Resurfaced

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What constitutes a painting in the wake of the postmodern period?

Despite rapidly changing conceptions of art, and the persistence of this question since the sixties, there is still an expectation that painting remains preserved in the modernist square canvas supported by a wooden stretchers. Paintings are conceived to possess either flexible supports of a cotton-based material or rigid supports made of wood, as well as the paint layered upon the surface. What if painting departed from this format and extended into the third dimension, the realm traditionally reserved for sculpture? Like Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly and other pioneering twentieth century artists, the seven artists included in Resurfaced continue to blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture through their use of various materials and methods. By redefining the painting surface—with the use of both flexible and rigid supports, employing unexpected materials, such as Mylar, resin, and epoxy, and developing new approaches to canvas structures—these artists create hybrid art objects located at the intersection of painting and sculpture.

In classifying an object as either a painting or sculpture, formal considerations of materials, technique, and appearance must be taken into account. Resurfaced considers the painting surface as the starting point, yet qualifies each work as sculptural as well. The artworks included in the exhibition have been produced not only by two-dimensional design, but also by modeling, and they exist in three dimensions. These hybrid works inhabit space in a manner unlike conventional square painting that only occupies the wall space upon which it hangs without incorporating the surrounding area in which it exists. Yet the presence of the painting surface remains a predominant characteristic in each work so that the burden of defining the objects as either painting or sculpture is inevitable and unavoidable. Although each artist in the exhibition employs distinctive methods, two characteristic ways of expanding the painting surface into the third dimension emerge in Resurfaced: one focused on materiality and one conceptual. The more material concern involves the manipulation of pre-conceived notions of painterly space in the service of both abstraction and realism. Sam Gilliam and Katy Stone create abstract works that literally project from the wall, moving beyond the confines of the flat painting surface, the hallmark of modern abstraction. Working in a different aesthetic mode, Sam Cady and Gina Ruggeri use the shaped edge of the painting surface to accentuate the imagery in their hyperrealistic still life paintings thus further problematizing the mimetic character of painting. In comparison, Jennifer Riley, Roger Tibbetts and Bill Thompson address conceptual concerns of painting. They employ new materials and methods as a means to explore issues of visual perception within the third dimension through experiments in painting surface, color, and perspective.

Sam Gilliam’s sensual, explosive forms constructed of crumpled and bunched canvas and nylon expand the tactile properties of abstract painting. Gilliam transforms the surface of his large abstract paintings, such as Poster Turban, so that they literally protrude from the wall. Reminiscent of the boldly colored abstract works by Washington Color School painters, such as Morris Louis and Ken Noland, Gilliam’s works physically project color into space, rather than optically allude to depth on the canvas. Emerging from the wall as mercurial, soft, delicate objects, the
abstract paintings inhabit the third dimension with a vibrancy that is both breathtaking and unsettling. The painter's ability to create this illusion is a testament to their skill and imagination.

Katy Stone's abstract paintings inhabit the third dimension with a nebulous quality, as if the painting descended from the ceiling and is in the midst of evolving into an object. The painting White Fall (Deluge) captures the sense of paint floating in the air, detached from any support. The shimmering surface of the painting conceals the multiple layers of semitransparent Mylar and Dura-Lar, commercial grade plastics that Stone uses as her painting surface. With references to Aristotle's four elements—fire, water, earth, and air—Stone's organic imagery retains a primal, malleable quality. The multiple sheets of Mylar appear, like sculpture, to stand on their own, or to float unassisted within space. A supportive armature, however, holds the painting surface in place. Stone's use of multiple semitransparent painting surfaces makes it difficult for the viewer to tell if the painting is floating in space or if it is supported by an invisible structure.

The trompe l'oeil paintings by Gina Ruggeri and Sam Cady accentuate the sense of three dimensionality in their objects by combining properties of painting, such as perspective, color, tone, and shadow, through uncharacteristic means. The illusion of three dimensionality is achieved by using thin layers of paint that create the appearance of depth and weight. Ruggeri's sharply delineated paintings, like those of Cady, recall the illusionary imagery of Pop Art, without the detached, ironic sensibility. The use of shaped supports expands the visual properties of the paintings.

That the painting is in fact an actual skull. This imitation exists only in the second dimension and lacks the properties of a seafaring vessel; however, the painting's illusion is the human eye. His landscape painting Morning Mirage, James Guedes mimics the topography of a natural landscape in a convincing miniature fashion. The semi-opaque form of the landscape lends a three-dimensional quality bringing the painting one step closer to resembling the contours of the real landscape, yet it remains an artificial world, impossible to inhabit. Plato critically wrote in The Republic that painters merely imitate what exists in nature and therefore are inferior artists. However, a painting imitates nature, not the surface it distances itself from the natural object. By Paton's standards, Cady and Ruggeri assume the role of tragic poets, though their skillful precision and invention in form have placed them as expert illusionists by contemporary aesthetic standards.

Jennifer Riley, Bill Thompson, and Roger Tibbetts produce the most conceptually based pieces in the exhibition. Each artist addresses properties of painting, such as perspective, color, tone, and shadow, through uncommon means or methods in an effort to broaden the possibilities of painting. Riley exploits the wall surface as an extended working space for her spectral paintings. Five Sweats traverses the colors of the spectrum in subtle gradients on the face of the canvas. On the verso, a single color adorning each support reflects onto the wall, thus creating a secondary spectrum behind the group of canvases. In the past, artists have painted separate images on both sides of one canvas, the images could only be viewed individually. Riley's use of both the front and back of a canvas within a unified composition is rare in the history of painting. By using the rear of the canvas, Riley compunds the visual experience produced on the front of the painting surface with imagery on the surrounding wall.

Roger Tibbetts also utilizes the wall as a painting surface in an effort to accentuate the properties of perspective, dimensionality, and symmetry. Ais functions to translate the perspective of two-dimensional design into the third dimension, unlike Renaissance perspective painting that focused on depicting the third dimension into a plastic image. The elliptical pieces, composed of oil and resin, project from and recede into the wall in a combination of directions that actually inhabit the space of the viewer, as if one could walk into and exist in the space of the paintings themselves. The viewer is encouraged to shift from one perspective to the other, as the mirrored image creates a sense of recession into the wall.

By incorporating the third dimension into painting, traditionally a two-dimensional medium, all of the artists in Resurfaced question the limitations and expand the possibilities of their practice. The employment of new materials and forms in painting causes an ambiguity in classifying the objects as either painting or sculpture. This conundrum of pinpointing what painting is has always existed, but its various and changing character is one reason the practice remains vibrant. The rich history of painting has demonstrated the development of the painting surface from cave painting to decorative wall fresco, from a "window into the world" to the modernist notion of a confined flat surface and, now, to the third dimension, as a matter of innovation and necessity.
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