
The Indiscipline of Painting

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Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture Part III', *Artforum*, June 1967, pp.24-292. Interestingly in the following issue's letters pages the painter Jo Baer picks this phrase up, likens it to Donald Judd's similar position and rebuts it. Jo Baer, 'Letters', *Artforum*, September 1967. It is worth pointing out though that Judd of course expressed dissatisfaction with both painting and sculpture during this period—but within his writing and vision was surprisingly catholic and 'messy', a quality I very much like. Donald Judd, 'Local History', 1964, in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York 1975, pp.148-156.

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It is important to recognise that modernist abstraction has a pre-history. For a summary see James Elkins, 'Abstraction's Sense of History: Frank Stella's "Working Space" Revisited', *American Art*, vol.7, no.1, Winter 1993, pp.28-39. Or Markus Bruderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction*, exh. cat., Foundation Beyeler, Basel 2001.

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Still one of the best introductions to this period, and a book that was to prove important to artists like Judd and Morris in the mid-1960s when it was widely read in artist circles is Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, London 1962.

Painters have always had a very particular relationship to the history of their discipline. *The Indiscipline of Painting* is about this relationship. As such this is an exhibition that is framed by my own concerns as a painter, or more particularly perhaps as an 'abstract' painter. It was conceived in the studio, and was stimulated by the same broad question that leads me to make paintings. How can an art form that is so indebted to, and informed by, its long and rich history still make a space for itself in today's world? How can this 'antique mode'—to use the American artist Robert Morris's summation of painting way back in the mid-1960s—still be credible today?^[1] And how does the reflection on past art—past painting and the past debates about painting—animate the painter and lead him or her to make new works, which embrace the present whilst being enveloped in their own unique form.

As a painter one is acutely aware that abstract painting has a history, or rather a past.^[2] It will forever be bound to modernism, the last century and the modern movement. Entwined with that past are ideas of progress, freedom, certainty and mastery, ideas that since the mid-1960s, and certainly today, artists have sought to question. These ideas of advancement and independence ring true whether one thinks back to the early twentieth-century ideological avant-gardes, or the later self-reflexive tradition of modernist painting. It is worth pointing out though, that there are two main strands of non-objective art within the Western tradition, and although related they are not necessarily always theoretically compatible. Many of the artists in *The Indiscipline of Painting* have found creative tensions in recognising and utilising this discordance. Through contemplating the histories of the discipline they have found opportunity and a space in which to work.

One Western tradition of abstract art is built upon a deliberate reaction against convention. Its initial avant-garde proponents, such as those artists associated with Russian constructivism, saw the medium as revolutionary and as offering a true break from a past that they wished to overcome. Abstraction was a medium that through its revolutionary and radical nature—its difference from past bourgeois, religious or aristocratic art—had an ability to influence other spheres of life and was consequently

positioned by artists to be able to engage directly in the political and social struggle. It was a new type of modern expression, fully connected with social, technological and political thinking, and able to put, in the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's slogan, 'Art into Life!'^[3] This was, of course, an artistic movement that encouraged and found a progressive zeal in a type of emancipatory inter-disciplinarity, with the forms and motifs from paintings happily being co-opted for architectural, typographic and design innovations.

The other main tradition of abstract art found value entirely in the way a work was made and how it looked 'visually', in what was called its form. This type of formalist abstraction is now most readily associated with two critics: the British Bloomsbury writer Clive Bell, writing in the early decades of the last century, and the American mid-century critic Clement Greenberg who produced a highly influential account of the rise and development of modernist painting and the primacy of American abstract expressionism. The roots from this tradition of formalism are entwined with the Russian model, but also, more importantly, with the fin de siècle idea of 'art for art's sake'—a detached critique which saw the value of art as being independent of all moral, political or social engagement.

