

# ALEX KWARTLER

Alex Kwartler (b.1979, New York, NY) has mounted two solo exhibitions at Magenta Plains: *Snowflake* in 2018 and *Pain Quotidien* in 2016. He has exhibited his work at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, White Columns, Bortolami Gallery, Mitchell Innes & Nash, Martos Gallery, Casey Kaplan, Petzel Gallery, Wallspace, Two Bridges Music Arts, and PRACTISE. His exhibitions have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Frieze*, *Artforum* and *Art in America*. Kwartler's paintings were featured in *Painting Abstraction*, edited by Bob Nickas and published by Phaidon Press. He received his MFA from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ and his BFA from The Cooper Union, New York, NY. Kwartler was artist-in-residence at The Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas in Spring 2017. Kwartler lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

*Arte Fuse*

May 2019

# ARTE FUSE

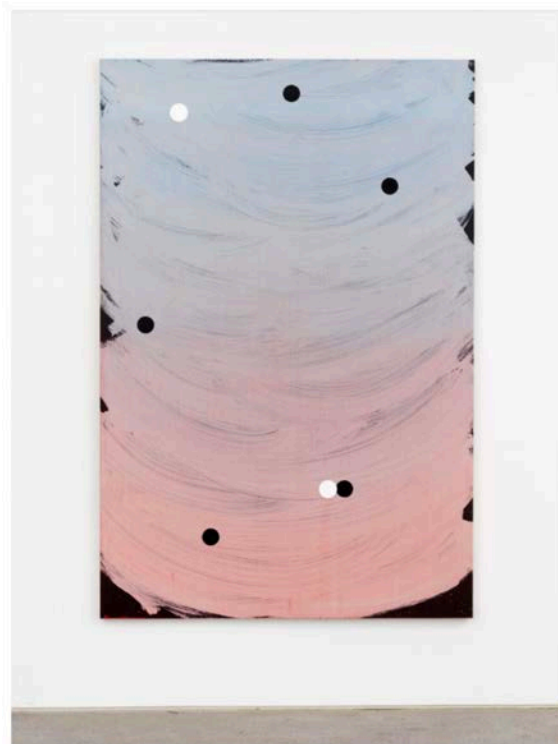
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## Highlights from Frieze New York, 2019

05/08/2019 by **PATTI JORDAN**

Frieze New York once again enticed viewers on Randall's Island this year with the global, cultural cognoscenti circulating its booths and aisles last week en masse. Interspersed throughout its north and south entrances the fair boasted exceptional works representing a broad sampling of artists ranging from those well situated in the contemporary canon to lesser-known established and newly emerging artists. New curated slots also brought attention to established Lantinx and Latin American artists as well as those fresh on the scene.

In light of the fact that Frieze 2019 granted plenty of exceptional standouts amongst the proliferation of captivating curations, below are those I found to be some of the top takeaways from this year's crop:



Alex Kwartler, *Untitled (dusk)*, 2019, 72 x 48 in.

At Magenta Plains Gallery's booth, two large-scale paintings by the newly represented artist Alex Kwartler were literal and figural eye-catchers. Kwartler's brushwork evinced an intrinsic technical facility and pictorial prowess through astute swoops and swashes of subtle but luminous warm and cool color gradation of shifting opacities. The artist additionally interjected dually frontal and recessive black and white dots (or possibly punctuations?) to add further play with space to trick the eye. To loosely coin the terms "slacker" or "casual abstraction" would not qualify as an insult as this gestural pair demonstrated ample use of Kwartler's overt preference for flatness, process-based painting. Powdered pigment appears to be vertically poured over his surfaces as an after-effect in order to heighten their atmospheric qualities as well as the illusion of depth of field, whilst the low-lying, closely cropped curvatures substantiate the space.

In only its second year of operation, Magenta Plains is a multigenerational gallery located in the Lower East Side and is committed to supporting a roster of emergent art and emerging artists. Kwartler has since had two solo exhibitions at Magenta Plains: "Pain Quotidien," 2016 and "Snowflake," 2018.

