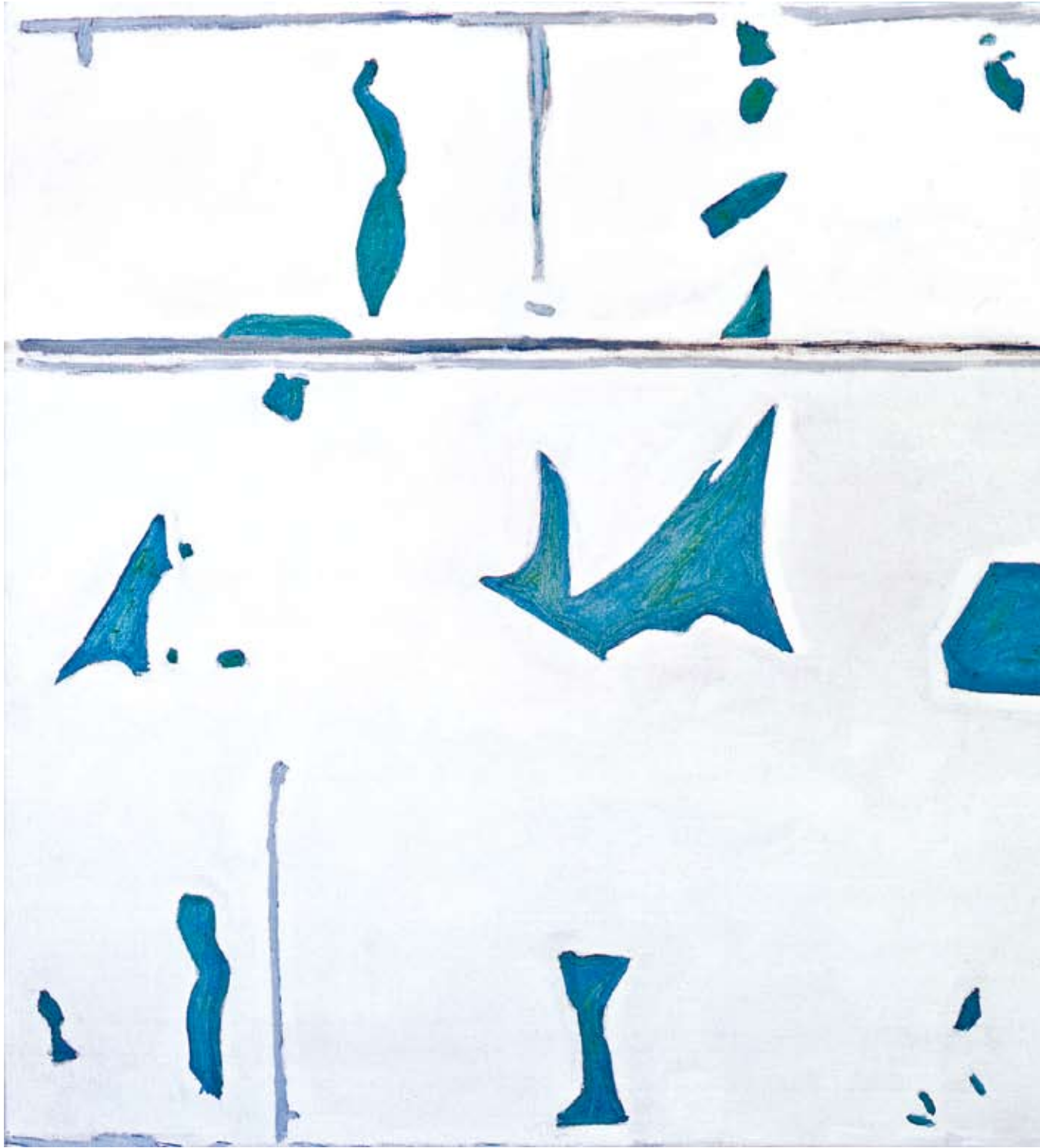


# PROVISIONAL



# PAINTING

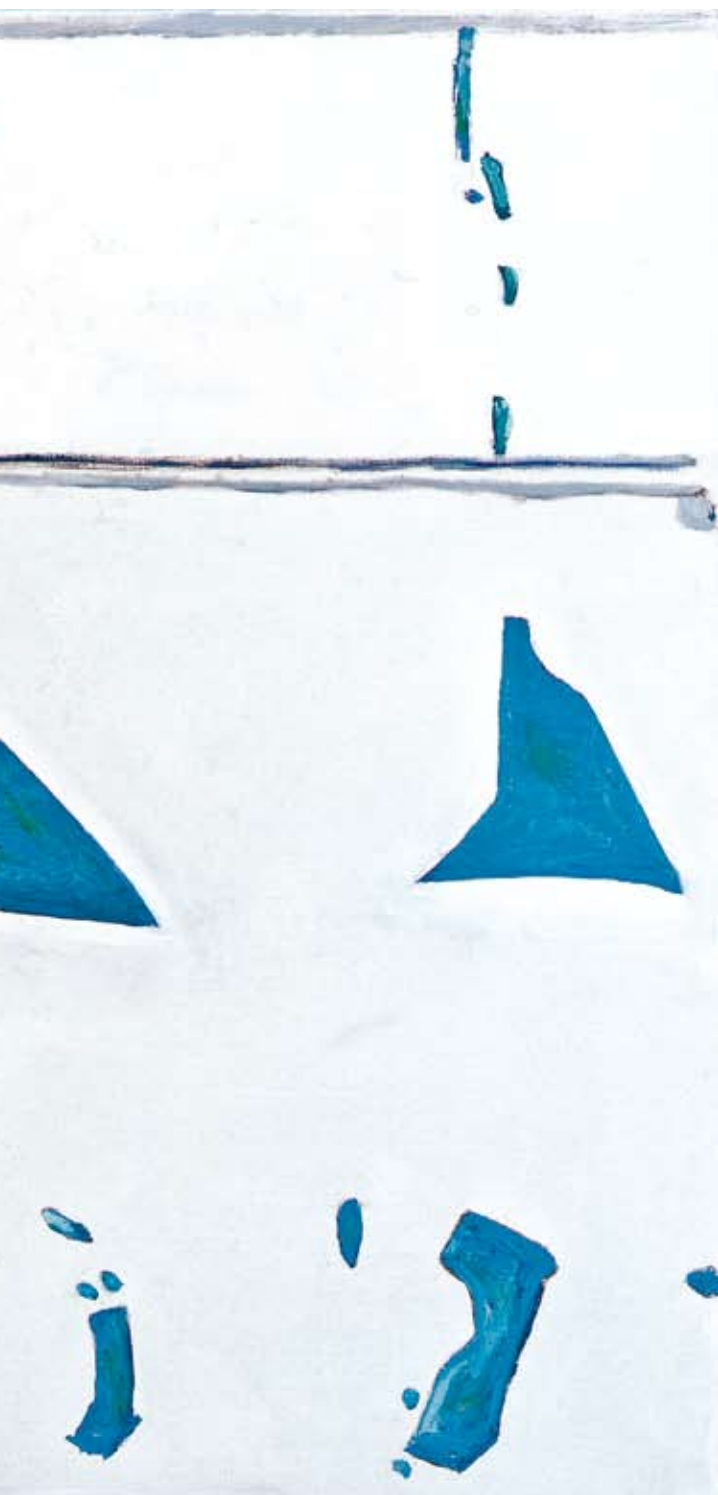
BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

A tendency in recent (and not-so-recent) painting spurns high craft and finish in favor of a more makeshift, seemingly anti-market, esthetic.

FOR THE PAST YEAR OR SO I've become increasingly aware of a kind of provisionality within the practice of painting. I first noticed it pervading the canvases of Raoul De Keyser, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Mary Heilmann and Michael Krebber, artists who have long made works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from "strong" painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse.

Why would an artist demur at the prospect of a finished work, court self-sabotaging strategies, sign his or her name to a painting that looks, from some perspectives, like an utter failure? It might have something to do with a foundational skepticism that runs through the history of modern art: we see it in Cézanne's infinite, agonized adjustments of Mont St. Victoire, in Dada's noisy denunciations (typified by Picabia's blasphemous *Portrait of Cézanne*), in Giacometti's endless obliterations and restartings of his painted portraits, in Sigmar Polke's gloriously dumb compositions of the 1960s. Something similar can be found in other art forms, in Paul Valéry's insistence that a poem is "never finished, only abandoned," in Artaud's call for "no more masterpieces," and in punk's knowing embrace of the amateurish and fucked-up. The history of modernism is full of strategies of refusal and acts of negation.

The genealogy of what I refer to as provisional painting includes Richard Tuttle's decades-long pursuit of humble beauty, Noël Dolla's still-radical stained-handkerchief paintings of the late 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg's "cardboards" of the 1970s, David Salle's intentionally feeble early canvases and the first-thought/best-thought whirlwind that was Martin Kippenberger. I take such work to be, in part, a struggle with a medium that can seem too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the fine arts "fine." As employed by younger artists, provisionality may also be an attempt to spurn the blandishments of the art



