

# Living Colors

by Vittorio Colaizzi



Installation view, *Living Colors*. Photograph by Vivian Doering.

The paradox of color in modern painting is that it makes one yearn for its fullness disconnected from boundaries or carriers, without which it would evanesce into nothing. Turner and Rothko struck a rare balance by showing this yearning in process. The artists in this exhibition also intimate this boundlessness through contained forms that all but tremble with imaginative potential. None of these artists mount polemics for an absolute or pure state, but instead seek and find the intensity of feeling brought about by prioritizing their own methods of shaping color.

Terry Parmelee was at first known for her prints, but her paintings have since received exposure and acclaim. Something of the decisiveness of the pressure endemic to printmaking is visible in her array of colored discs, and her approach is quintessentially modernist, in that she emphasizes visual experience for its own sake. Thomas Downing used a similar motif—the circle—albeit scrupulously distinct upon a canvas field. He stipulated that the “flat, two dimensional painting surface. . . is organized so that it gains in visual depth by involving the space in front of the painting from the observer’s viewpoint,” continuing, “. . . a remarkable thing about color: that it can move while being still. In fact, it moves more when it is most flat—that is, the more calm it is. In other words, a

circle has this same feeling of equilibrium and containment, and so it defines an area in a way that lets color do more, act more as color.”<sup>1</sup> This pressing and accretion of concentrated color is also part of Howard Mehring’s method, as he combined geometric shapes of painted canvas in large-scale collages. Given the pre-eminence of the term “optical” in relation to modernist painting,<sup>2</sup> Mehring retains a pointed tactility to his mottled and saturated color, reinforced by his assertively emblematic compositions. In this way, he reaffirms the integrity of the perceiving body as a whole.

Synthesizing the visceral and optical, Vivian Springford used the staining technique to achieve multi-colored and loosely concentric effects of spreading, bleeding, and juxtaposition,



Image detail: Vivian Springford, *Expansionist Series* (VSF538), 1975

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Downing, San Diego: La Jolla Museum of Art, 1968, n.p., and Leslie Judd Ahlander, “An Artist Speaks: Tom Downing,” *Washington Post*, Sept 9, 1966, G4.

<sup>2</sup>See Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 90, and Michael Fried, “Three American Painters,” *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 227.

enriching the vocabulary of relatively homogenous blocks of color favored by canonical color field artists. For this reason, the painter and critic David Rhodes is correct to emphasize her work's "experimental and particular" ambitions, including "an almost Tantric-like meditative quality." Rhodes further claims that Springford

still-fertile field characterized by a dialectic of invention and structure. Or, as Mehring put it, "I start with a certain symmetrical image, then let the picture paint itself out in a balance between intellect and intuition."<sup>4</sup>

In 1979, two years before Douglas Crimp would excoriate painters in his famous essay "The End of



Image detail: Kimber Smith, *Untitled*, 1973

"expand[s] the possibilities for painting or abstraction, even as we understand those terms today."<sup>3</sup>



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By alluding to the idea of expansion, its possibility as well as its foreclosure, Rhodes evokes hybrid experiments in the late 60s and 70s that followed abstraction's apparent exhaustion by the logics of minimalism and conceptualism. According to this logic, if art's destiny was to elucidate its condition, avenues of distribution, and habits of construal, then to dally in construction and configuration was surely a dead end. Springford, among others, insisted upon the meaningfulness of process, imagery, and the layered temporalities at work in the studio. Rather than a completed historical process, modernist painting emerges as a

Painting,"<sup>5</sup> not only for persisting in an expressionist mode, but for daring to compose at all, Kimber Smith exhibited what were to be his late works on canvas, not unrelated to the works on paper here from earlier in the decade. In both cases, Smith strikes a delicate and prescient balance between loose execution and geometric structures whose pedigree extended to modernism's utopian ambitions. In a much-quoted review, Hal Foster notes the paintings' "nonchalance," free of the anxieties that might attend what he saw as abstract expressionist motifs, instead "sustain[ing] a delightful, erotic play," despite the "critic's weary

and anxious eye."<sup>6</sup> Years later, painter and critic Joe Fyfe analyzed Smith's approach as poised between midcentury spontaneity and the insistent sense of totality that the next generation of minimal and color field artists refined: "Smith concentrated on apprehending the picture in its entirety. A painting was not to be read as a history of its making but as a structural idea."<sup>7</sup>