*Two Coats of Paint*

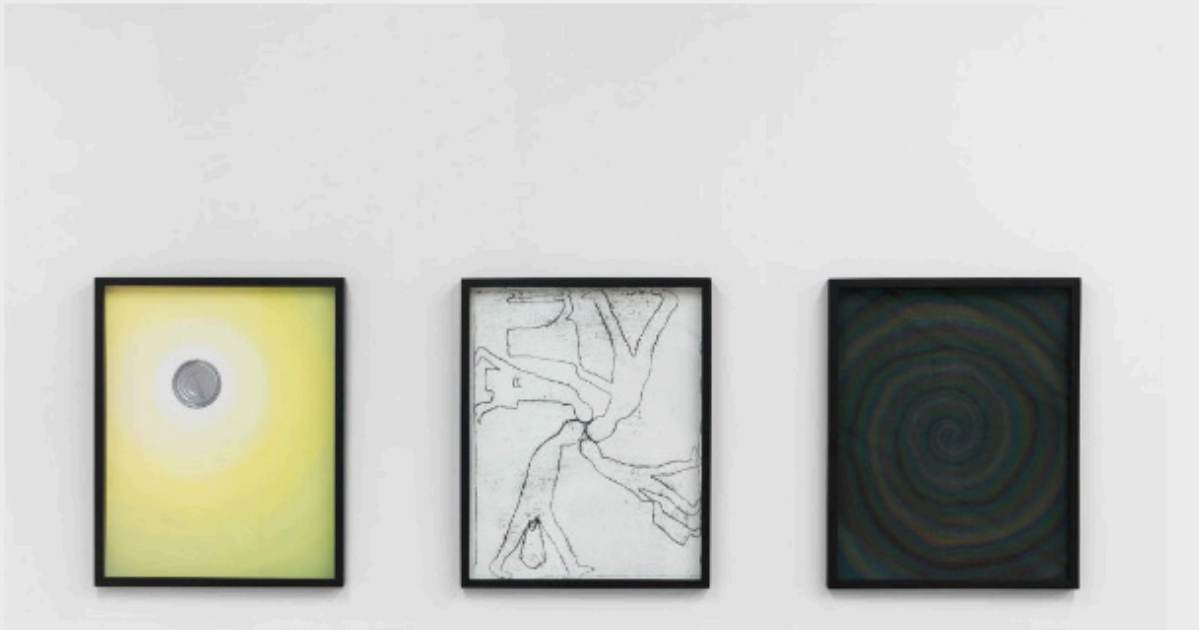
June 2018

**TWO COATS OF PAINT**

June 22, 2018

***Alex Kwartler: Tenuous survivalism***

6:51 pm by Two Coats Staff



Contributed by Sharon Butler / In "Snowflake," Alex Kwartler's recent show at Magenta Plains, small-scale paintings captured the desultory emotional tenor of 2017. Compared with his [earlier exhibitions](#), which featured a lively, large-scale abstractions alongside smaller black pictograph-like images and explored notions about surface and spontaneity, the work on view this year appears slow, dark, and extremely deliberate.

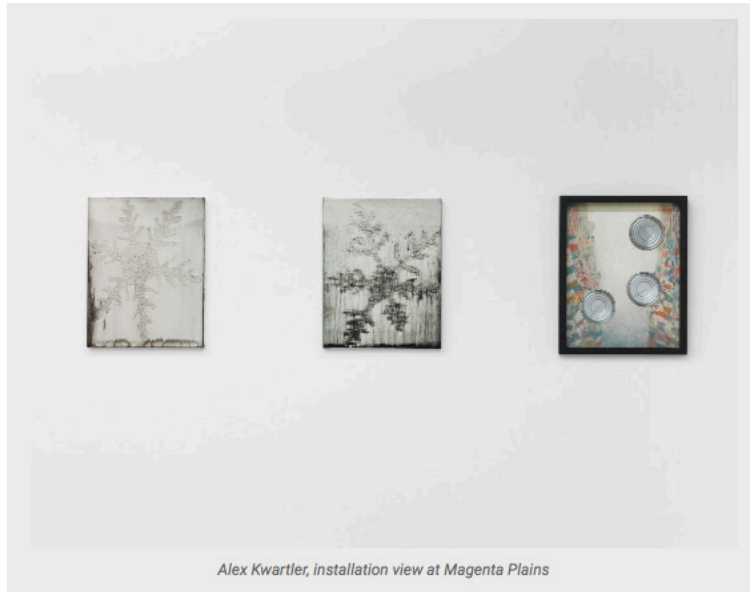


Alex Kwartler, *Snowflake (To the Harbormaster, for ML)*, 2018, oil and pumice on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

The title of the show references an epithet, originally hurled at coddled millennials, that Trump trolls adopted to level at anyone deemed too sensitive—primarily liberals—during the 2016 presidential campaign. Many of the paintings in the show feature kaleidoscope-like shapes, formed from combining outline images of people carrying bags and rolling suitcases (“schleppers”). Dark gray outlines against cool white fields, both with matte surfaces, absorb light rather than giving anything back. The schleppers seem imprinted on the surface rather than brushed, and together the figures form crude snowflake-like forms with empty star or badge shapes in the center of the canvases.



Alex Kwartler, *Alex Kwartler, Penny III*, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Alex Kwartler, installation view at Magenta Plains

Kwartler has adopted a range of different approaches for the current work. Several pieces are made on canvasboard and displayed behind glass in black wooden frames, a strategy more commonly used for photographs than painting. By arraying the paintings in this way, Kwartler creates distance from the artist's touch and imparts a sense that they are valued relics from the past. Two of the paintings, *Celebration! (After Childe Hassam)* and *Apotheosis (with tuna)*, have metallic disks from the tops of tuna cans embedded in them, with the 2020 sell-by date clearly stamped on their surfaces. In another untitled painting, a dense dark swirl, like a somber version of the background from a sixties psychedelic poster or the *Time Tunnel* vortex, is joined by a forlorn piece of popcorn, resting inside the glass at the bottom of the frame.



Alex Kwartler, installation view at Magenta Plains





Two more traditional paintings, *Penny II* and *Penny III*, feature white-on-white and grey-on-grey images of Lincoln pennies, dated 2016, that seem to be falling in the air as if during a coin toss. The close-neutral palettes are reminiscent of Luc Tuymans' early still life and figure paintings. Several paintings, black-and-white like the images of the schleppers, present traditional (but melting) snowflake images crafted with a gritty combination of dark grey oil paint and pumice, evoking snow not at the beginning of the storm when it creates a magical landscape, but rather several weeks in, after the bright white becomes speckled with ash and soot.

In their deft and knowing dreariness, Kwartler's new paintings challenge viewers to confront ugly, sad reality. They are poems about the delicate object that has survived, but just barely.

["Alex Kwartler: Snowflake,"](#) Magenta Plains, LES, New York, NY. Through June 17, 2018.



*The New York Times*

June 15, 2018

# The New York Times

## Galleries

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### NATHANIEL ROBINSON AND ALEX KWARTLER

*Through Sunday Magenta Plains, 94  
Allen Street, Manhattan;  
917-388-2464, magentaplains.com.*

What's so fascinating about virtuosic reproductions of everyday objects we don't care much about in the first place? The seven fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement sculptures composing Nathaniel Robinson's "No One's Things," one of two excellent solo shows running concurrently at Magenta Plains, capture the minute buckles and crinkles of crushed paper cups, an umbrella canopy, and a miniature blue tent with astonishing fidelity. But their fun house scale — each is about the size of an ottoman — and slightly abstracted color are enough to put them into a strange virtual territory somewhere between trompe l'oeil and the uncanny valley. They're like demonstration models of synthetic American abundance.

Downstairs, the diffident, intensely self-conscious paintings of Alex Kwartler's "Snowflake" are named after poems by Frank O'Hara and Emily Dickinson, among others, but the poet they

made me think of was A. R. Ammons. Whether he's painting wavering vortexes of nauseous nocturnal rainbows, grayscale pennies falling through nothingness, or a soot-colored snowflake, textured with crushed pumice, that fills its little canvas, Mr. Kwartler rigorously strips away every extraneous mark and gesture until he's left with only a naked, nearly colorless thought. But what this reveals, particularly in the snowflake paintings, is an evanescent beauty very much like the delicate shapes that pass through ocean foam.