Raoul De Keyser: *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 35½ by 49½ inches. Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.



market—what seemed, until only yesterday, an insatiable appetite for smart, stylish, immaculately executed canvases, paintings that left no doubt as to the artist's technical competence, refined sensibility and solid work ethic.

#### FIVE PROVISIONAL PAINTERS

Raoul De Keyser's paintings tend to be modest in size, so that they have already forfeited "heroic" ambitions even before the first mark is made. Unlike many painters who wield impressive techniques in small-scale work (Tomma Abts, James Siena, Merlin James), De Keyser doesn't compensate for modesty of size with complex compositions or dazzling brushwork. On the contrary, he works in a manner so low-key that even sympathetic critics can be unsure how to evaluate his paintings. In 2006, *New York Times* reviewer Roberta Smith noted his "weird combination of deliberation and indecision";<sup>1</sup> in 2004, Barry Schwabsky, writing in *Artforum*, described the oscillating responses De Keyser's work can inspire: "Slapdash handling gradually begins to seem

surprisingly sensitive—or is it? The grubby color, fresh and beautifully calibrated—but is it, really? The sense of doubt never quite goes away."<sup>2</sup>

In truth, when you encounter a De Keyser it doesn't take too much imagination to attribute it to an amateur painter having a try at abstraction after seeing reproductions somewhere of paintings by Clyfford Still and Jean Arp. He manages to lay down a few jagged shapes, usually all the same color, against a monochrome ground. The limited palette suggests not any reductivist strategy but a novice who has invested in only a couple of tubes of paint. No effort is made to hide the laborious adjustments to the contours of the shapes or preliminary pencil markings. No line is quite straight; placement of shapes and dots of color appear either senselessly random or stiffly coordinated. As French curator Jean-Charles Vergne puts it, De Keyser's work "constantly asserts the impossibility of painting free of touch-ups, mistakes, accidents, set on laying bare the seams, the second tries and the failures. . . . [There is] a constant stuttering in the painting."<sup>3</sup>



THE SMUDGED PASSAGES DEFACING PARTS  
OF ALBERT OEHLER'S CANVASES BECOME,  
IN CHRISTOPHER WOOL'S WORK, SOMETHING  
LIKE THE GROUND OF THE COMPOSITION.

