and meaningful painting. Perhaps ambitious abstract painting is not as endangered as Rose's self-proclaimed "manifesto exhibition" might suggest. Certainly her curatorial selections were evidence of abstraction's continued vitality in many quarters. The artists in "Painting After Postmodernism," regardless of their nationality or age, clearly regard modernism not as a distant beacon or a dead reference, but as an ongoing and flourishing inspiration. ○

1. Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," *Art in America*, October–November 1965, p. 69; reprinted in *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art, 1963–1987*, New York, Grove Press, p. 71.
2. Barbara Rose, "American Painting: The Eighties," *Autocritique*, p. 282.
3. Ibid. p. 289.
4. Barbara Rose, *Abstract Painting: The '90s*, exhibition brochure, New York, André Emmerich Gallery, 1991.
5. Barbara Rose, *Painting After Postmodernism | Belgium—USA*, Brussels, Lannoo Publishers, 2016, p. 9.
6. "American Painting: The Eighties," *Autocritique*, p. 287.
7. *Painting After Postmodernism*, p. 9.
8. Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May 2009, p. 134; also available online at artinamericamagazine.com.