WILL HEINRICH

The New York Times

June 15, 2018

# The New York Times

Nathaniel Robinson and Alex Kwartler

Through Sunday. Magenta Plains, 94 Allen Street, Manhattan; 917-388-2464, [magentaplains.com](http://magentaplains.com).



Installation view of Nathaniel Robinson's solo show "No One's Things," featuring fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement sculptures. Magenta Plains

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Installation view of Alex Kwartler's "Snowflake" paintings at Magenta Plains. Magenta Plains

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*The New York Times*

June 2012

# The New York Times

**ART & DESIGN** | ART REVIEW

## Like Watching Paint Thrive

In Five Chelsea Galleries, the State of Painting

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 28, 2012

Painting is a lot of things: resilient, vampiric, perverse, increasingly elastic, infinitely absorptive and, in one form or another, nearly as old as humankind. One thing it is not, it still seems necessary to say, is dead.

Maybe it appears that way if you spend much time in New York City's major museums, where large group shows of contemporary painting are breathtakingly rare, given how many curators are besotted with Conceptual Art and its many often-vibrant derivatives. These form a hegemony as dominant and one-sided as formalist abstraction ever was.

But that's another reason we have art galleries. Not just to sell art, but also to give alternate, less rigid and blinkered, less institutionally sanctioned views of what's going on.

Evidence of painting's lively persistence is on view in Chelsea in five ambitious group exhibitions organized by a range of people: art dealers, independent curators and art historians. Together these shows feature the work of more than 120 artists and indicate some of what is going on in and around the medium. Some are more coherent than others, and what they collectively reveal is hardly the whole story, not even close. (For one thing there's little attention to figuration; the prevailing tilt is toward abstraction of one sort or another.) A few of the shows take a diffuse approach, examining the ways painting can merge with sculpture or Conceptual Art and yield pictorial hybrids that may not even involve paint; others are more focused on the medium's traditional forms.

All told, these efforts release a lot of raw information into the Chelsea air, creating a messy conversation, a succession of curatorial arguments whose proximity makes it easy to move back and forth among them, sizing up the contributions of individual artists as well as the larger ethos.

### Stretching Painting

The 10 artists in “Stretching Painting” at [Galerie Lelong](#) don’t so much push the medium into space as meddle with its physical properties at close quarters, on the wall.

Sometimes the exercise is disarmingly simple, as with the magnified brushwork and pale colors (diluted with plaster) of Alex Kwartler’s two large paintings on plywood. Sometimes it is startlingly obsessive, as with the work of Gabriel Pionkowski, a young artist who unravels canvas, colors the individual threads and partly reweaves them into stripes or jacquardlike patterns; or Donald Moffett’s wildly suggestive combinations of furlike paint surfaces on emphatically perforated wood.



The “Painting in Space” show at Luhring Augustine, with the orange carpet of Rachel Harrison’s “Legitimo” running through it. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Kate Shepherd and Jim Lee indicate new possibilities for the modernist monochrome. Assembled by Veronica Roberts, a New York-based curator and scholar, the works here can sometimes feel a bit small-bore. This is relieved by Patrick Brennan’s “Boomtown (A long road home),” a big, bristling collage festooned with small paintings, and Lauren Luloff’s “Flame Violent and Golden,” which seems pieced together from textile remnants that are actually hand-painted on different scraps of cloth, using bleach. It has some of the scenery-chewing exuberance of Julian Schnabel, which is quite refreshing.

## Artforum

November 2010

## ARTFORUM



Alex Kwartler, *untitled*, 2013, pigmented plaster on plywood, 48 x 96".

NEW YORK

### Alex Kwartler and Elke Solomon

KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY  
54 Ludlow Street  
May 19 - June 23

Alex Kwartler and Elke Solomon's first mother-and-son exhibition of their individual and collaborative works is a multigenerational ode to light, the latest from a long pedigree of Western artists obsessed with the subject. Like the first modern master of light, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, both of these artists echo the mysteries of the natural world within their work, while also sharing Renoir's jubilant engagement with daily life.

Kwartler emits this joy through his deceptively simple series of pigmented plaster-on-plywood paintings, which lean gently against the walls like common lumber. The immediacy of his

brush marks, which dry rapidly on the wet plaster, offer a visceral sense of motion, as gray, purple, and green brushstrokes bump, careen, and crash into each other like forces of nature. This effect, made even more seductive by being buffed to a soft sheen, conjures a thunderstorm, a rolling field, or backlit clouds with breathtaking evocation that is rare for pure abstraction. Compared to Kwartler's two-dimensional panels, the elder Solomon's hanging light sculptures feel more literal, thanks to their use of cheap 99-cent store materials such as fake decorative flowers and plastic jewelry, yet they offer up a similar brand of transformation. Through her unusual juxtapositions and installations (all of the works are hung at varying levels above head height), Solomon reignites her kitsch materials with the transcendent beauty that originally inspired these trinkets.

Considering Solomon and Kwartler's shared affinities, it is unsurprising that their collaborative collage paintings work so well. Shreds of photographs, all of which were taken during a screening of the movie *Renoir*, 2013, dance across the surface of these small painted panels. Despite their simple two-step process, the works include a remarkable variety of paint handling and compositional moves. One untitled panel features fragments of classical nude imagery nestled inside a dark, spiraling vortex. It's a lovely and vexing picture that glows with corporeal magic. This work—the entire show in fact—reminds us that even in a throwaway society the artist will always find a way to pay homage to nature and beauty.

—*Ryan Steadman*

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Art In America

August 2011

# Art in America

REVIEWS Aug 27, 2011

## We Regret To Inform You

NEW YORK

at Martos

by Casey Ruble



The press release for the group show "We Regret To Inform You There Is Currently No Space Or Place For Abstract Painting" (the bulk of which comprised—you guessed it!—contemporary abstract painting) consisted of just one sentence: "We regret to inform you there is no other information for this press release." Cagey, perhaps lazy and certainly provocative, the one-liner reflects the slippery identity abstract painting has assumed since the days of Greenberg.