---

Unlike De Keyser, Albert Oehlen paints big and avails himself of far more than two or three colors, but his canvases also seem rife with "mistakes" and "second tries." Oehlen does not bother to hide his reliance on standard graphic design software for many of his compositions. Even after more than a decade of experiment, he wields these basic digital tools with apparent clumsiness; his computer-assisted paintings can sometimes bring to mind Paper Rad, the U.S. art collective that fetishizes the clunky graphics of early video games. Oehlen's paintings usually begin with collage-based inkjet images, over which he layers dirty-looking swaths of thin paint and whacked-out meandering lines. Canvases in a recent show of less digital work at Nathalie Obadia in Paris feature smudges of oil paint atop fragments of Spanish advertising posters; many of them look as if someone had inadvertently spilled paint onto a poster and, in the attempt to clean it off, had only made matters worse. This one-time purveyor of "bad" Neo-Expressionism has been committed to large-scale abstraction since the late 1980s (when, in his own words, he "started making an effort to be seen as a serious painter"<sup>4</sup>), but his work, which manages to be at once antiseptic and messy, continues to draw great pictorial force from its abject awkwardness.

The grisaille abstractions Christopher Wool has been making since about 2006 share a lot with Oehlen's work. (The resemblance is more than coincidental: these two artists enjoy a longstanding dialogue, most recently evidenced by the Oehlen painting Wool selected for his section of the artist-curated show "Sardines and Oranges" at the Hammer Museum.) The smudged passages of paint defacing parts of Oehlen's canvases become, in Wool's work, something like the ground of the composition. Both artists also make Photoshop, or similar software, part of their painting process. For some works, Wool takes photographs of brushstrokes in his own previous



Right, Christopher Wool: *Untitled*, 2007, enamel on linen, 126 by 96 inches. Courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Albert Oehlen: *Chloé*, 2008, oil and paper on canvas, 106¼ by 118 inches. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

## WHY WOULD AN ARTIST DEMUR AT THE PROSPECT OF A FINISHED WORK, COURT SELF-SABOTAGING STRATEGIES, SIGN HIS OR HER NAME TO A PAINTING THAT LOOKS LIKE AN UTTER FAILURE?

