

# OBJECT LESSONS

AN ESSAY FOR *OBJECT MATTER* EXHIBITION BY

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**“Our sensibility has shifted... demanding of aesthetic experience an increasingly literal order of effects and becoming more and more reluctant to admit illusion and fiction... It is our taste for the actual, immediate, first-hand, which desires that painting, sculpture, music, poetry become more concrete by confining themselves strictly to that which is most palpable in them, namely their mediums, and by refraining from treating or imitating what lies outside the province of their exclusive effects.”**

**— Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,”  
*Partisan Review*, 1949**

When he wrote the passage above, art critic Clement Greenberg sought to provide context for the turn away from representational subject matter in the arts. Artistic expression was downstream from the values and circumstances of the society, and the former was often a reflection of the latter. Abstraction in painting and sculpture, he felt, satisfied the demands of an increasingly positivist, materialistic society. Greenberg’s comments remain relevant, in an entirely different social moment nearly seventy-five years later, when flows of commerce and communication are dematerialized, music is compressed and streamed, and smartphone apps offer movie theaters and art museums in miniature. To the extent that our contemporary taste still demands the “actual, immediate, [and] first-hand,” it is now as a corrective to the age of digitization.

By amplifying textures and surfaces, the works in “Object Matter” offer a variety of responses to the collective cultural desire for art that is handmade, tangible, and tactile. Materiality is foregrounded in all of these paintings, whether abstract or representation— a boundary that has become increasingly fluid following decades of development in paint technology spearheaded, in large part, by Golden Artist Colors. For example, there are several naturalistic paintings in the exhibition, paintings that represent aspects of the natural world; some depict the landscape and others do not. Bob Alexander’s *Green Line* and Joel Longenecker’s *Untitled* are resolutely abstract, while Scott Bennett’s *Cedar in Snow* shows recognizable elements of the landscape. What is common to all three pictures is the way in which they make visual the tactile sensations of nature: the coarseness of eroded stone, the rugged surface of tree bark, the marked and mottled texture of the ground. Naturalism in these paintings is felt by means of textural analogues.

In the exhibition's figurative works, the physicality of subject matter is emphasized as much as that of paint materials, as in the atomized brush marks surrounding the stylized figure in Charity Baker's *Deer Bed*. In Mary Breneman's *Body Builder*, masses of oil paint define the imposing figure's musculature. A figure's hands fill the whole of Camilla Fallon's *Thinking, Hands*, and their convex composition seems to reach out from the canvas. Fish and figure blend together among the aqueous drips of Martin Hoogasian's *Big Bass*, while thick impasto calls attention to paint and process in Mark Raush's *Self Portrait*. By contrast, in Rebecca Purdum's *Untitled* drawing, a single linear form, poetic and provocative, calls to mind the budding stem of a plant.

Another quality common to many paintings in this show is the emphasis on color as subject matter. In contrast to traditional genres like portraiture and still life, color painting does not have an established set of pictorial conventions. Though first generation of color artists, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski, were grouped together under the rubric of "color-field painting," the tools and techniques of their art varied widely, and the most common element among them was their inclination to experiment and innovate. This tendency remains true of contemporary color painting, as evidenced by the variety of applications, supports, and surfaces included in this show.

Like the naturalism described above, expressive color is not bound by any genre or style of painting. Elizabeth Snelling's *Summer Flowers* and Jodie Manasevit's *Reckoning* share a similar palette, but where the fuchsias and umbers of Snelling's still life are distributed rhythmically, in *Reckoning*, those hues are broadened into separate zones blurred only at their boundaries. If those works represent two opposite points on a spectrum, the paintings by Paula De Luccia, Darryl Hughto, Noah Landfield, Ronnie Landfield, Mark Milroy, Sarah Sands, Sandi Slone, and Francine Tint fall within the boundaries. Full bodied color blooms and bursts forth from De Luccia's *Always at Noon*, while in Slone's *Joy Whispers*, poured pearlescent hues blend and pool. Color expresses mood in Mark Milroy's cool-toned *Helena*, and metallic pigments float free in Hughto's imagined seascape *Tahiti*, their radiance matched by the fluorescent tones of the central sailboat.

Patterning and repetition characterizes Sands' *Twilight*, with colors and marks becoming denser as they mass toward the work's center. A more irregular, organic pattern covers the surface of Noah Landfield's *Revealed*; its contrasting zones of light and dark recall the sky seen through a canopy of trees. The radiant, soak-stained colors of Ronnie Landfield's *At Dawn* suggest a vast horizon; similarly thinned pigments span the surface of Tint's *Spider Woman*, but her gestures seal the painting's shallow space.

Unconventional supports and surfaces abound in "Object Matter." Straddling the line between two- and three-dimensions, some are shaped, others constructed, in materials such as plaster, plexiglas, paper, and panel. Stephen Achimore wrests rigidity from paper using a mold in *MP2023-13*. In *choir (for tom black)*, len bellinger employs an additive process, beginning with a discarded or recycled material and allowing the work to develop in response to that object. Barry Katz uses sculptural techniques in *Number 4*; its porous, circular surface is constructed from plaster and wire mesh. The whirling and turbulent brush work of James Walsh's *Black and Ochre Vee*'s belie the painting's unusually dense, topographical surface, whose thickness approaches bas relief.

Surface has long been a defining characteristic of color painting, whether in the early stained paintings of the 1950s and '60s or the dense textures of the 1970s. In more contemporary color painting, surface has itself become a material for painting, in a development that proceeds as much from modernist sculpture as from cubist collage. That is, surface in the works of Berrisford Boothe, Jeffrey Kurland, Lauren Olitski, Susan Roth, Kate Stewart, and Ann Walsh, is involved in what Michael Fried once described as the "syntax" of relating disparate parts into a holistic unity. Strips of paper are woven through one another in a subtly asymmetrical pattern on the shaped surface of Boothe's *Different Elements, Specific Qualities*. In Kurland's *Aqua Light*, silkscreen mesh ripples across the canvas, with paint spreading between its ridges. The disparate surface elements on the shaped support of Lauren Olitski's *El Niño Affect* are harmonized by the all-over glimmering luster of metallic pigments.

Surface doubles as drawing and gesture in Roth's abstract *Arabian Night*, where strips and folds of painted canvas are applied in lieu of traditional brushwork. With its contrasting hard-edged and circular forms, and matte and metallic sheens, Stewart's *Arashi Cloud* maintains the appearance and effect of collage, although the canvas surface is painted using only acrylic and dye. The physicality of surface comes into play differently in Ann Walsh's *Highlight*, where sheets of colored vinyl are adhered to a plexiglas surface. In contrast to the variegated surfaces of the works described above, color, surface, and support are made nearly integral to one another in *Highlight*.

In his introductory statement for this exhibition, curator and artist Scott Bennett writes of his goal to assemble works that would not only provide aesthetic pleasure, but also teach us about the materials and methods used in contemporary art. With their variety of surfaces, styles, tools, and techniques, the works he's gathered together offer us important object lessons about the possibilities open to contemporary painting.

**Alex Grimley | *Object Lessons* | September 2023**