Featuring both established artists and newcomers, this exhibition focused on a loose genre of painting that might best be called "conceptual abstraction"—a term that was used in 1991 to describe a Sidney Janis exhibition (which included the likes of Ross Bleckner and Peter Halley) but gained little traction in the art-theory lexicon. The Janis press release was more forthcoming than that from Martos, characterizing the work as open to "narration, appropriation, language, illusion, internal imageries and the play of signs and styles."

Already prevalent a generation ago, such abstraction has only continued to burgeon, and the work in "We Regret To Inform You . . ." feels fresh: irreverent about its formalist ancestry (yet reliant on the visual pleasure it offers), committed to self-reflexivity (yet often achieving it through irony or transparency of process), unafraid of a bit of figuration (so long as it's treated as a sign along with all the abstract elements).

Jules de Balincourt offered a black, blue and fluorescent pink text piece that spells out the exhibition's title in charmingly clumsy block letters arranged in a square spiral. It's a painting of which Malevich might begrudgingly approve. Sarah Crowner pushed hard-edge abstraction into the realm of craft with an Ellsworth Kelly-ish composition made of sewn pieces of painted fabric. Alex Kwartler provided two pieces whose rainbow hues are rendered in such dark values that the paintings' material surface appears to vanish; Davina Semo took an opposite approach with two "paintings" that verge on sculpture thanks to their cumbersome medium (reinforced concrete) and installation (sitting on the floor). Most arresting was Wayne Gonzales's *Gray Pentagon* (2005), an Op-art, yet eerily emotive, large acrylic painting that visually hovers somewhere between television static and a grainy aerial photograph of our national defense building.

The show included works and artists ranging widely in age—from Olivier Mosset (b. 1944), represented by a nihilistic, Silly-Putty-pink monochrome from 1980, to Nick Van Zanten (b. 1988), whose multi-colored graphlike painting from 2010 is comprehensively subtitled *Unemployment Rates of the United States as a Whole and All 50 States From April 2008 to September 2010 Within the Range of 3.75% and 10.25% on a Surface the Size of the Weekly Income of an American at Poverty Level Laid Out in One Dollar Bills*.

Striving to be anything but capital-A abstract, paintings like these appear to gain leverage when "abstract" is used as a verb: to "conceptualize something," "summarize something," "extract something," "steal something." Viewed in that light, this exhibition's cheeky title suddenly seems a bit more genuine, and its works resonated as an intelligent force still asking to be reckoned with.

*Photo: Jules de Balincourt: We Regret To Inform You There Is Currently No Space Or Place For Abstract Painting, 2004, oil, enamel and spray paint on board, 10 1/4 by 12 3/4 inches; at Martos.*

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Interview

October 2014

Interview

# ON THE SURFACE OF ALEX KWARTLER

By Rachel Small

Published October 14, 2014



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For his show at Nathalie Karg Gallery, which opened last night, artist Alex Kwartler presents two diverging series of large-scale works made over the last year. Five paintings awash in vibrant shades of fresco paint and finished with a glossy sheen are pitched against six stark white canvases, which are punctuated by black dashes coalescing into a figure. Titled “A Superficial Lyric,” the exhibition spotlights the shallowest visible level of the art.

“I wanted to use the word ‘superficial’ to point towards the surface,” says Kwartler, who studied painting at Cooper Union. “‘Superficial’ in a literal meaning—relating to the surface, how we read the surface and the time it takes to make assumptions based on surface.”

Because fresco paint dries almost immediately, Kwartler had to make the colored paintings in quick swoops of his paintbrush, leaving a brush mark similar to James Nares’s oil-on-linen works and a meditative effect reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s Color Field compositions. On top of that is a highly reflective finish. “It’s shiny so you’re getting a little bit of a reflection of yourself in the space,” he explains. “There is a weird perceptual back-and-forth where you’re looking at the painting, but you’re seeing yourself, someone behind you, or the space.”

The black-and-white series took a conversely studied approach. Based on a small ink sketch by Kwartler, each is an attempt at replicating the original drawing at eight feet tall in vinyl paint. The finish is matte. Rather than chance reflections, the discovery for viewers comes with subjectively realizing the figure within the marks. “Some people see him walking, a figure in rain. Other people can’t see the figure at first,” says the artist. “It’s deliberately super vague...The more projection the better. I don’t want it to be too deterministic.”

In the gallery, the two sets alternate unevenly. Four black-and-white works hang close together, calling attention to subtle irregularities resulting from the reproduction process. Colored paintings are spaced farther apart, giving the expansive array of lush tones room to breathe. Surging brush marks feel especially fluid next to controlled black lines. Both series evolved from spontaneous gesture at separate stages, but, as Kwartler says, “in the end there’s a level of finish that freezes that spontaneity.”

*“ALEX KWARTLER: A SUPERFICIAL LYRIC” IS ON VIEW AT [NATHALIE KARG GALLERY](#) FROM OCTOBER 15 TO NOVEMBER 26, 2014.*



*Frieze*

November 2015

# frieze

FEATURE - 20 FEB 2015

## Formal Affairs

In recent years, abstract painting has experienced both a new popularity and a critical backlash. Can it be written off as 'zombie formalism' or are innovative approaches to abstraction really being developed?

BY DAVID GEERS

The last few years have been especially big for abstract painting, which has attracted as many impassioned advocates and opponents as it has investors. Dubbed 'slacker abstraction', 'provisional painting', 'neo-formalism', 'casualism' and 'zombie formalism' (as coined by artist and critic Walter Robinson), many of the works in question share an affinity for flatness, process-based approaches, improvised gestures and, at times, a playful sense of humour. Yet are all works that share these features alike? Before collapsing so much recent painting into morphological indistinction and dismissing it as solely a symptom of the market, is it possible to discern some productive, even critical, strains in today's abstract practices? Such may be the project of 'The Forever Now', an exhibition of recent painting curated by Laura Hoptman at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, which brackets these and other approaches under the broad banner of 'atemporality'. But rather than accept such generalized terms or reject abstraction as a category, how can we instead parse some particulars?

