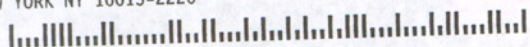


ARTnews

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PAINTING Are The Rules Changing?

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Boundary Issues

More and more painters are crossing the line between the purely abstract and the strictly representational

There was a time when the difference between an abstract painting and a representational painting was plain to see. If a painting depicted objects from the natural world, it was representational; if it didn't, it was, by definition, abstract. So, what to make of a painting that is at first glance abstract, but contains within it, say, the wheel of a car, or a human limb? Does that make it representational?

In the creative free-for-all that is today's art world, a growing number of painters are taking liberally from both approaches. The resulting works are a hybrid: neither representational nor abstract, but something in between. Cecily Brown deliberately fuses the two in her provocative renderings of sexual exploits; Barnaby Furnas paints scenes of explosive violence that hint at abstraction but are often peppered with

BY REBECCA SPENCE

cartoonlike figures; Dana Schutz distorts human subjects with the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract

Expressionism; and Neo Rauch aligns patches of clean-lined abstraction alongside his depictions of heroic workers.

At the beginning of the 20th century, some pioneering painters came to abstraction by pressing figurative pictures toward ever more stylized forms until the subjects became unrecognizable. Take, for example, Piet Mondrian's weblike renderings of trees or Marcel Duchamp's Cubist experiments with the depiction of movement. And in the 1950s Willem de Kooning's portraits of women seemed to emerge from fields of frenzied brushwork. But for most of the modern period, painters swore allegiance to their respective approaches, rarely encroaching on the other's territory. All that has changed. "We're in a time where boundaries are blurred that were previously sacrosanct," notes Madeleine Grynsztejn, senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco

Museum of Modern Art. "We live in a culture that increasingly melds and confuses previous opposites."

New York-based artist Kristin Baker concurs. "Everything is fragmented, represented, and then derepresented in the world," says Baker. "It only makes sense to be oscillating between the two," adds the 30-year-old painter. Baker's romanticized landscapes rendered in vivid reds, blues, and greens depict the spectacle of auto racing. Her subject matter is real-world enough: cars whiz around a track, sometimes colliding with one another and exploding into horrific, albeit beautiful, scenes of disaster. But the relieflike paintings, constructed with layers of acrylic paint applied to PVC boards, are far from a direct representation.

In Baker's wall-size *Portrait of a Whatever Agricultural Excursion* (2005), what at first appears to be an abstract pastiche of fluid shapes is, upon closer examination, an overturned race car. As her work has evolved over the past several years, Baker says she is less conscious of "riding the boundary" between the historically disparate modes. "I used to see them as two different things that I would bring together, but now I feel like they've dissolved into one another," says the 2002 graduate of the Yale M.F.A. program. Last spring, Baker sold out a solo show at ACME in Los Angeles, and her paintings fetch up to \$50,000 at New York's Deitch Projects.

For some artists, experimenting with a middle ground is an



COURTESY FREDRIC SNITZER GALLERY, MIAMI



effective way to capture the viewer's attention. "When people look at paintings that they can't define as abstract or representational, it forces them to really engage," says New York-based artist Elizabeth Neel. After culling images from the Internet, Neel incorporates fragments of the assorted pictures into her oils, which often suggest a narrative. In *The Disappearance of Gustav* (2005), based on BBC and National Geographic photographs relating to the story of an African crocodile named Gustav who was rumored to have devoured hundreds of villagers, a gray reptilian claw and tail stand in for the legendary animal.

In the context of this semimythical subject matter, Neel's mixing of abstract and figurative passages can also be understood as an investigation of ambiguity. "The zeitgeist of this time is the inability to clamp down on the specific," says the 31-year-old artist, whose work sells for between \$6,000 and \$13,000 at New York's Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc.

Francesca DiMaggio, 24, who first painted idyllic scenes of young women, added abstraction to her repertoire to get people to look for more than story elements on the canvas. "Covering up the figure made the paint the primary focus," says DiMaggio, whose work was most recently featured in "The Manhattan Project" at Miami's Fredric Snitzer Gallery. Now, says the artist, "the paint tells the narrative, rather than a girl in a bush."

Fusing delicately stenciled lace, reminiscent of the 1970s Pattern and Decoration movement, with more masculine elements like cranes and bricks, DiMaggio's paintings are an exploration of opposites. In *Arc* (2006), a brick archway and a stack of cardboard boxes collide with a snakeskin pattern in the center of the canvas. Says DiMaggio, "It's about the space between abstraction and representation." ■

Rebecca Spence is a writer based in New York.

OPPOSITE Francesca DiMaggio's oil-on-canvas *Arc*, 2006.
 ABOVE The tumult of a racing accident is fodder for *Portrait of a Whatever Agricultural Excursion*, 2005, by Kristin Baker.
 BELOW Elizabeth Neel's *The Disappearance of Gustav*, 2005.

