

Review Three art shows in San Diego recall abstraction's prominence

Christopher Knight

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Abstract paintings and sculptures were once the gold standard of Modern art. They spoke of adventurous aesthetic expeditions into hitherto unexplored visual realms.

Since the 1950s the figurative banner was held high by marvelous painters such as David Park in San Francisco, Jane Freilicher in New York and many others, but abstraction, nonetheless, ruled. By the late 1970s, though, change was underway.

Alternatives to the industrial forms of Minimalist art were emerging. Figures started to turn up in the most critically lauded paintings and sculptures. The secondary status of image-laden Pop art saw embryonic reevaluation. Even painting itself, considered moribund by many, began a resurgence.

Abstraction as a radical, early 20th century benchmark was finally broken nearly two generations ago. Disruptive exhibitions like "New Image Painting" at the Whitney Museum of American Art and "Bad Painting" at the New Museum were mounted in New York, both in 1978.

Three museum exhibitions currently in San Diego recall the shifting status of abstraction in painting and sculpture. Serendipitous rather than planned, the simultaneous shows — one group, two solos — of course do not offer a thorough accounting. No case is being made. But all three do include exceptional individual works that raise provocative questions.

The former gold standard is essential to the big loan show "Gauguin to Warhol: 20th Century Icons from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery" at the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park. The title names two celebrity artists for whom images were indispensable, but it's a bit misleading: The show actually begins with an 1890 Impressionist painting of rural field workers by Camille Pissarro and concludes with an abstract Minimalist sculpture in the form of a painted column by Anne Truitt, made a year before her death in 2004.

"Pissarro to Truitt" is designed to chronicle the Albright-Knox's once-adventurous collecting history. The museum now lays claim to one of the nation's finest public collections of Modern art.

A "treasures" show, it was first mounted (with a few changes) two years ago as a stimulus for a planned museum expansion that hasn't quite yet gotten underway. In 2007, the Albright-Knox got into serious trouble with a disastrous decision to sell at auction 196 works from its permanent collection. Today, a salute to building the collection rather than disassembling it is one way to change the focus.

Among the 76 works are early masterpieces by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, De Chirico, Dove, Soutine and Miro, plus an unusual floral still-life by self-taught eccentric Henri Rousseau.

The first full-tilt abstraction is an energetic canvas by Wassily Kandinsky — coincidentally himself a great admirer of Rousseau's non-academic, unencumbered style. Kandinsky painted a diagonal cascade of tumultuous, vividly colored shapes, lines and brush marks. painted in Munich in 1913. At the brink of the cataclysmic Great War, the rush evokes a biblical deluge without ever resorting to recognizable objects.

The show's second half is dominated by superlative examples of New York School abstraction, a great strength of the Albright-Knox collection. It begins with Arshile Gorky's magnificent "The Liver Is the Cock's Comb," a vibrant 1944 image of feverish erotic hunger and voluptuous regeneration.

The awful ruin of war likewise thrums within Gorky's agitated array of spiky, organic, chromatically explosive forms. At just over 6 by 8 feet, it is a pivotal painting in the history of American abstract art. The door opens to Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Lee Bontecou and more.

Bontecou stitched together rough canvas with sharp wire instead of thread. Her wall relief's tough materials evoke military fatigues and the machine shop, while funnel shapes merge a birth canal with jet engines.

Just as Bontecou finished her gutsy painting/sculpture hybrid, a young artist from outside Birmingham, Ala., was moving to New York. Jack Whitten left Tuskegee Institute to become a painter, and in 1960 he enrolled at the Cooper Union in Manhattan's East Village. He was 21.

"Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting," a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla, charts the painter's career in 60 canvases installed in series. The earliest is a haunting group of black panels with soft, vaporous clouds of spectral white shapes — ghostly faces emerging from the gloom.

The small paintings suggest black-and-white photographs developing in a chemical bath. Consciousness is their subject. (As an African American youth growing up in the dangerous Jim Crow South, Whitten had good reason to nurture being mindful.) The spectral heads, one of which is titled "Christ," gently assert that, for art, acute perception is inseparable from engagement with a painting's materials.

It also meant that abstraction was virtually inevitable. No recognizable image was essential. Whitten dropped it altogether in the 1970s.

Modern abstract painting was by then institutionally encrusted with metaphysics. Whitten stripped it away. Painting's physical facts were enough.

He began to drag paint across the canvas, using household tools like squeegees, rakes and combs. (The squeegee abstractions precede Gerhard Richter's celebrated examples by about a decade.) Some were made by pouring thick acrylic from a can and leveling off the surface to form a slab.

Another series based on the Greek alphabet suspended graphite in acrylic medium, which he combed over a ground of titanium white. Their blurry grids are a soft, non-industrial Minimalism. Whitten's approach is a type of counterculture Modernism, also explored in different ways by artists such as Patrick Hogan and Alan Shields.