To begin, let's look at the term 'process'. For what unites painters as diverse as Kerstin Brätsch, Jeff Elrod, Julie Mehretu, Florian Meisenberg and David Ostrowski, among others, is an interest in process defined through gesture, and sometimes non-traditional techniques such as pouring, staining and spraying. In light of this, Hal Foster has suggested that today, like the renewed interest in performance, process acts as a guarantee of *presence*.<sup>1</sup> Process assures us of the work's unique location in place and time, of the fact that the artist is indeed present. It provides a key condition of a painting's material value, offering an earthy defence against the perfected copy and the incursions of the digital screen.



Julie Mehretu, *Vague Lowing*, 2014, ink and acrylic on canvas, 91 x 121 cm. Courtesy: the artist and White Cube, London; photograph: Tom Powel

While this rush towards the analogue by a generation of artists immersed in technology has become a critical refrain, it also manifests a diversity of responses. There are any number of artists whose work recoils into Modernist and Minimalist styles, using process to access some notion of 'unmediated' reality. We can also identify relational or Post-internet practices that attempt to dematerialize the art object while blurring the line between artist and audience through participation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is another strain of committed studio practice that invests in process, but is polluted by language, representation and new, technologically mediated conditions of production.

Brätsch, for instance, makes ample use of traditional materials such as glass, paint and paper, but hardly is her work a simple retreat to analogue nostalgia. She is a prolific collaborator, known for opening her practice to the influences of other hands as well as techniques. Her experiments in glass employ the workshop that Sigmar Polke used for his last major public commission for the Grossmünster in Zürich, while the installation *Maler, den Pinsel prüfend* (Painter, Examining the Brush, 2012) recoded Brätsch's painterly language through the media of glass and of the workshop itself, her brushstrokes preserved like flies in amber. Brätsch executes many other projects with Adele Röder as the fictional import/export company DAS INSTITUT, which polymorously dabbles in fashion, performance, painting and advertising. Meanwhile, Brätsch's signature painted works place glowing orbs and fan-like brushstrokes on paper installed under glass in frames suggesting large digital screens. Indeed, Brätsch has highlighted the resemblance of her marks to digitally produced brushstrokes; they are frequently overlaid on transparent sheets of Mylar, superimposed, at times, like layers in a design app or suspended like dissected corpses.

Still, while Brätsch's work is an almost-analytic deconstruction of painterly codes, artists such as Ostrowski elevate process to the status of fetishized gesture. More precisely, whereas process was once an anti-Romantic impulse in the hands of Robert Morris, Richard Serra and others, it now occupies the very place once accorded to the unique brushstroke and narrative expression.<sup>3</sup> To put it differently, narrative and even biography have migrated into process. This may account for the fact that, as the term 'zombie formalism' suggests, so many recent abstract paintings look the same; their distinction lies in the narratives of their making.<sup>4</sup> But are such narratives, trafficked like financial instruments in our new economy, sufficient? Is it enough to know that a given painting was made by collecting rainwater, using studio detritus or by using the artist's own anesthetized hand (Ryan Estep) or a fire extinguisher (Lucien Smith)?



Alex Kwartler, *Untitled*, 2014, vinyl paint on canvas over plywood, 2.4 x 1.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York

If some young artists deploy process within a Minimal, architecture-friendly form of painting, just as many combine process with humour to sidestep this austerity, directing painting towards more informal and playful ends. Deployed in the service of critique, humour can also speak truth to power even when such power seems indomitable.<sup>5</sup>

The methods Meisenberg employs also involve staining the canvas, sewing into it, indexing it bodily, leaving it raw. On first glance, these formal interests might bring Meisenberg's work closer to that of Ostrowski or Christian Rosa. But, whereas Ostrowski insists on a fetishized materialism and Rosa's work withdraws into the nostalgia of Joan Miró or Alexander Calder, Meisenberg's painterly gags deal with the digital detritus of phone and computer screens. Recent installations at Kasseler Kunstverein and Wentrup Gallery displayed Meisenberg's Minimal paintings alongside flatscreens surrounded by wall graphics depicting a transparent Photoshop canvas. Meanwhile, the video *You are certainly entitled to this opinion* (2014) shows Meisenberg forcibly interacting with the Siri function on his iPad. It is an awkward but also a much-needed reminder that technology is not total; there are still spaces of friction and play – even when interacting with the systems that seem to have colonized our lives. And while some, like Meisenberg, take a playful attitude, more prevalent is the strategy of using the formal structure of the joke. Here,

contradictory associations are overlapped – language/bodily gesture, precious object/mechanical reproduction, art history/lowly medium – or else, the very authority of painting is upended by a punch line. Even in Anne Lise Coste's work or Laura Owens's whimsical, text-based abstractions, the set-up is always painting with a capital P – a premise then broken, deflated, secularized.



Florian Meisenberg, *Untitled*, from the series '7 Seas Against Dandruff (Arctic Ocean)', 2014, oil paint, acrylic and airbrush on canvas, 1.8 × 1.6 m. Courtesy: the artist, Kate MacGarry, London, Wentrup, Berlin, and Mendes Wood, São Paulo

Indeed, painting still remains the institution to be demolished, preserved in its negative form, or else dispersed into architectural, and now virtual, space. If, in the 1960s, this fracture of Modernist autonomy was contentiously inaugurated by Minimalist works, today's practices displace painting into what Helmut Draxler called its 'apparatus'.<sup>6</sup> As we follow this expansion of the medium into a myriad of 'painterly' gestures lodged in video games, film, installation and performance (recall Marina Abramović's re-enacted performances displayed like tableaux at her 2010 MoMA exhibition 'The Artist Is Present'), how can we even locate what painting is today? Do we evaluate it as rigorously as we would Conceptualism, as frivolously as we would entertainment or as sensitively as we would, well, painting? The most productive contemporary approaches, like Brätsch's and Meisenberg's, invest in experiences that are conceptually complex, sensually rich and irreducible to easy positions.

