

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning blogazine, primarily about painting

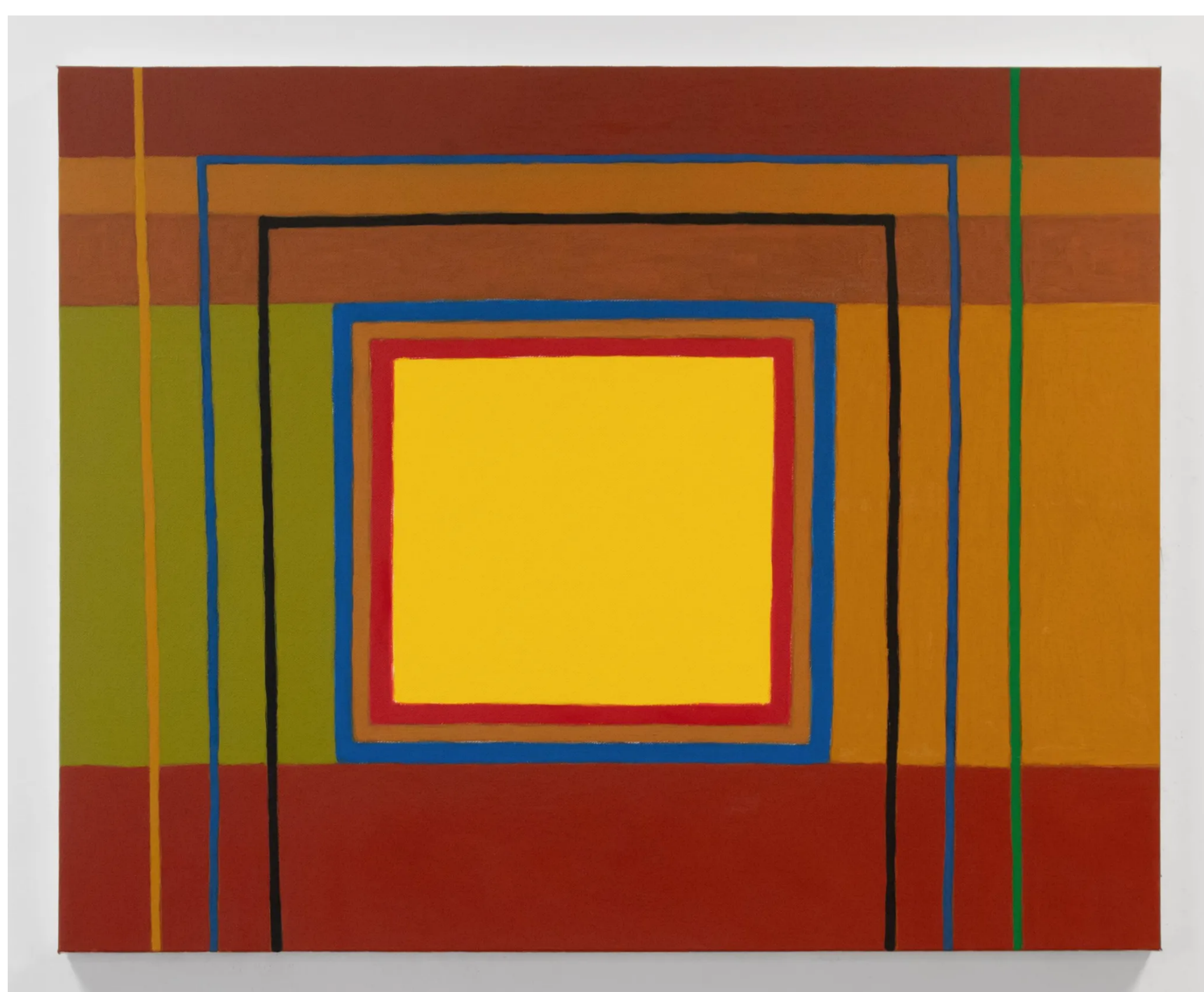
MENU



IDEAS ABOUT PAINTING

A (mostly appreciative) response to Saul Ostrow

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At Thomas Erben through March 2: Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2022, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

Contributed by Adam Simon / I was struck by the last two sentences of Saul Ostrow's essay, "[Painting simulacra: Brice Marden, David Reed, and Gerhard Richter](#)." He writes: "Marden, Reed, and Richter have sustained abstract painting's aesthetic and cultural value as a mode of resistive thinking. In most cases, though, this has been misread or at least subsumed by its own model, thereby giving rise to the kind of acritical aestheticism and nostalgia that bolsters painters who promote gestural abstraction as a genre or motif rather than a mode of inquiry." It took a minute to unpack this statement and allow it to sink in. Ostrow's critique is dense, and appears to implicate most contemporary gestural abstract painters as well as contemporary criticism that dismisses the possibility of radical formalism.