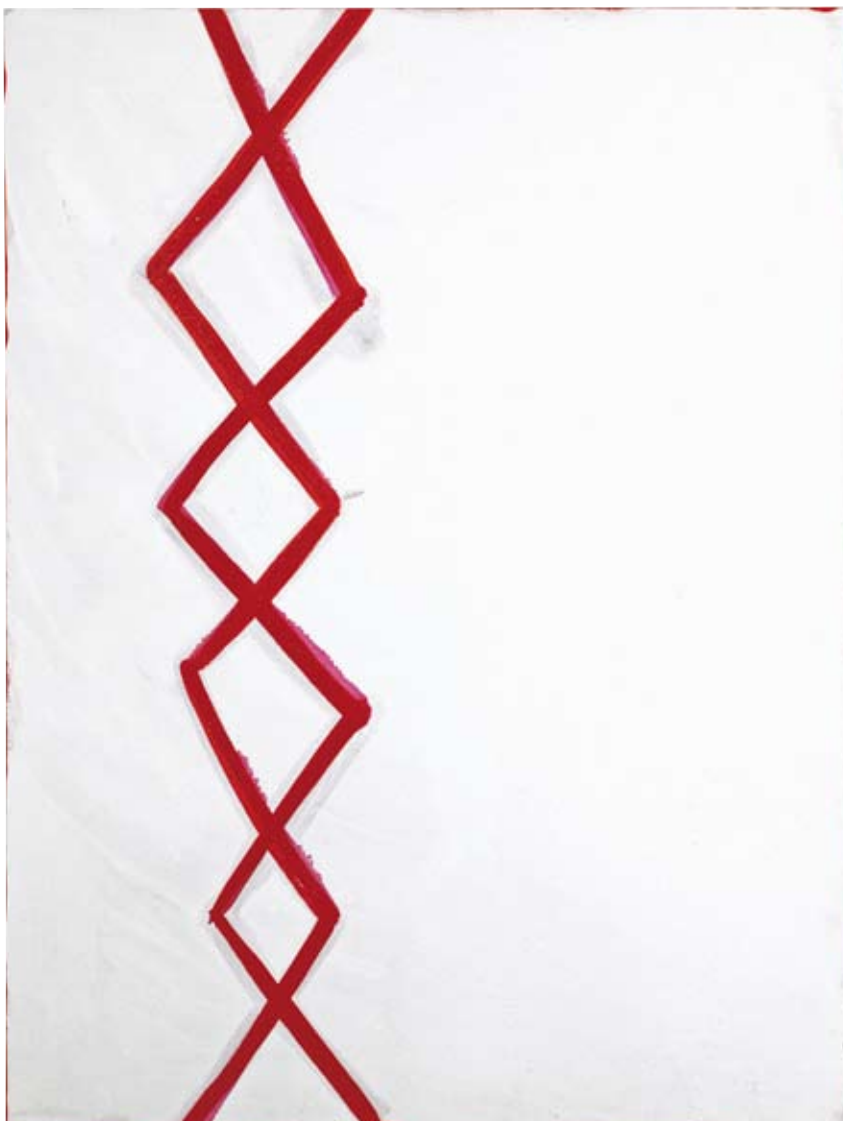
---

paintings, which he manipulates digitally. These altered images are silkscreened onto aluminum or linen. Other more straightforward paintings employ enamel paint (sprayed and brushed on) to similar effect. The compositions feature large clumps of broad back-and-forth gray and white brushstrokes—think of whitewashed windows or rubbed-out chalk on blackboards—through which wander black spray-painted lines of varying thickness that suggest bent rebar or mangled wire coat hangers. There are echoes of de Kooning's light-filled landscape-inspired paintings of the 1960s and '70s, though Wool's engrained chromophobia (over several decades of painting he has hardly ever strayed from a palette of black and white) keeps nature at bay. What we get instead are paradoxical pictures in which the artist seems to have obliterated a painting-in-progress and then presented this sum of erasures as the finished work. But has anything actually been covered up? Is there something under Wool's erasures?

From one angle, Mary Heilmann is the unlikeliest of candidates for painting stardom: over nearly four decades she has relied on a few off-the-rack modernist structures—generally grids or blocks of color over solid grounds—which she deploys with a nonchalance that seems to border on carelessness. Like De Keyser, she favors the slightly wobbly over the straight and true, and an unflashy way of handling paint. Her palette—acidic primaries and an occasional black-and-white composition—is more attention-getting than his, and she has always been adept at slipping little visual conundrums into her paintings. (There's an almost Escher-like oscillation of figure and ground in many of her works.) But for an abstract painter of her generation, she displays remarkably little sense of program or agenda. Because each painting is self-contained and unassuming, it doesn't seem to invite any transcendent reading. Where so many other painters seek to convey their artistic ambitions through signs of intensive labor, grand scale, daunting complexity or serious themes, Heilmann, who began as a ceramist, seems to position painting as ceramics by other means. In her recent retrospective [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '07], the presence of some of her ceramic vessels and dishes and funky painted chairs invited viewers to look at the painterly qualities of these objects. Far more interestingly, their inclusion suggested that

treating painting as if it were ceramics, that is, as a medium free of weighty cultural expectations, is key to Heilmann's art.

If one could measure provisionality in painting, then Michael Krebber would probably score off the charts. Much of his work, although ostensibly about painting, uses none of its accepted components—his most recent show in New York, at Greene Naftali Gallery, centered on sliced-up windsurfing boards—and when he does engage brush and canvas, the results can seem laughably thin. Many of his paintings consist of a few bits of sketchy brushwork that might or might not represent an object or body part slapped over a white or pastel ground. At other times, he has painted white blocky shapes over kitschy bed linens, or glued single newspaper spreads onto cursorily





Michael Krebber: *Contempt for one's own work as planning for career*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 55 by 43¼ inches. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Mary Heilmann: *Seam*, 1990, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich London.

It would be a mistake, however, to equate Krebber's contempt with cynicism. His attitude to painting ultimately seems to echo Marianne Moore's to poetry: "I, too, dislike it,/ Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,/ One discovers in/ It, after all, a place for the genuine."

### THREE REAPPEARANCES

The historical context of the quintet of artists above may become clearer with the new accessibility of bodies of work by Joan Miró, Martin Barré and Kimber Smith.

Until "Joan Miró: Painting and Anti-Painting, 1927-1937," at the

Museum of Modern Art in New York last fall, I'd relegated Miró to the status of Boring Modern Master, an artist whose once radical innovations had long ago been tamed and diluted by overexposure. The 12 series of works gathered by MoMA curator Anne Umland made me dump this ridiculous misperception once and for all.

Miró's aim in this period was, as he told a Spanish journalist in 1931, to "destroy everything that exists in painting."<sup>6</sup> Two works in particular exemplify this agenda. *Painting (Cloud and Birds)*, 1927, is a big unprimed canvas with a giant clump of white paint into which Miró has scribbled a cursory series of looping black lines; some incomplete featherlike shapes are scattered below. *Painting (Head)*, 1930, a 7½-by-5½-foot white ground canvas, has been . . . "defaced" is the first word that comes to mind, by a schematically outlined, giant pink head, large blotches of black and pink paint and a huge tangle of looping blue lines similar to the black ones in *Cloud and Birds*. The images in *Painting (Head)* are lined up on a diagonal (lower left to upper right), and the entire composition is crisscrossed with rapidly drawn pencil lines and a smattering of dots and dashes. The lack of finish, aggres-

sive painted grounds. Confronted with a baker's dozen of Krebber's paintings, London critic (and Krebber fan) Adrian Searle once observed: "How long did each painting take—five minutes, 10 minutes max, a lifetime of experience?"<sup>5</sup> There's nothing inherently noteworthy about a quickly executed painting, but Krebber's hastiness seems closer to a prostitute's hurried coupling than to the rapid elegance of a Chinese ink painting. It appears to say, Painting is what I do but let's not get sentimental about it or waste unnecessary time or materials; this is all you're getting for your money. And yet, Krebber's disdain for painting could equally be interpreted as a sign of overvaluation of the medium—he holds it in such high esteem that he's afraid of besmirching it through excessive contact.

The dandyish, self-lacerating wit that runs through Krebber's work (this may be the real basis of his critical association with Kippenberger) extends to some of his titles. A 2004 show at Dépendance gallery in Brussels of newspaper-spread paintings was named "Unfinished too soon," a phrase that suggests an artist failing to achieve *nonfinito* vitality out of sheer impatience. In 2001 he titled an especially sketchy painting *Contempt for one's own work as planning for career*.