Still, as painting expands into a nebula of interdisciplinarity, a corresponding gravitational pull also collapses the work materially, conjuring up the logic of the ruin and Raphael Rubenstein's idea of the provisional, demolished, 'fucked up' object that he likens to punk aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> This logic can be traced through the work of Richard Aldrich, Matias Faldbakken, Rosy Keyser, Oscar Murillo, Kasper Sonne and others.

The ruin also informs the work of Mehretu, whose architecturally inspired paintings have customarily employed geometric forms overlaid by a dizzying tempest of pen-and-ink wash drawing. However, converging with today's performative currents, the geometries in her recent works recede to near-invisibility, while the drawing comes to the fore as fields of hurried marks reminiscent of automatic writing or shadows of towns evaporated by nuclear testing. And while these works may recall the calligraphic experiments of Abstract Expressionism, or even those of young artists like Coste, they also retain their link to their architectural origins, attenuating this connection without severing it. In this way, they are perhaps more obligated to J.M.W. Turner than to Cy Twombly. As sombre explorations of indistinction, they depict collapse rather than perform it materially.



Jeff Elrod, *3 Poles*, 2014, UV ink on Fischer canvas, 2.2 × 1.7 m. Courtesy: the artist, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York, and Simon Lee Gallery, London

Of course, today's impulse to devalue painting – to literally ruin it on stage – is not entirely misplaced, especially if one contrasts it to the rosy, anonymously produced canvases of Jeff Koons. But while such devaluation, seen most prominently in recent practices like Ostrowski's and Murillo's, may seem like a counter to the look of pristine commercialism, it can also exoticize formlessness and abject materials, fetishizing the real. It bears mentioning that what is often implicit in such gestures of restaging reality as distressed ruin, is the very privilege and distance belied by this act. As viewers, we get a rarified glimpse of the abjected and the forsaken – the frisson of the demolished object silhouetted by its palatial setting. If materialist critique or anti-aesthetic levelling is the objective, this gesture – seen in galleries from Bushwick to Berlin – substitutes one emphatic materialism for another. That is, it asks us to focus on the materials of the deconstructed thing rather than critically deconstruct the material conditions framing it.<sup>8</sup>

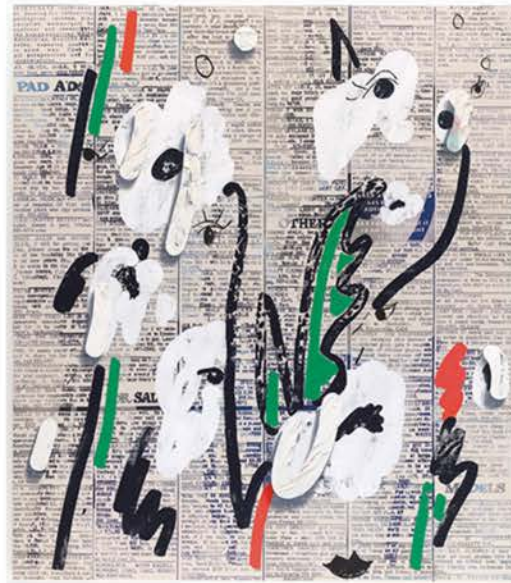
For critic Lane Relyea, rather than a form of resistance, today's homespun production segues seamlessly with corporate-advertising strategies and the new flexible, freelance economy. Is it such a stretch to connect the raw and crafty canvases in our galleries to aesthetics that privilege the tastefully outmoded and ostentatiously handmade? Along the same continuum as our casual abstraction, Relyea argues, we can also position a new appeal to entrepreneurial spirit, where workers are increasingly individuated as 'creatives' yet rendered all the more exploited and precarious.<sup>9</sup> To extend this provocative logic: in the wake of radical deregulation and the dismantling of collective labour, the aesthetics of Etsy prevail. That is, as each worker becomes equally contingent and autonomous, artistic production dons the look of small-batch, artisanal craft, complete with its modest scale, appeal to vintage patina and weathered, distressed surfaces.



Amy Sillman, *Cartoon*, 2012, iPad animation still. Courtesy: the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Bearing all these complexities in mind, how can we then reassess painting – and abstract painting specifically – for alternative and unique modes of resistance? What inevitably comes to mind is the image of agit-prop that retools the work as political design, or the model of social practice that often forsakes the object altogether. Yet, there is another version of resistance still crucial to painters that reinvests in the object and in what we might call the latent politics of the encounter.

For Elrod, painting can gesture towards critique without abandoning itself. Forms of unmoored, immaterial labour infiltrate the field of automatist marks in his paintings, less Expressionist than redolent of computer-mouse clicks. Perfecting his computer-based technique into what he calls ‘frictionless drawing’, Elrod painstakingly masks, paints, sprays or prints the results onto canvas. His 2013 exhibition at PS1/MoMA, ‘Nobody Sees Like Us’, presented hypnotic printed canvases compiled from hundreds of computer-generated drawings created in homage to artist and poet’s Brion Gysin’s ‘dream machine’. Resembling blurred photographs of landscapes, they are sublime without lapsing into Romanticism, conceptually driven without forfeiting the visual experience of the viewer. Moreover, developed initially at his former day job, Elrod’s methods recall theorist Michel de Certeau’s notion of the *perruque* or a form of carving out autonomous, non-productive and playful spaces within labour. Elrod’s work thus emerges as a kind of proactive ‘making do’.<sup>10</sup> It bears the brunt of painting’s encounter with digital technology, but also exploits this ostensible adversary for personal and artistic use.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, Flashe paint, synthetic polymer paint and oil stick on canvas, 3.4 x 3 m. Courtesy: the Enid A. Haupt Fund and the Museum of Modern Art, New York; photograph: Jonathan Muzikar

Similarly, while Amy Sillman is known for her abstract paintings, her iPhone and iPad animations fuse abstract language with narrative and figuration; all within a practice that unmoors the painterly from its traditional auratic bases. Exhibited sometimes alongside her paintings, these pieces complete a wide-ranging practice that ultimately flattens the distinctions between abstraction,

cartooning, painting and language. The young painter Alex Kwartler, meanwhile, investigates the timeworn process of fresco – a technique that demands decisive execution. His recent show, ‘A Superficial Lyric’, at Nathalie Karg Gallery in New York, juxtaposed large fresco abstractions with graphic cartoon images of a figure walking in the rain. As such, the gesture situates abstraction and illustration along the same plane. Yet while these imposing abstract works – each one humorously sealed with glossy polish – evoke blown-up details of Impressionist paintings, they also conjure large photographic prints, equal parts Andreas Gursky and Claude Monet. More critically, unlike practices that cynically evacuate the object’s affective merits under the pretext of critique, each work still communicates the artist’s investment. Here, even the cartoon images show traces of gridding, rethinking, over-painting – in a word, commitment.