Ostrow's claim seems to be that abstract painting is inherently self-reflexive and historically aware. Forms are inherited and repurposed by each generation. Assumptions are constantly being upended, both on the part of the practitioners and of the audience. In the second paragraph, he says the works of Marden, Richter, and Reed "are a response to the intricacies of abstract painting, and highlight their audiences' habit of seeing their expectations, rather than what is actually presented to them." One wonders if that assessment might apply to most art viewing.

All but three (Mary Heilmann, Harriet Korman, and Eva Hesse) of the artists mentioned in the article are male. I take this as reflecting not Ostrow's own bias but that of the historical period he is most focused on and the art market during that period. One could take the general topic of the decoupling of the painterly gesture from spontaneity, emotion, etc., and apply it, to varying degrees, to a number of female painters from a later generation. A sampling might include [Jacqueline Humphries](#), [Suzanne McClelland](#), [Charline von Heyl](#), [Andrea Belag](#), and [Jill Moser](#). There are numerous others.

That said, it makes sense to designate Marden, Richter, and Reed as representing a shift from abstract painting as "expression of subjectivity or its reiteration of formal problems" to "the canvas's potential as a conceptual space." Reed is not as widely known as Marden or Richter but his representation by Gagolian, beginning in 2017 with an [exhibition of his work from the 1970s](#) curated by Katy Siegel and Christopher Wool, signals increased prominence. All three artists seem genuinely invested in the painterly gesture while remaining hyper-aware of the implications of its use. This parsing of formal decisions, where art and philosophy merge, is something Ostrow does exceptionally well. Here he situates all three painters in the context of post-Minimalism, with its rejection of both Minimalism's formal rigor and Abstract Expressionism's romantic and grandiose rhetoric.



David Reed, *Painting Paintings (David Reed) 1975*, curated by Katy Siegel and Christopher Wool. Installation at Gagolian in 2017. (Screen grab of Rob McKeever image.)

None of the artists mentioned in the article show up on an internet search for post-Minimalist artists, but it's a woefully vague category anyway and I think Ostrow's treatment of it makes sense. I hadn't thought about the fact that post-Minimalism was coterminous with post-Structuralism. There are key phrases in Ostrow's text that reflect post-Structuralist language. I'm thinking of "the illusion of an impossible spontaneity," "a simulacrum of spontaneity and process," or "simulation of authenticity." Ostrow refers to Richter making "representations of abstract paintings," a mind-fuck of a phrase that warrants an article of its own. I'm reminded by all of this of one of my favorite examples of painting as a complex mode of thought: the post-Structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault's essay on Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas*, which appears in his book [The Order of Things](#).

One could take issue with the historical specificity of Ostrow's premise. He zones in on the brushstroke as a signifier and abstraction as a genre, but it's possible to look at the entire history of Western painting and see assumptions constantly upended and formal propositions iconoclastically applied. Isn't that what Manet did with the motif of the reclining nude when he painted *Olympia*, or what seventeenth-century Dutch painters did when they chose to focus on normal people and everyday lives? What makes Ostrow's premise compelling is not the repurposing of the loaded brush stroke per se but the entire social and historical context in which a loaded brush came to represent authenticity and subjectivity in the first place. To cover that would require looking at the rise of the bourgeoisie leading to the primacy of the individual, the evolution of existentialism, and who knows what else.

To me, the most intriguing application of the idea of painterliness as constituting something other than an indexical result of an action is to the work of [Brice Marden](#). Even more in death than in life, Marden is seen as the Zen master of painterly abstract painting. I had never known anyone to identify artificiality in his gestures until I read Ostrow's essay. Maybe I just need to get out more. It's interesting, though, that what could seem to detract from the sublimity generally associated with his work in Ostrow's essay becomes an additional way to understand his oeuvre. Rather than taking away from the "authenticity" of what Marden accomplished, Ostrow contextualizes it within the intellectual discourse of post-Structuralism. An awareness of the full, layered meaning of an action doesn't have to diminish its effect. Art is one of the primary areas of human experience in which something can be itself and its opposite simultaneously. I see the work of these artists in that light.

Of interest:

["Harriet Korman, Portraits of Squares,"](#) Thomas Erben Gallery, January 18 – March 2, 2024

About the Author: [Adam Simon](#) is a New York artist and writer. His recent paintings combine corporate logotypes, stock photography, and tropes of modernist design.