MAYBE, AT A PARTICULAR MOMENT, NOTHING COULD SEEM MORE PRESUMPTUOUS OR INAPPROPRIATE—MAYBE EVEN OBSCENE—THAN TO SET OUT TO CREATE A MASTERPIECE.



sively crude figuration, and extensive doodling and cancellation marks suggest a painter at war with his medium. That Miró dared such provocations at this scale more than 75 years ago is astounding; he looks like a contemporary of Polke or Kippenberger.

I think the source of Miró's daring, and the reason why his work is so close to what I'm calling "provisional painting," resides in his rejection of the idea of a finished, durable work. In 1928, he confessed to Francesc Trabal that after completing a painting he had his dealer take it away as quickly as possible: "I can't bear to have it there in front of me. . . . [When] I've finished something I discover it's just a basis for what I've got to do next. It's never anything more than a point of departure. . . . Do I have to remind you that what I detest most is lasting?"<sup>7</sup>

The paintings of Martin Barré (1924-1996) remained little known in this country until last year, when they were the subject of a show at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York and a monograph by Yve-Alain Bois [see *A.i.A.*, Jan. '09]. Emerging in mid-1950s Paris as a gestural abstractionist, Barré went against the grain by working with

thin paint. "But," as he explained to Catherine Millet in 1974, "what bumped up against the taste or style of the period was not so much this lack of thickness as the impression of emptiness, of nonwork."<sup>8</sup> In the early 1960s, he embarked on a series of paintings with stripes and grids (he also used arrow motifs), sometimes made with spray-paint applied through stencils. Even now, the pictures look strikingly preliminary and offhand, like the underpainting of some never-finished work. It's common to locate the zero-degree of painting in the realm of white or black monochromes, but Barré's skewed grids and free-floating signs can make Ryman or Reinhardt look positively old masterish. And yet he insisted that his paintings should not be understood as neo-Dada critique. "What I was doing," he clarified to Millet, "could well appear as antipainting, whereas what I wanted to show, through the traces or points of impact in a clear surface, was what a painting could be if disencumbered of object, color, and form."<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Miró and Barré, the American painter Kimber Smith (1922-1981) was not out to destroy or to disencumber his chosen medium, and yet he made paintings, especially toward the end of his life, that hover at the edge of dissolution, that seem radically unfinished. Smith's career can be divided into two parts: the decade he spent in Paris (1954-64), where he was particularly close to fellow expatriates Shirley Jaffe and Sam Francis, and the years after his return to the U.S., when he divided his time between New York City





Above, Kimber Smith: *Prague*, 1977, acrylic on cotton, 64½ by 93½ inches. Private collection. Courtesy Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland.

Opposite top, Joan Miró: *Clouds and Birds*, 1927, oil on canvas, 57½ by 44⅞ inches. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Opposite bottom, Martin Barré: *73-74-D-149 x 139*, 1973-74, acrylic on canvas, 58¾ by 54¾ inches. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

and the Hamptons. The best recent presentation of Smith's work was a 2004 retrospective at the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland, which included paintings such as *Kirchner's Garden* (1976), *Prague* (1977) and *Nissa* (1980). In these works, Smith treated the canvas as a giant sketch pad. He generally combined sets of wavy lines, floating bars of loosely applied paint, some approximately filled-in shapes and lots of empty primed canvas. The marks seem notational, as if this were a preparatory gouache that somehow ended up as the final painting. Smith's signature—a penciled-in KS that seems as iffy as the composition it claims—identifies these as finished works. In a stylistic fusion that anticipates Heilmann's informal formalism, Smith splashed Matissean insouciance over the serious-minded legacy of Abstract

Expressionism. Reviewing a show of Smith's paintings for *Artforum* in 1979, Hal Foster noted the artist's "apparent nonchalance" and freedom from "anxiety" in relation to his immediate predecessors. Smith, he wrote, "does not fight at the fore, but neither does he fight at the rear; indeed, he fights not at all."<sup>10</sup> Although chiefly concerned with how Smith faced the dilemma of being a second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter at the end of the '70s, years that were so inhospitable to the style, Foster broaches a much larger issue. It is precisely in declining to "fight" that painters such as Smith, Heilmann and De Keyser make their attacks on received ideas about painting.

## PAINTING AND ITS IMPOSSIBILITY

What makes painting "impossible"? What makes "great" painting impossible? Perhaps it is a sense of belatedness, a conviction that an earlier generation or artist has left only a few scraps to be cleaned up. Or maybe, at a particular moment, in a particular life and history, nothing could seem more presumptuous or inappropriate—maybe even obscene—than to set out to create a masterpiece. Impossibility can also be the result of the artist making excessive demands on the work, demands to which current practice has no reply. At a certain moment, in a certain studio, it appears that great painting may be impossible, that painting of any kind may be impossible. Nonetheless, for whatever reasons pertaining to a particular