Clement Greenberg, whose shadow over subsequent generations of artists on both sides of the Atlantic was to prove increasingly stifling, saw painting as remaining critical in a very specific and programmatic way. This was through a continual process of refinement—a process that had the potential at least to be viewed as being able to detach painting from any direct engagement with the world that surrounded it. This was a world apart, open to all, where the visual and the formal held precedence.

For Greenberg, modernist painting could be seen as detached, as it was focusing on an internal dialogue that sought to define its very character. This progressive refining, one that emphasised the unique qualities of the medium, saw painting develop through generations of artists, from Edouard Manet to Paul Cézanne and beyond, subconsciously and consciously stressing the material and visual qualities of painting itself. These qualities—or

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The origins of the concept of 'material-specificity' though championed by modernist critics and artists like Greenberg and T.S. Eliot, can in fact be traced back to Gotthold Lessing writing in the mid-eighteenth century. The German critic argued against the Roman poet Horace's dictum 'as is painting, so is poetry'. He thought the two art forms were very different, with poetry focusing on a relationship to time and painting to space. For Lessing an artwork's value related directly to its engagement with the unique characteristics of its own medium. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, 1766, trans. Edward Allen McCormick, New York 1984, p.91.

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This self-critical tendency, whereby each art would reveal 'what was unique in the nature of its medium', is clearly opposed to any form of interdisciplinarity. For Greenberg, the history of modernist painting could be seen as a project that searched out and then tested the 'working norms' or 'conventions' of painting. These 'norms' Greenberg famously defined as 'flatness and the delimitation of flatness'. By stressing these attributes, painting could be seen to have abandoned the illusory space in which pictorial representation took place, and consequently embraced ever-increasing levels of abstraction.

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Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting', *October*, no.16, Spring 1981, pp.69–86.

'norms' as Greenberg was to term them—included the flatness of the picture plane and the delimitation of that flatness through the way the paintings were made. This tradition was one that revolved around painting's distinctiveness from other artistic media and what was called its 'material-specificity'.^[4] In its most extreme forms this saw painting being championed, by critics at least, for being ideologically disconnected from the social and political world. It distorted many artist's motives and left some of the American colour field painters as seeing themselves as part of a grand developmental scheme, a scheme which theoretically could reach an end, when those 'norms', particular only to painting—were finally expressed with perfect clarity and purity.^[5] For some critics this endpoint, the endpoint of modernist painting, would surely come as painting reached an apogee and an impasse in minimalist works and the monochrome canvas.^[6]

It is this history, and its ramifications, that is re-interpreted, (appropriated) and called into question by the artists included in *The Indiscipline of Painting*. The 'indiscipline' of the exhibition's title refers to the porous borders that current practice has re-found in the 'discipline of painting'. The charged word 'discipline', with its controlling and restraining connotations, alludes to Greenberg's modernist aesthetic,^[7] an aesthetic which is now broken or has been permeated, as painting forges new conceptual partnerships and reconnects to old pre-modernist allegiances.

The Indiscipline of Painting, then, is about the way recent painters relate to this shared history. It explores the changing relationships that painters from the 1960s to the present day have had with the ideas and beliefs of modernism, modernist painting and minimalism. But it is also about the specific use of what I would call a 'graphic language' in recent abstract painting. And that significantly complicates matters. For though this graphic language is formally and theoretically linked to the traditions in twentieth-century abstraction, it is also shared with the world of commercial design and contemporary culture. How can contemporary artists make work that somehow responds to this situation? And how can they do so *in*

painting—within the constraints of a medium that can now, perhaps, seem too dated, too retinal, too formal, and forever tied to an ideology that once promulgated its own self-assured status. Not to mention a market that panders to the fleeting trends and fashions of the day? Indeed, today, does the genre that we might call abstract painting still really exist at all? For is there not a real sense that paintings that purportedly 'look abstract' are in part mere representations of what abstract paintings were (and stood for) in the past?