Whitten engages paint and canvas as the materials of a bricoleur. The abstractions turn away from modern ideas of artistic progress — the present building on the past in an advancing march on the road to a glorious if unseen future. Instead, an unfolding process is engaged.

Unfortunately, the otherwise illuminating retrospective has no catalog. The absence is a major liability, since Whitten hasn't had a Southern California solo exhibition in a quarter-century (his only one, near as I can tell). For me, the La Jolla show was like starting from scratch.

A catalog is said to be in the works, although it won't be available until the spring (the show closes Jan. 4). By then, the retrospective will have moved on to the Midwest.

Finally, a very small but handsome installation of 19 equally small painted sculptures, most from the 2000s, by Bay Area artist Ron Nagle is at the entry to the San Diego Museum's grand Albright-Knox show. Nagle's weird and eloquent abstractions look to one of art's most ancient sources, decorated clay, to conjure exquisite little objects whose acute refinement is shot through with pain.

Take "Lobster Boy" (1999), a radiant crimson sculpture just over 3½ inches high. In profile it looks like a deformed demitasse, a dainty china cup whose handle curves around and warps into a sea monster's tentacle. But the cup is flat, like a painting, and seems to have a chip sliced out of the top. Its seemingly flocked surface is velvety, not slick, with a chrome-yellow underglaze that gives the red surface the passionate crackle of fire.

Like the work of Ken Price, plainly one of Nagle's heroes, the traditional ceramic cup is remade into something riveting and strange. "Lobster Boy" refers to the tawdry tale of circus sideshow performer Grady Stiles, an abusive alcoholic whose fingers and toes were fused into claw-like deformities.

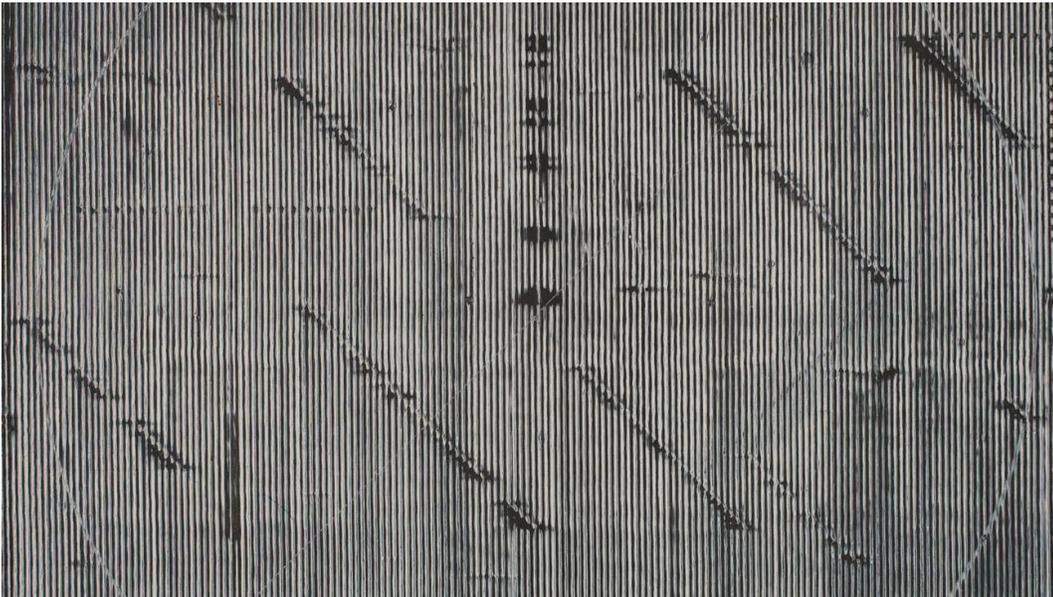
Stiles murdered his daughter's fiancé, his stepson later murdered him and his story became a tabloid sensation. Nagle's abstract sculpture shows none of the gruesome narrative, but its formal perfection and intimate scale convey an aura at once tender, odd and sinister. It's like an exquisite hand grenade.

So is "Grim Trimmins," a rectangular, moss-green tufted shape like a comfortable Victorian sofa, from which a slick black puddle oozes — a psychological oil spill. Elsewhere, a jaunty pair of swelling, bulbous shapes that flank a little red-topped cylinder turns "Bad Clown" into a dismally comic, sexualized nightmare — a John Wayne Gacy abstraction whose all-American palette of red, white and blue couldn't be more pointed.

All of Nagle's marvelous sculptures are tiny. They reverse the common trajectory of postwar American abstract sculpture, where bigger has typically been thought to be better. A full Nagle retrospective is warranted, since preindustrial ceramics turn out to be an ideal foundation for abstract sculpture in a postindustrial age.



Jack Whitten's "Chinese Sincerity," 1974, is part of a retrospective of his work at MCASD. (Pablo Mason / Museum of Contemporary Art San D)



Jack Whitten's "Epsilon Group I," 1976, also appears in the Whitten retrospective. (Jack Whitten / Museum of Contemporary Art San D)