

Eva Lundsager, R.H. Quaytman, and Mary Heilman Brush Up on Their Painting

Things get drippy and trippy in three current shows of new work

By Martha Schwendener

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Courtesy Greenberg Van Doren Gallery



Flipping the Ab-Ex'ers: Lundsager's *Over Whether 10*

Details:

Eva Lundsager

Greenberg Van Doren
730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street, 212-445-0444
Through February 7

R.H. Quaytman: 'Chapter 12: Iamb'

Miguel Abreu 36 Orchard Street, 212-995-1774
Through February 1

Mary Heilman: 'Two-Lane Blacktop'

303 Gallery
547 West 21st Street, 212-255-1121
Through February 21

"Sculpture is tiresome," wrote Baudelaire in the 1840s, back when painting was the Western medium du jour. But the pendulum of critical taste swings both ways: Marcel Duchamp rejected painting after World War I; the New York School revived it; then it was declared dead in the late '60s—only to be resuscitated by artists like Tom Lawson, whose 1981 essay, "Last Exit: Painting," has gotten some renewed attention in recent years as the surging art market drew comparisons to, then promptly surpassed, the excesses of the 1980s.

The problem, which Lawson acknowledged, is that painting thrives during boom markets. People always need pictures to decorate their houses—and yachts, planes, and offices. But painting doesn't have to serve as an auxiliary to interior design; it can still be "subversive." Instead of skirmishing on the margins, Lawson theorized it could operate at "the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble." His model was David Salle—which was kind of like Baudelaire putting his money on Constantin Guy (in other words, the wrong painter of the moment). But Lawson's ideas might still hold up. Three painters currently showing in commercial galleries could put his theory to the test.

In the relatively traditional painting category is Eva Lundsager, whose exhibition is, appropriately, on 57th Street, where the midcentury painters she borrows from showed. Lundsager's paintings dip heavily into the New York School's bag of tricks, using the

drips of Pollock (et al.); the concentrated, frenetic gestures of Joan Mitchell; and post-painterly washes of diluted pigment as fodder. Only Lundsager almost comically rearranges them, literally turning Ab-Ex's sacred devices on their heads.

After the pigment drips down the surface of her canvases, she flips them upside down and continues to paint, so that the downward drips now defy gravity and end up looking like waving sea plants, flames, or stalagmites. Morris Louis—like streaks slide sideways across the canvas; abstraction merges with landscape. Lundsager quotes oddball visionary painters like Marsden Hartley, mid-century watercolorist Charles Burchfield, and symbolist Odilon Redon. The results of this motley mix are a fabulous affront to high modernist ideas of painterly "purity."

Downtown, you've got R.H. Quaytman, former director of the recently closed gallery-collaborative Orchard—which was virtually across the street from Miguel Abreu, where her current show is. Quaytman's paintings are considerably less painterly than Lundsager's: Most are silk-screened onto wood panels; a few are covered with iridescent diamond dust. One group of paintings—although not hung in a serial arrangement—starts with a scintillating-grid motif: a phenomenon discovered in 1994 by one E. Lingelbach in which black dots appear and disappear when you look at a grid of gray lines painted in a black field, with white dots at their intersections.

What you've got, in essence, is a conflation of Op Art with Jasper Johns: The grids, like Johns's encaustic targets or flags, are a painted version of the "thing itself" rather than a representation of it. Only Quaytman drags the game of conceptual painting out further with additional panels depicting a photographed version of the scintillating-grid painting (the optical illusion doesn't work as well from this remove) and a lamp shining on a grid painting (perhaps the "original" grid painting, perhaps not). In addition to Johns and Op Art, Quaytman pays homage to Po-Mo practitioners like Jack Goldstein and Troy Brauntuch (both mentioned in Lawson's essay), for whom perception, representation, and the reproduction of images were key issues.

Then there's Mary Heilman, whose way overdue retrospective at the New Museum, which closes on January 26, has been joined by a show of new paintings at 303 in Chelsea. Heilman is the current master of painting that looks effortless—only it took her 40 years to get there. (Along with Thomas Nozkowski, she's perhaps one of the most imitated painters working today.)

The New Museum show includes all brands of Heilman trickery, from truncated drips of paint to nesting canvases and brushstrokes that look like meandering Mobius loops. Canvases like *Surfing on Acid* (2005) suggest the origins of her bright, California palette (Heilman actually studied ceramics with macho potter Peter Voulkos at Berkeley in the '60s). But then works like *French Screen* (1978) prove that Matisse has as much to do with it as Ab-Ex, Ellsworth Kelly, Albers, and Klee.

At Heilman's 303 show, her signature, riotous color is juxtaposed with black-and-white paintings that contrast asphalt roads with the dividing lines painted on them. Two-Lane

Blacktop (2008) takes its title from Monte Hellman's 1971 cult movie about drag racing, while Vanishing Point (2008) feels like an unstated reference to Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph The Road West (1938), in which the road recedes into the distance, the perfect, modern illustration of one-point perspective.

Throughout Heilman's shows, there's a self-deprecating hippie humor that undercuts the bombastic rhetoric of Ab-Ex and posits painting as actually fun: an antidote to the angst of the 10th Street crowd and the brinksmanship of minimalism and conceptualism. She is a member of the generation that pulled painting out of the wreckage, but in Lundsager and Quaytman's work, those battles are distilled into a different kind of mandate: It's more than just OK to conflate Ab-Ex and Pop, Burchfield and Mitchell, or Johns and Bridget Riley—it's expected.

Painting now can function, à la Lawson, at the center of the market or within the endgame of postmodernism (or post-postmodernism). Its status, like everything else in the art world, could change at any minute. Except, when a medium's weathered everything, literally, from ancient volcanic eruptions to the invention of the Internet, I doubt painting needs to be looking over its shoulder.