So the questions that you might hold with you when looking and thinking about these works are deceptively simple ones. How do these paintings address both the contemporary world and the history of their medium? And how does each of these artists re-write and interpret the history of their medium so that they can create a space in which to work?

I see the artworks in *The Indiscipline of Painting* as answering these questions in a variety of different ways. The questions are implied through the exhibition's installation, through the connections that the viewer can make between works, and through each of the paintings possessing what might be called multi-faceted qualities. That is, they have the ability to speak and connect meaningfully both to painting's past and to the present. The artists seem to have the capacity to absorb and connect to contemporary social and cultural contexts, as well as to reflect upon the shifting reception of the medium's historic development. As abstract art they can be seen as being tied to the twentieth century, but that reflection is entwined with ideas of how the artist sees the present in relationship to the past. The challenge the artists in this exhibition seem to face is how to make work that recognises this particular situation, and moves beyond the confines of a historical legacy.^[8]

The Indiscipline of Painting is an exhibition of works by forty-nine different artists, but it is also an exhibition about connections—connections between paintings, connections that are sometimes explicit and sometimes not, connections that are at times formal and at other times bound by biography or by shared dialogues and concerns. However, the individual nature of each work

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Greenberg saw 'the essence of modernism' residing 'in the use of characteristic methods' of each individual 'discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench more firmly in its area of competence.' Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', 1960, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brien, Chicago 1993, pp.85-93.

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Perhaps these paintings can be seen to have a desire to operate after what Andreas Huyssen described as 'the great divide'. They are illustrative of a type, or model, of painting where the blurred boundaries between high culture and the mass media neither prevent painting drawing meaningfully from its historical roots, nor disavow painting's relationship to broader contemporary culture. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana 1986.

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For good accounts of this tendency in respect to Stella and Warhol see Caroline A. Jones, 'Frank Stella: Executive Artist' and 'Andy Warhol's Factory: Commonism, and the Business Art Business', in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago and London 1996. With respect to Palermo see Christine Mehring, *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era*, New Haven and London 2009. Regarding Gene Davis and specifically *Give Away* see Douglas Davis's contribution to Jacqueline Days Serwer, 'Give Away', in *Gene Davis: A Memorial Exhibition*, exh. cat., Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1987.

is important. It is for this reason that short essays have been commissioned focussing on a single work by each of the artists.

Even paintings that were realised as part of great series retain their identity as singular works. They are particular, specific, one-off objects that need to hold their own as such. This rings true for those artists whose practice blatantly mimics methods of serial production, be it through the executive rationale of Frank Stella's series, Andy Warhol silk-screening in his Factory, or Blinky Palermo manufacturing his cloth paintings or *Stoffbilder* works. And of course these ideas were pushed

to a limit with the multiple canvases created by Gene Davis, Douglas Davis and Ed McGowan from their extraordinary Fluxus-inspired performance *Give Away* of 1969.^[9] Even when artists are working in series in a less self-conscious manner, it is worth recognising that they are still perhaps tied to a way of working that has been influenced as much by modern methods of (market-

orientated) production, as it has by ideas of the work possessing an inherent logic for continual development or refinement. Ironically, the importance of the singular work is also true for those artists who have sought to challenge and question it most directly. There is an element of self-sufficiency within all individual paintings, even when artists have been inspired by, and draw from, anti-painting and conceptual art strategies. This rings true where individual pieces were conceived as part of larger divergent formal installations, as for example in the work of Richard Tuttle or Martin Barré (above). It also applies to those artists who,

through reflection on the broader theoretical concerns attached to painting, work conceptually to interrogate its status—concerns such as the way paintings address issues of individual authorship, the market, the institutions of art and patronage, and the social implications of display. The artists associated with B.M.P.T. (the collective acronym used by Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni as they developed a collective practice in mid-1960s) could be seen to do this, as they shared each others' styles and made work that through its generic nature, focused on its installation as much as its objecthood. Though referring to painting it perhaps wasn't

painting at all—as it had undermined so many of the assumed conditions that popular wisdom would see as defining painting. More recently, the artist Cheyney Thompson can be seen to quote 'painting' (the activity, the object and its reproduction) as a way to question or focus on its social and economic position in culture.

