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In New York, Catching a Wave with Ann Pibal

BY CODY DELISTRATY | DECEMBER 24, 2018



Ann Pibal

RWPT1/2, 2018

acrylic on aluminum panel

39 x 29 inches (each panel); 100 x 74 cm (each panel)

(Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery)

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The artist Ann Pibal has chosen surfing — particularly mid-century depictions of male, American surfers in print magazines — as the lens through which to view not only new modes of artistic abstraction but also the gender and power politics therein. “Surfing,” she recently told Modern Painters over written correspondence, “is a ready metaphor in my mind for painting, especially abstract painting and all of its trappings.” Both surfing and abstract painting have tended to be “emblems of primarily white, male, American individualism, prowess, [and] exceptionalism,” she noted, while also both being legitimate ways of finding “transformative personal experiences.” How, indeed, might one square the circle of abstract painting being at once a mode of gendered and racial power as well as a place of legitimate, near-spiritual experience? On view at the Team Gallery in Manhattan through January 19, her current exhibition “Surf Type” both poses this question and continues her signature style of doing away with artistic hierarchies, exploring a work’s medium and physicality, and finding new meaning in classic archetypes.

What was behind your decision to use surfer magazines as the center of your current show?

About a year ago, when José Freire invited me to do an exhibition at Team Bungalow in Venice Beach, I immediately knew I wanted to revisit a body of work on paper I made about surfing in 2010. A selection from the new group of drawings is included the current show at Team in New York. The new series, like the previous one, uses pages torn from The Surfer’s Journal as a substrate for drawing with laser-cut shapes. Stars, stripes, hearts, X’s and O’s. Surfing is a ready metaphor in my mind for painting, especially abstract painting and all of its trappings — everything from the way surfing and abstract painting have both functioned since the mid 20th century as emblems of primarily white, male, American individualism, prowess, exceptionalism, to the real ways both activities allow for legitimately transformative personal experiences embedded in a kind of quasi-spiritual language and an often-romanticized relationship to natural forces.

From the standpoint of the medium and its physicality, how do you see a page of a glossy magazine in dialogue with an abstract painting?

The main thing about these magazines is that I am completely captivated by the highly produced water and landscape imagery. I like the athletes too. From the beginning, when I started working with this type of ephemera in 2010, I saw the photography in *The Surfer's Journal* had much of what I aim for while painting with regard to space and light. For a long time, I've been engaged through my painting with a kind of transitional light — the luminous stuff of morning and evening. It is that kind of color — color with glowing, reflective parts — that allows me to engage most directly with an idea of time passing or of shifting realities. These magazines are packed full of photography that takes advantage of this kind of light — morning sets and evening sets. This, along with the heavy post-production this imagery goes through, makes for an unreasonably luminous color extravaganza.

Recently, I've been using a lot of reflective paint — silver, gold, also some iridescent colors. This has been partly to evoke the idea of a painted image as icon, and also to engage literally with the phenomenon of reflection. Water provides a reflective surface and simultaneously a translucent depth. Something I aspire to with my surfaces: that they be not solely flat, reflective, or pictorial.

You're from Minneapolis and live and work on the East Coast; what does the "West" — and its archetypes, like California surfers — represent to you and your artistic practice?

I probably only saw the ocean three or four times as a child. Because my experiences at the "edge" were few and far between, it was always a transformative space for me and held power beyond any other experience for my young self. I realize, of course, that this is not uncommon to allow the experience of the ocean to contain one's spiritual life. At this point, I go to the water to replenish myself, to do my grieving and to send my respect into the universe. The desert works for me too, but it doesn't provide anything close to the same kind of redemption. Somehow, the Atlantic doesn't have the same resonance for me as the Pacific, and I find time in New England generally to be non-satisfying with regard to moving through and inhabiting the landscape. My partner, Colin Brant, is from California, although we met in Iowa City, and over the 25 years we have been together, he and I have

regularly spent significant amounts of time out there and also in Baja, Mexico. Something in my connection to him is also sealed into a connection with the Pacific in particular. He isn't a surfer, but he is an athlete, so I think I have an empathetic connection to the men in the magazine tear sheets, even as, at the same time, I take great and delicious joy in making some humor and criticism out of the images of them.

The phrase “without privileging one source over another” is often applied to your work. What does this mean, exactly, to you and how you create?

I've been interested in disregarding hierarchies between design and painting — the “decorative” and the “serious,” the “grand” and the “personal” from the beginning. The decorative or effusive aspects of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism are paramount and are rejected based only on Modernism's inherent cultural biases. I'm invested in the generosity of pattern and color in painting, in architecture, and also in industrial and domestic design, especially textiles. When I started working with hard edges, I discovered that the use of the hard edge makes easy work of connecting the history of Western painting to older, more venerable histories. The reach of abstraction obviously goes beyond the short story of European and American Modernism. And finally, aiming as I do, to create mutable surfaces and dynamic engagements with light and space the evocation of landscape and the pictorial has never been off limits for me.

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