Not unlike Smith, Dorothy Fratt moderates the sense of totality that hovers around some of the most recognizable modernist painters, from Mondrian to Rothko to Noland, without completely

<sup>3</sup>David Rhodes, "Vivian Springford, Almine Reich Gallery," *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2018. <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/10/artseen/Vivian-Springford>

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Jamie L. Smith, Ph.D., *Howard Mehring: Radiant*, Connersmith, 2023. <https://www.connersmith.us.com/exhibitions/howard-mehring>

<sup>5</sup>Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86.

<sup>6</sup>Hal Foster, "Kimber Smith [exhibition review]," *Artforum* vol. 17, no. 8 (April 1979): 71.

<sup>7</sup>Joe Fyfe, "Kimber Smith: The Winged Life," *Kimber Smith* (New York: Graham Gallery, 2011), n.p.

abandoning it. Fratt's forms are just as varied as her intense colors, and she never left behind intimations of the landscape. As Dr. Ashley Busby wrote, "Fratt saw her own process as a journey filled with moments of surprise."<sup>8</sup>



Dorothy Fratt, *Bird on a Wire*, 1999

A persistent concern of modernist painting has been to achieve validity beyond the personal and idiosyncratic. Consider for example the geometric figures and anti-autographic processes of color field painters who exploited the flow of liquid paint. David Headley writes eloquently of his own long efforts to suppress a signature style,<sup>9</sup> and indeed his method sidesteps the mark as personal seismograph through sheer scale and materiality of colored zones. Nevertheless, as scholars such as Yve-Alain Bois and Isabelle Graw have pointed out, the subjective can never be thoroughly repressed,<sup>10</sup> and we recognize Headley's work through the singularity of his solutions, as they touch universals of color and physicality.

Joseph Albers is undoubtedly a foundational figure in this vein, as much for his methodical exploration of color as for his



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steadfast commitment to a repeated and versatile pictorial format. One encounters Albers's nestled squares in a realm that is anything but rarefied, but manifestly here-and-now. Matthew Feyld also demonstrates the intersection of apparent asceticism and abundance by inviting the viewer in for concentrated meditation on scale, rhythm, and the continuity of



Image detail: Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square Series*, 1971

space upon and surrounding his work. His regularized marks' proximity to the edge erodes the picture's fictional realm and integrates the surrounding architecture into one's aesthetic consideration.

Even given their devotion to color, no method or paradigm unites any of these artists. Helene Herzbrun's varied career shows a wide-ranging exploration of paint, and moreover a fearlessness with pictorial construction that transcends the orthodoxies of both color field and gestural abstraction. In fact, we might reflect on the vicissitudes of history that led to the establishment of these categories in the first place. While abstract painting was never as wan as superficial accounts of previous decades would have it, it is undeniable that a new vitality by younger artists has emerged that is complemented by renewed

<sup>8</sup>Dr. Ashley Busby, Dorothy Fratt: Paint the Town Red, (Kensington, MD: Pazo Fine Art, 2022), 36.

<sup>9</sup>David Headley, "Biography." <https://davidheadley.com/about/#Bio>

<sup>10</sup>See Yve-Alain Bois, "Strzeminski and Kobra: In Search of Motivation" and "Ryman's Tact," *Painting as Model*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 123-155 and 215-226, and Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy," in Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchard, eds., *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Frankfurt am Main: Institut für Kunstkritik; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 79-101.

interest in previous accomplishments. Color was paramount in critic Clement Greenberg's formulation of modernism as the quest for an

“irreducible working essence.”<sup>11</sup>

Too much has been made of “essence,” and too little of “working.” If we define modernism, and in particular “late” or “high modernism” as a focus on and amplification of that which is most pertinent and viable in one's art in answer to the challenges of the recent past, one cannot help but recognize the flexibility and sustainability that artists have wrested from this template. The issues that arise in the studio as immediate problems of making are the threads that connect artists to history.

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Helene Herzbrun, *Stem Christie*, c. 1974

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<sup>11</sup>Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4; *Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131.