The most obvious connection between the works in *The Indiscipline*

of *Painting* is, of course, that they demonstrate a personal selection, made at a particular time. It is as a painter that I have chosen these paintings. They all have a real pertinence for me now—not as objects for art-historical scholarship but as possessing a living, real engagement with ideas. That said, I could not have accomplished this project without the unwavering support of Martin Clark, the Artistic Director at Tate St Ives, and Sarah Shalgosky, Curator of the University of Warwick, who initially invited me to develop this exhibition. Together we navigated the terrain—a terrain, that stems from post-minimalist painting, and which, in truth, is far too vast to offer itself to



Exhibition view: *Martin Barré*. ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1979. © Estate of Martin Barre, AGDP/ DACS London 2011. Photograph: André Morain

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This refers to Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence'. Bloom argues poetic, and by extension art, history is structured by Oedipal drives. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford 1997, p.30.

anything but a very partial and partisan study. So even if the paintings are drawn from just a few exclusive pockets of interconnected artistic activity in Europe and North America, and the selection happily disregards some well-known and wonderful works, the final group of paintings makes perfect sense for me. But this is not an exercise in self-indulgence. I also wanted to show people paintings that I am very enthusiastic about, that I find curious and wonderful and think they might not know.

Of course I am fully aware that the perspective of this exhibition is just one of many vantage points from which to view these paintings, and by framing the show around the problematic

position of abstraction, other perspectives may have been lost. Indeed many (maybe all) of these works, whilst referring to abstract art, are representational or concrete or 'against' abstraction and could easily find a place in the theoretical dialogues around pop art, post-conceptual art, the gendered politics of 'pattern and decoration', and the expanded cultural fields of painting.

Most of the artists in the exhibition are represented by just one work. Sometimes this is a signature piece, a classic work that encapsulates the artist's practice. At other times it is a more tangential work and throws light on an aspect of that artist's career that is especially interesting. Some of these paintings are in the Tate's Collection and are perhaps known to a British audience, but many others, the majority, have been gathered directly from artists and from private collections and have not been shown before in Britain.

The earliest works I have selected are two pieces by the American painter Myron Stout, an artist who is perhaps not widely known in this country. They open the exhibition. They were made in the 1950s, or rather were started in the 1950s as they took years to complete. Chronologically and geographically they would fit more happily within the boundaries of New York or American School formalism than in an exhibition charting more recent practice. But their inclusion points out an important concern that runs through the show—that the culture of painting is far broader than the merely familiar and well known, and in the contemporary situation, many artists have been inspired

by a levelling of the marginal and canonical.

I see this levelling as allowing a renegotiation with past art, one that allows a more open dialogue, and which takes account of the ways culture develops and the so-called 'anxieties of influence' that play on any creative endeavour, but are perhaps felt by painters more acutely than most. [10] This creative re-negotiation demonstrates the inventive possibilities of

re-reading and repositioning oneself away from too linear or didactic a form of art history. (We re-remember that the discipline of art history itself is not just a modernist invention.) Indeed this attitude emphasises that there can never be an authoritative idea of history. Stout fits this bill. For though the work emerges from the context of abstract expressionism, these incredibly hard-won and slowly executed paintings can be seen as being more pertinently in dialogue with later artists' work. Stout found particular favour with subsequent generations of avant-garde artists, like those associated with Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery in New York in the 1960s (above).