**AS EMPLOYED BY YOUNGER ARTISTS, PROVISIONALITY MAY BE AN ATTEMPT TO SPURN THE BLANDISHMENTS OF THE ART MARKET.**

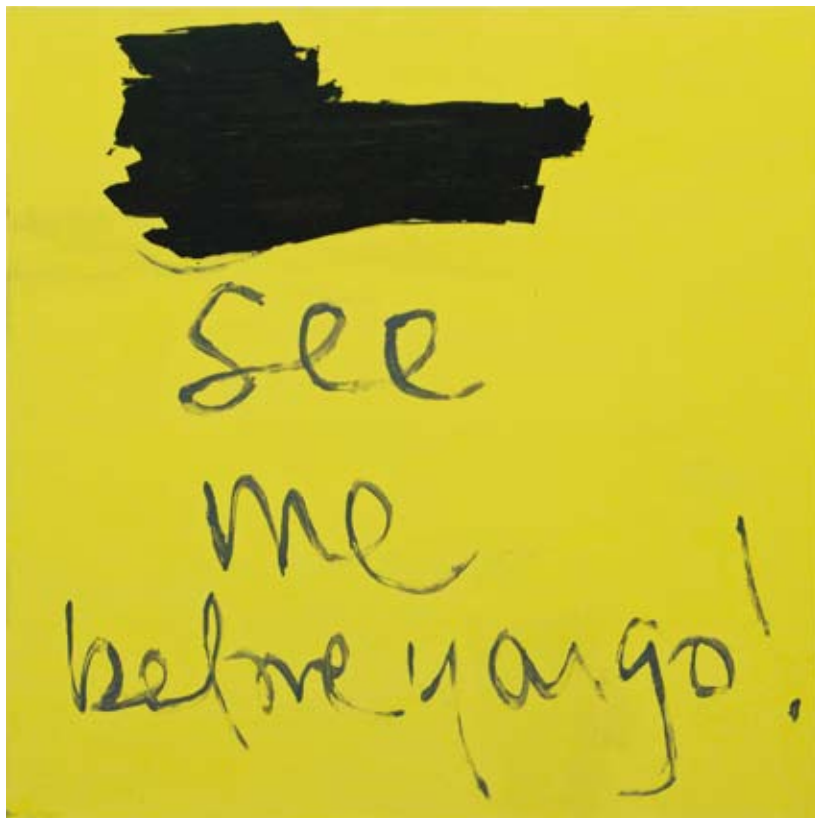
---

painter at a particular time, painting must be done, must go on.

A growing number of younger artists (and a few who have been showing for longer) are entertaining the idea of impossibility in painting. This has led them to reject a sense of finish in their work, or to rely on acts of negation.

An Austrian artist based in Vienna, Stefan Sandner works mostly with found texts and documents—scrawled notes, agenda pages and enigmatic sketches—which he paints in a greatly enlarged format onto his large monochrome canvases. Some of the texts are obviously self-referential (“see me before you go!” pleaded one painting in his 2008 show in New York at Museum 52); others recycle inscriptions by famous people (the text of a 2004 diptych is cribbed from Kurt Cobain’s journals), handmade public notices and art-world ephemera (e.g., a playlist for a Stephen Prina performance). The initial sense of disconnect between the triviality of the texts and the way they have been reproduced (often at imposing scale, on faultlessly executed canvases) gives way to a new synthesis. It’s as if conceptualist Joseph Grigely were supplying material to Ellsworth Kelly. (Lest viewers be tempted to pigeonhole him as a textual appropriator, Sandner usually includes at least one textless monochrome painting, often on a shaped canvas, in each of his solo shows.) Rather than turning abstraction into a joke—like Richard Prince, with whom he has been unfavorably compared—Sandner gives it a serious task: to bridge the gap between the everyday and the ideal.

The 20 paintings in Richard Aldrich’s show this winter at Bortolami in New York rehearse nearly that many modernist modes: there were gestural paintings that look like details from late ’50s Gustons, deconstructed canvases, essays in oblique figuration, compositions that verge on pattern painting. Aldrich uses collage elements (pieces of cloth and art reproduction postcards), cuts away sections of canvas to reveal stretcher bars, slathers on oil paint and wax, reduces a composition to a scattering of seemingly random marks, paints copies of his own work. Rather than an exercise in stylistic pastiche, however, or suggesting that the artist were assuming different personae, the show looked very much of a piece, held together by a curious awkwardness, even incompetence, that persisted across the different modes. Accommodating slightly irregular stretchers and a lack of perfect right angles, several canvases are badly wrinkled and folded at the edges. In one work, four thin lengths of snapped-off wood employed



Above, Stefan Sandner: *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 39½ inches square. Courtesy Museum 52, New York.

Opposite, Richard Aldrich: *Looking with Mirror Apparatus*, 2008, oil, wax, Plexiglas and mirror on cut linen, 84 by 58 inches. Courtesy Bortolami Gallery, New York.

as improvised pins hold together two pieces of black cloth. The bottom third of a large portrait is abruptly cut away to reveal the flimsy-looking stretcher underneath. Attached to a large painting featuring postcards of Whistlers from the Frick are four large sheets of paper, one of which is crumpled in a corner and already peeling away from its canvas backing. Another painting looks like a half-finished canvas that some second-string abstractionist had stuck in the racks circa 1960. One way or another, every painting has something “wrong” with it: sloppy craft, outmoded style, impenetrable obscurity. Taken together, these flawed works seem less about offering yet another critique of painting than securing permission for the artist to pursue every potentially interesting idea that crosses his mind.

While Cheryl Donegan has long explored painting issues in

THEIR WORK MAY AT TIMES COME OFF AS UNCERTAIN, CASUAL, SELF-CANCELLING OR UNFINISHED, BUT ALL OF THESE ARTISTS ARE FULLY COMMITTED TO THE PROJECT OF PAINTING.

---



her gift for linear mark-making and a curiosity about paint's material possibilities, though one feels she never lingers as long as she could. Yet, her show in winter 2006 at Greene Naftali in New York was one of her best. In silvery oil paintings, gestures seem to erase one another in a flurry of marks, always obliterating some underlying composition of greater order and grace. Though long based in New York, Humphries is a New Orleans native, and it doesn't seem far-fetched to read these turbulent paintings as visions of a location overwhelmed by chaotic natural forces. There are clear echoes of Wool's self-erasing gestures in Humphries's paintings (as well as borrowings from Rosenquist's shard paintings of the 1980s), but her cancellations are more immediate and less self-conscious than Wool's.