Oscar Murillo, *tilapia*, 2013, oil stick, oil paint, concrete dye, thread and dirt on canvas, 1.9 x 1.6 m. Courtesy: the artist, Carlos Ishikawa, and David Zwirner, London

Such terms may, indeed, be antiquated. However, in our culture of narrowed attention spans, cynicism and spectacle, they also become quite precious. But are the moments they designate enough? We must concede that most painters – no matter how resistant in motive – still respect the traditional distribution framework of the gallery system, the art fair and the museum, and so necessarily limit their gestures to allegory. The artist allegorizes his or her place as trapped within the art apparatus but performing for a utopian ‘outside’ where painting may recall its former powers as a public art. The problem of painting, that is, remains its uncertain place between disseminated image, object of (political) faith and luxury good.

But can we also imagine a space outside of this ambivalence? Today’s technological developments ask us to recognize inexorable shifts in art’s production, distribution and spectatorship. The challenge for us is not to recoil into formalist nostalgia or artisanal myopia, but to adapt to this arena, conceiving of new modes of production, ownership and display without losing that fragile conduit that still captivates the viewer on a level of material intimacy. And if painting alone is not up to this task, perhaps we can follow its unmoored shards into new spheres of experience, new phenomenologies of hybrid objects and new demands, but for this reason, all the more meaningful encounters.

1 Hal Foster, ‘In Praise of Actuality’, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (forthcoming), Verso, New York, 2015

2 For more on the connection of relational practices to a digital ‘prosumer’ model see: Claire Bishop, ‘Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media’, *Artforum*, September 2012

3 As an ironic parallel, consider Morris’s famous essay ‘Anti-Form’ that contrasts the matter-based process of Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis to the ‘personalism’ of process that preceded it. Robert Morris, ‘Anti Form’, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993

4 See, for instance, Jerry Saltz, ‘Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?’, *Vulture*: <http://ow.ly/HcbY0>

5 We should also remember that, although humour remains a powerful weapon, it can, like the carnival, offer a temporary reprieve from domination, allowing the system to function all the more smoothly.

6 Helmut Draxler, ‘Painting as Apparatus: Twelve Theses’, *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2010

7 Raphael Rubenstein, ‘Provisional Painting Parts 1 and 2’, *Art in America* (May 2009 and February 2012), <http://ow.ly/HccuL> and <http://ow.ly/HccCx>

8 For a closer examination of this dynamic see my postscript to ‘Neo-Modern’ in *Golden Age*, Christopher K. Ho and Marco Antonini (eds), Nurture Art Press, New York, 2014

9 Lane Relyea, ‘DIY Abstraction’, *Wow Huh*, <http://ow.ly/Hcdór>

10 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988

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From *Painting Abstraction*  
by Bob Nickas