Exhibition view: *Group Show*, Green Gallery, New York 1961. Photo shows: Myron Stout's *Untitled Number 2*, 1956 (centre), flanked by from left to right, works by Claus Oldenburg, Lucas Samaras, Mark di Suvero and Oldenburg. ©Rudolph Burockhardt/DACS London 2011

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I am thinking here of a number of intersecting trajectories. Such as: exhibitions like *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* (New York, Independent Curators, 2006) that charted the development of a type of painting in New York that expunged Greenbergian aesthetics yet remained framed within the boundaries of abstract painting; the continuing importance of artists associated with Konrad Fischer Gallery such as Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, and more marginal figures like Bob Law; as well as those French and Swiss artists who comprised B.M.P.T. whose collective works, subsequent practice and legacy still inform current debate. Each of these trajectories has been recognised within this exhibition.

Aside from Myron Stout's paintings there are also examples of work by some of those near-mythic figures in post-war art, artists like Gerhard Richter, Blinky Palermo and Robert Ryman, whose on-going contribution to recent painting can never be over-emphasised, and whose influence must be negotiated by later generations of painters, as they, like them, ask what is crucial in their discipline. Yet these great artists are not necessarily to be seen as obstacles to be overcome; their presence in this exhibition points to the unfinished business within their practice. I think the selected works still speak directly to the concerns of later generations. Although Palermo's cloth paintings, or Ryman's first regulated monochromes, might have been assimilated into standard art histories, I see the problems and questions they continue to pose about how painters view the identity of paintings as still vital. Indeed both Palermo and Ryman, in very different ways, remind us to examine the beauty and materiality of painting through its unique position in a broad and competing arena of other visual and material cultures. In Palermo's case this is derived through a simple confident gesture with mass-produced dyed cloth. The resulting works, whilst referring to consumerism, domesticity and industry (of both the cloth and of course the painting), escapes too narrow a reading by connecting to the concerns of formalist abstraction—to colour, form and tactility. For Ryman this connection riffs between the rarefied sphere of monochrome painting and the concrete, actual, regulated and systematic brushstroke in a particular brand of manufactured white paint.

This exhibition also highlights a recurrent interest in the monochrome. For some artists this interest is expressed through the heightened sensitivities that the genre can offer, for others, through its pictorial and physical truth. There has been a re-investment in this supposedly finite position, which shows an expanded and far richer territory for painting than one might have readily assumed. It is one that is less confined to introspection and the restaging of a historically contested moment in painting's modernist history, than in the possibilities of sharing a formal language with the radical roots of painting, the materiality, even 'objectness' of painting,

or indeed the world of banality.

The theoretical debates of the late 1960s and 1970s stand behind many of the concerns of this exhibition. It was during this period that there was a tendency to consider abstract painting to be an isolated and redundant form of expression, either bogged down by the dominance of Greenbergian formalism, or drifting into minimalist practices. This resulted in many artists moving away from abstraction and painting altogether, in search of an art form that could more readily respond to the dramatic social, economic and political changes which characterised the era. But this reading, although true, is an oversimplification that has hidden many of the most interesting debates which took place within painting during these decades. Many artists, a number of whom are included in this exhibition, were acutely aware of the position in which painting then seemed to find itself. They hoped through their work to show other models for abstraction and to challenge the retrospective account of history that Greenberg promulgated—an account which both distorted the motivations of many of the artists he championed and left the discipline in a conundrum.^[11]

One example of this might be found in the way artists began to amplify how real, lived experience, and autobiography, entered the supposedly rarefied and expunged realm of painting. It is amplification because it is done with a level of self-consciousness and it recognises that a residue of personal biography and experience is always present even in the most formalist of paintings. This can be seen in the hallucinogenic quality of Peter Young's psychedelic dot paintings, or the 'New Wave' knowing slackness of Mary Heilmann's canvases, which draw, in part, on individual responses to aspects of popular and counter culture.