Wendy White also employs the obliterative qualities of paint, though she is more likely to use a spray-gun than a brush. The paintings she showed at Leo Koenig in New York last summer are multipanel, with three to five variously sized canvases abutted in irregular formations.

Dense, sooty accumulations of black spray paint are randomly dispersed

video to much acclaim, her actual paintings garner much less notice. Given her mode of working, her choices of materials and forms, this isn't so surprising. Donegan's last show of paintings in New York, "Luxury Dust" in September 2007 at the now-defunct Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, included about a dozen works on 24-by-18-inch pieces of corrugated cardboard. Some of them feature crowded, triangle-laden compositions executed in water-based oils; in others she covered the cardboard with gold or silver tape and then sliced away at the tape to create spiky, reflective arrays. The cheap materials, generic imagery (Donegan's claustrophobic Cubo-Futurist compositions sometimes include clips grabbed from eBay), modest size and hasty-looking facture seem to beg for the works to be dismissed. The title of the show should give us pause. These are just about the most unluxurious paintings imaginable (an effect heightened by the fluorescent lights the artist requested for her show): as such they can be interpreted as detritus of the boom or as strangely prophesying a post-crash economy.

Restless painters tend to work in several different manners at once or embark on new approaches in serial order. Jacqueline Humphries does the latter. Each of her phases displays

across the panels, sometimes partially covering more open tangles of Day-Glo lines. Echoing the irregularity of the outer edges, the units of paint avoid neat enclosure; their edges fray, disperse and fade out, as if the artist simply runs out of paint. The sense of random defacement evokes graffiti art, but one could equally think of Tàpies and Motherwell—as in Humphries's work, there is an affinity between some kinds of provisionality and gestural abstraction.

Provisionality is visible in a number of current artists nominally identified as sculptors, including Sarah Braman, Alexandra Bircken and Gedi Sibony; much of the work in the New Museum's "Unmonumental" exhibition of 2007-08, which included Bircken and Sibony along with many others, embodied the provisional sensibility in three dimensions. Although not present in "Unmonumental," sculptor Peter Soriano has recently been making extremely provisional three-dimensional works. Each consists of a length of aluminum tubing projecting from the wall. Steel cables stretch from the tube to anchors on the wall. These points are linked by spray-painted lines and arrows (mostly in bright colors), and sometimes marked with circles and Xs or crossed out with brief squiggles. Usually executed by the artist, these wall





Above, Wendy White: *Mrs. Dash*, 2008, acrylic and spray paint on four canvases, 170¾ by 48½ inches overall. Courtesy Leo Koenig Gallery, New York.



Left, Cheryl Donegan: *Luxury Dust (Silver)*, 2007, silver tape on cardboard, 24 by 18 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Opposite, Jacqueline Humphries: *Judith*, 2006, oil on linen, 90 by 96 inches. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery.

works can also be made by others following a set of instructions. Owing as much to Con Ed street markings as to conceptual wall works (LeWitt, Bochner), Soriano's structures diagram their own making, but with their cancellations and misdirections (arrows sometimes seem to be suggesting a particular element, or even the entire work, should be moved over several feet), and work-in-progress status conveyed by the spray-painted signs, they also entertain the possibility that they could be remade in another way. This comes about not only because the metal structures and spray-painted marks must be constructed afresh for each showing, but also because the viewer is always being invited to second-guess the artist's decisions, to imagine other configurations.

At times provisional painting overlaps with "bad painting," a mode with roots in the 1970s that continues to offer artists means of engaging the medium without having to take on all of its unwanted trappings. When Kippenberger employed techniques that give the impression of haste and clumsiness, it allowed him to mock the market along with the medium (though he also snuck in some virtuosic painting that doesn't seem

## WITH THEIR CANCELLATIONS AND WORK-IN-PROGRESS STATUS, SORIANO'S STRUCTURES ENTERTAIN THE POSSIBILITY THAT THEY COULD BE REMADE ANOTHER WAY.

pretentious). But provisionality can also be taken to a point where there is not even a remote possibility of "bad" concealing "good." That seems to be where Joe Bradley's intent in the "Schmagoo Paintings" that he showed at Canada gallery in New York last fall. A distinction needs to be made between Bradley and the other artists I have been discussing here. Their work may at times come off as uncertain, incomplete, casual, self-cancelling or unfinished, but each of them is fully committed to the project of painting. If they seek to break existing, perhaps unspoken, contracts with painting, it is only in order to draw up other protocols that will renew the medium. Bradley's work, which sometimes shares the guttersnipe esthetics of artists such as Dan Colen and Dash Snow, seems more like a willful artistic gesture than part of a painter's necessary process.

Provisional painting is not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting. It's the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double

<sup>1</sup> Roberta Smith, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2006, p. E37. <sup>2</sup> Barry Schwabsky, "Raoul de Keyser," *Artforum*, Summer 2004, p. 240. <sup>3</sup> Jean-Charles Vergne, "Small things aspire the world and they become the world," in *Raoul de Keyser*, Clermont-Ferrand, FRAC Auvergne, 2008, p. 15. <sup>4</sup> "Albert Oehlen talks to Eric Banks," *Artforum*, April 2003, pp. 182-83. <sup>5</sup> Adrian Searle, "Never Trust a Painter," *The Guardian*, Sept. 25, 2001. <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Anne Umland, *Joan Miró: Painting and Anti-Painting*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2008, p. 2. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. <sup>8</sup> Catherine Millet, "Interview with Martin Barré," in Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Columbus, Wexner Center for the Arts, 2001, p. 190. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193. <sup>10</sup> Hal Foster, in *Artforum*, April 1979, p. 71.

**RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN** is a New York-based writer who teaches critical studies at the University of Houston.

### EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

Following are current and upcoming solo shows by some of the artists discussed:

**"Raoul De Keyser: 44 Watercolors,"** Museu Serralves, Porto, Mar. 28-May 17; Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, May 18-June 24.

**"Raoul De Keyser: Replay, Paintings 1964-2007,"** Kunstmuseum Bonn, Aug. 20-Oct. 18.

**"Raoul De Keyser,"** David Zwirner, New York, September 2009.

**"Jacqueline Humphries,"** Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, Apr. 16-May 16.

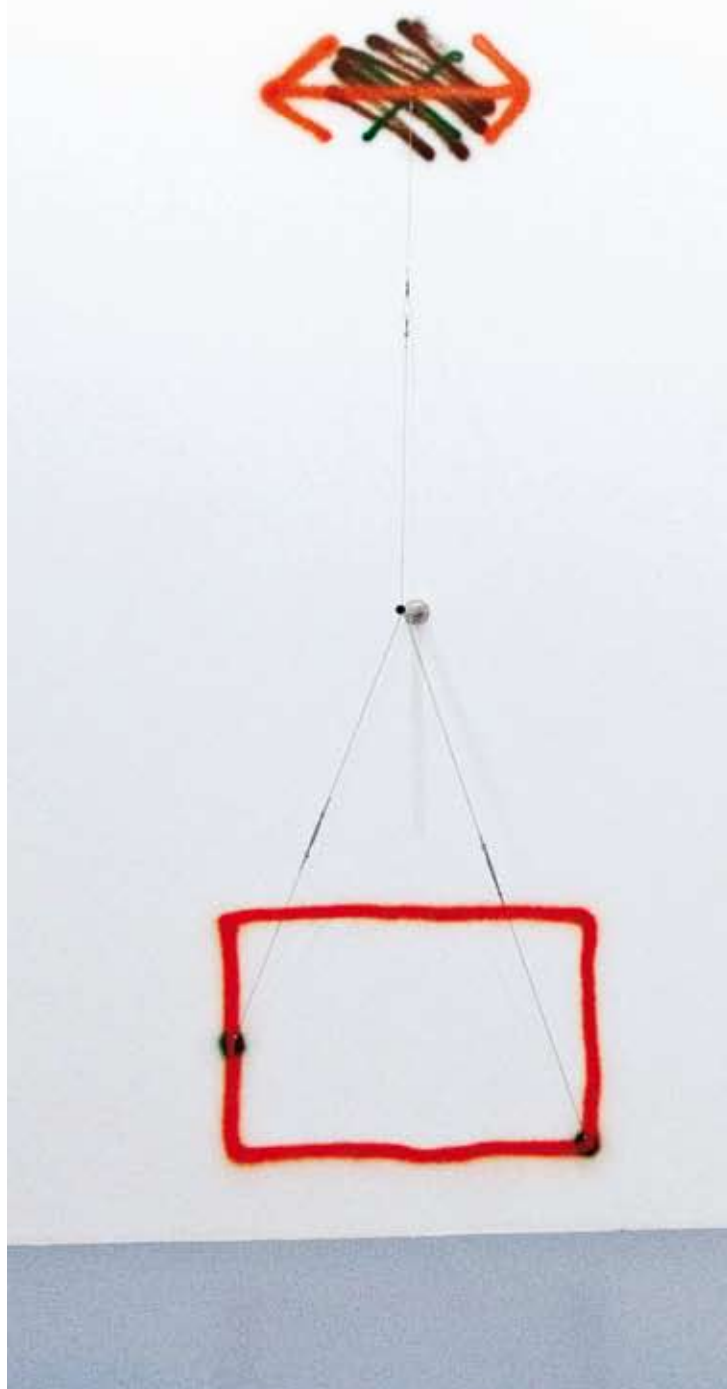
**"Albert Oehlen,"** Luhring Augustine, New York, Apr. 25-May 30.

**Richard Aldrich** will show at Bartolami gallery's Art Statements booth at Art Basel, June 10-14.

**"Christopher Wool: Porto—Köln,"** Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Apr. 21-July 12 (opened at Museu Serralves, Porto, Nov. 22, 2008-Mar. 15, 2009).

**Martin Barré** will have a show at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier in December 2009.

**"Kimber Smith,"** James Graham & Sons, New York, fall 2009.



standing in for a star/masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk. To put it another way: provisional painting is major painting masquerading as minor painting. In their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described how Kafka's linguistic and cultural condition (as a Jewish author writing in German in Prague where the type of German he spoke was "minor" in relation both to the locally dominant Czech language and to standard German) involved the "impossibility" of writing



in German and the “impossibility of not writing.” Kafka’s solution was to fashion a mode of writing that seemed to erase all literary precedents, and to create an oeuvre that barely survived into the future. Faced with painting’s imposing history and the diminishment of the medium by newer art forms, recent painters may have found themselves in similarly “minor” situations; the provisionality of their work is an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting. o

View of Peter Soriano’s exhibition  
 “Other Side . . . ( . . . IDOC, AJAC, IONA,  
 EMEU . . . ),” 2008; at Galerie Jean Fourier,  
 Paris. Courtesy Galerie Jean Fourier.