Phaidon, 2009

Alex Kwartler

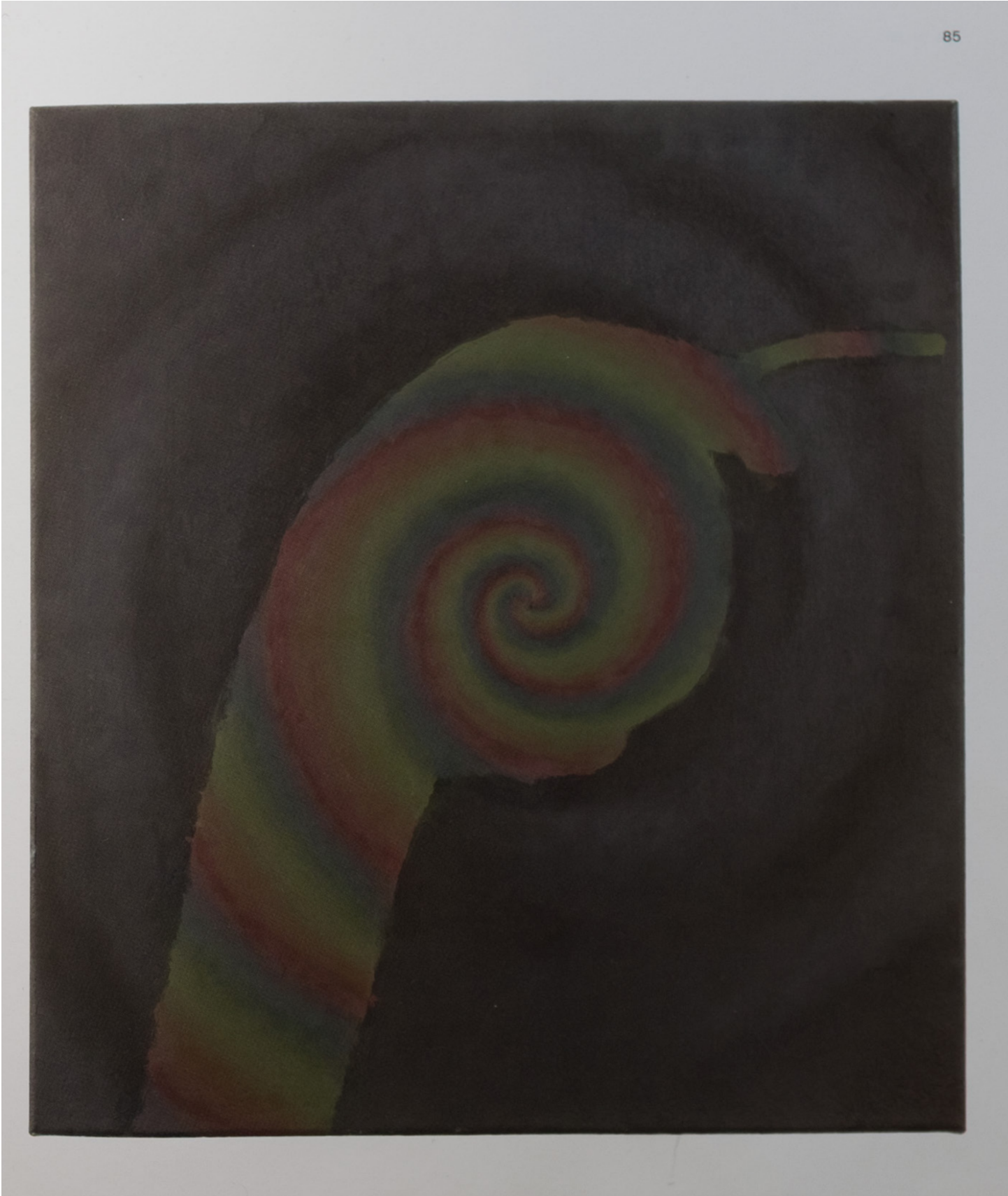
In the course of meetings and conversations, it's surprising to hear two artists whose paintings don't look in any way similar speak in almost exactly the same terms about their intentions or their procedures or their desires. Most of them overlap with general but shared sentiments: how abstraction offers a space of freedom in which to produce paintings. And actually it's worth noting just how often artists who make nonrepresentational paintings speak about images. Alex Kwartler and Julie Mehretu are two very different artists, producing disparate works that have no clear visual correspondence, no common language or subject matter, and yet both directly refer to the importance of removal, of what is taken away in order, paradoxically, to arrive at an image. For Mehretu, with her most recent paintings, "Erasure is the major action in the work."<sup>6</sup> For Kwartler, there is a process of painting and sanding the surface, of erasing, then returning back to painting, until the image begins to recede, allowing for "a ghost image to come into view."<sup>7</sup> He speaks intently of visibility and invisibility, of appearance and disappearance, of how "the painted surface becomes the locus of experience beyond the depicted."<sup>8</sup> The elusive nature of the imagery has something to do with his starting points, to be sure – he often begins with spirals, silhouettes, gradients, and the V form – but it's his aim "to retard an associative certainty" that guides his picture-making. The uncertainty of what's in front of us only opens more room for consideration, and for painting, particularly for abstraction, this is an ideal situation. Like many artists today, Kwartler's philosophy is based on the sense that in a world where images are delivered in an instant, where they are quickly processed, filed away, or deleted, viewers have become all too accustomed to "the speed of recognizability." To look at something and to see something are no longer the same thing, and one doesn't necessarily lead to the other. Kwartler states matter-of-factly that he is interested in painting an image that is about "the time that it really takes to look at something."

In the studio is an ever-present and very full ashtray, a clue of sorts to a small grisaille painting nearby – most of Kwartler's works are modest in size – which little by little reveals its image as four upright hands, each holding a cigarette. The appropriately ash gray tones of the painting, *1800NYQUITS* (2008), are offset by a vertical band of light down the center that bathes the most prominent hand and gives the painting a palpable melancholic mood. The reference to a toll-free number for people who want to quit smoking, adds a comic touch to an image that negates its title. A related painting, *Smoker* (2008), features a single hand holding a cigarette on top of a blue spiral. The background color and the spiral continue to the edges of the frame, a device which serves to double the hand. There is the visible painted hand and the hand that made the painting, unseen but present, hovering above the object itself. The crudely drawn (cartoonish) hands and cigarettes in these paintings call to mind the painted/drawn lines of a later Philip Guston. The idea of the hand doubled leads back to Guston as well. In his 1968 painting *Paw*, a hand holding a brush seems to have just painted the line on the canvas. Kwartler's hand and cigarette have a similar self-reflexivity, but in these works we see the cigarette as a surrogate for the paintbrush. The title in this sense takes on a wholly other meaning, at least potentially. If one quits smoking, does one quit painting? Another work that prominently features the spiral motif, *Toast* (2008), has at its center the silhouette of a bare foot holding a martini glass between its toes. A trace of the spiral continues off the edges of the canvas, while the silhouetted image is internally

contained, framed by a near monochromatic painted border around all four sides. The picture within the picture plays off the ambiguity of figuration merged with abstraction, and despite the absurdity of the image, we are reminded once again that abstraction comes from the facts of everyday life.

Kwartler describes the surfaces of his paintings as built-up, erased, re-drawn, and so on, emphasizing the time in which the image literally "comes to the surface" and how he regards this phenomenon as determining the speed at which the viewer sees the picture. In making a parallel between creation and reception, he also draws comparisons to artists who are important to his thinking, most notably to Morandi and the stillness of his still lifes, and to Reinhardt and the "timeless" aspect of his black paintings. Kwartler once painted a white-on-white New York City street scene (*Untitled* 2005), although it is not immediately identifiable as such, that brings together these two artists, as unlikely as this seems, in terms of the thing observed. Here, the image is an afterimage, and one arrives at recognition slowly. When we walk into a darkened room, within mere seconds our eyes adjust to the lack of light and we begin to discern the space, objects in the space, and so on. To look at the white-on-white street scene is to have a similar experience, one that unfolds in reverse: our eyes adjust to the profusion of light, and we begin to see the buildings, the cars, the flag hung from a pole. Kwartler has said that the surfaces of his paintings carry "the ghost of past pictures." This painting is its own phantom, as it encapsulates perhaps the very heart of his attitude towards abstraction, which he identifies as "the capacity for painting to create its own images."

- 1 *Smoker* 2008  
oil on canvas  
14 × 12 in (36 × 30 cm)
- 2 *Toast* 2008  
oil on canvas  
32 × 26 in (81 × 66 cm)
- 3 *Abstract Cluster* 2007  
oil on canvas  
32 × 26 in (81 × 66 cm)



Alex Kwartler