The appropriation of, or representation and use of some of the tropes we associate with past abstract painting, is another strand to be considered here. What is interesting is that although we might assume such a tendency to be synonymous with a particular brand of early postmodernism, when an uncritical form of appropriation was rife within many aspects of visual culture, it is more widespread. Indeed many of the selected artists recognise

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In the work of the European neo-expressionist painters, those of the Transavanguardia, and in the paintings of David Salle and Julian Schnabel, a 'bric-a-brac' aesthetic of historical sampling was visible. The critic Yve-Alain Bois, in an essay from 1987, presented this style of borrowing, collaging or using as historically irresponsible because it divorces hard-won meanings from their form. Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, London and New York 1987. This position is somewhat similar to Thierry de Duve's, when he forcefully rejects the nascent but retrograde postmodern painting practices. Thierry de Duve, 'Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue', *Artforum*, September 1983, pp.32-7.

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Stephen Melville proposed that painting after modernism relied on the tradition being divided and displaced so as to open up a new ground for painting—a ground that might, by including other media, displace 'painting' per se. Stephen Melville et al., *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, exh. cat., Wexner Centre for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, 2001. This relates to looser ideas of 'expanded painting', of which Gene Davis's *Franklin's Footpath* 1972 is an exemplar. Jacquelyn Sewer et al., *Gene Davis: A Memorial Exhibition*, exh. cat., National Museum of American Art, Washington 1987. Recent reflection on expanded painting was brought together in Rainald Schumacher, *Imagination Becomes Reality – Part 1, Expanded Paint Tools*, exh. cat., Goetz Collection Munich 2006.

and use this tendency and do so in a particular and focused way. In this way they bring out very specific critical reflections on abstract painting, modernism and the present.^[12] Although the 1980s are one focus for this activity—with artists such as Peter Halley utilising the formal language of abstract painting in diagrammatic representations for contemporary-symbolic ends, or David Diaó basing work on reproductions of very particular paintings and their representation in history—the drive to quote and usefully 'mis-quote' is also evident in earlier and later works. Blinky Palermo's cloth *Stoffbilder* from the late 1960s are also clearly, in part, a subversion of ideas in the then dominant form of American colour field painting. The early collective activities of the B.M.P.T. broke down and re-presented the very ingredients of what they saw constituted painting in such a way as to stress its antithesis.

Although all these paintings have been made by hand, few of them exhibit what you could call a direct and self-expressive handling of paint. They represent a different type of negotiation with material. They reflect a strand of contemporary anxiety that regards the gestural and the idea of self-expression as being in some sense contrived. Even those artists who use what we might call a 'painterly' approach to the handling of their material (sometimes in an apparently loose, lyrical and physical manner like Karin Davie or Katharina Grosse) do so in a conceptually detached, or once removed, way. The method is informed by displacement as much as by the corporeal and material. That does not mean that works do not record and trace their making—all of them do. Some exhibit great skill and dexterity, others a much more mundane or commonplace style of making. Some hold great speed within their manufacture and others slowness or even timelessness. The way that time is held in the making of a painting—and in its viewing—is something that has always fascinated me. How a work, and the handling of paint and material, can imply one reading but give way to another. How they invite you to read them quickly or slowly, and how their meanings unfold conceptually over time. How paintings can hold time or be outside of time, or indeed just out of time.

This exhibition, then, focuses on an aspect of contemporary painting practice that finds vitality in the languages painting shares with the competing visual cultures that surround us. It is perhaps painting's agility in absorbing such outside influence, and reconciling it with its past, that seems today its most unique quality. As such this is not a painting exhibition that stresses the expanded nature of the practice, if that encompasses how installations, films, or objects relate and can be seen as legitimately part of paintings lineage and culture.^[13] Instead, this is an exhibition that recognises the problem of thinking of painting in a historically determined way, of thinking of paintings as being abstract or figurative, of thinking of them as separate from other art. It does so in order to show the sense and non-sense of such an approach, and like the selected artists who are investigating the material properties of painting, it does so with a confidence and staginess that allows for and demonstrates conflicting degrees of both perversity and pleasure.