Paging: Bob Nickas on Abstraction

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Art in America
November 03, 2009

You could say Bob Nickas behaves more like an artist than a critic. Since moving to New York in 1984, he has developed a reputation for being a truly independent voice in his field, working against the prevailing narratives of contemporary art without compromise. Nickas has curated over 80 exhibitions and from 2003 and 2006 served as curatorial advisor for PS1. In 1994 he co-founded the highly influential, now-defunct *Index* Magazine with artist Peter Halley.

As a writer, Nickas is known for his direct, jargon-free prose, that are accessible in their convictions. Many such interviews and reviews are collected in two books *Live Free or Die* (2000, Les Presses Du Reel) and *Theft is Vision* (2007, JRP Ringier). Nickas' latest book brings patent inclusiveness to one of the most equivocal genre's in art. *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* intimately profiles 80

abstract painters working today. Nickas writes an involved report of each artist's work and practice, creating a multifarious portrait of the phenomenon's practitioners at a time when painting has been declared dead several times over. Make no mistake: this is not the final word on abstract painting, nor a strategic list of names meant to collectively prove the existence of a historic "moment." Like everything Bob Nickas has done before, here he shares his independent take on specific artists doing work that he respects.

ASHER PENN : What made you want to do a book about contemporary abstract painting? Was it something you'd been thinking about for some time?

BOB NICKAS: It never occurred to me to do a book on painting. Phaidon had been interested to do something with me for a while, and for whatever reasons we never came up with the right project. I wrote the introduction to the American Surfaces book they did with Stephen Shore, which came out around the time that I organized Stephen's show at PS1 in 2005. That same year I met Craig Garrett, who is a commissioning editor, and he saw another show I did at PS1, "The Painted World." The show included works by, among others, Wayne Gonzales, Joanne Greenbaum, Alex Hay, Mark Grotjahn, Mary Heilmann, Bill Komoski, Chris Martin, Olivier Mosset, Ann Pibal, Steven Parrino, Philip Taaffe, John Tremblay , Alan Uglow, Dan Walsh, and Chuck Webster —all artists who are in the book. That was when Craig started to think about a survey of abstract painting, and his thought was to approach an author who was also a curator, someone who knew how to put pictures together and could write about them. I remember we were at the Venice Biennale in June of 2007, and we had planned to meet. I somehow persuaded him to take the whole afternoon off and go with me to the Lido, where we went swimming and had lunch and started to seriously talk about doing a book. If it hadn't been for the show at PS1 four years ago, and a day at the beach two years ago, there might not have been a book.

PENN: The book itself reads like an exhibition. *Where does Painting Abstraction* differ from "The Painted World" in terms of it's curation? Is it a revision? A continuation?

NICKAS: You could see each chapter of the book as a show, although I think that the first, "Hybrid Pictures," and the last, "The Act of Painting," are best suited to being realized as exhibitions. How the book and the show differ is a matter of focus. The book is meant to be an overview of abstract, or at least non-representational, painting today, and there are 80 artists, with all the paintings reproduced having been painted in the last five years. The show, like most of my shows, brought together artists of different generations, so across from a work by Philip Taaffe from, say 2005, was a Paul Feeley painting from 1964. Or there would be a Myron Stout painted between 1954 and 1978—24 years to finish a painting!—alongside a new work by John Tremblay. The show was more of a collection, with a personal, often idiosyncratic point of view. But I can't deny that the show in many ways informed the book. Just as "The Painted World" involved numerous studio visits towards choosing the works for the show, so too did the book. In fact, of 80 artists included, I visited about 60 studios as part of my research for the book.

PENN: Were there any specific surveys of abstract painting, or any kind of art, that you had in mind when compiling this book? Histories that you were working off of? Contemporary narratives you were working against?

NICKAS: I based most of the texts on the notes taken during studio visits. I worked much more journalistically than art historically. When you read the text you are in the studio; the paintings are up and tools are there on the worktable; images and drawings are tacked to the wall; and the artist is there, speaking to you directly. That's quite rare in art books. I'm not quoting theorists or art historians or other critics. As I say at the end of the introduction, there are 80 artists in the book, and I'm not telling a single story in which they all have parts to play. I'm not someone who has a global theory

of art. That, to my mind, is one of the great problems with art writing today, where the art becomes an illustration to prove a writer's point.

PENN: The book's cover has on it a white circle and a design motif of black circles, which runs through the book. It reminded me of Olivier Mosset, who was the subject of the opening essay in your book, Live Free or Die. Is Olivier Mosset your starting point when thinking about contemporary abstract painting? (LEFT: DAVID MALEK, SUSPIRA DE PROFUNDIS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHAIDON)

NICKAS: The cover actually looks like a detail of a Steven Parrino painting from 1986, an orange monochrome with a large cut-out in the center. Olivier and Steven were good friends, and collaborated on two paintings, and I came to think about their work as the basic building blocks for my shows. A show, like a house, has to have a foundation. And Olivier is very much a bridge to a younger generation of artists. For me, he's probably the single most important figure in terms of my coming around to painting in the mid-80s.

When I moved to New York at the end of 1984, I was antagonistic towards painting because of what was dominant at the time—neo-Expressionism, neo-Surrealism, graffiti, the Italian transavanguardia, Keith Haring, Julian Schnabel. My interests were centered on Pop, Op, Minimal, and Conceptual art, earthworks, performance, installation, experimental film and music, street photography. I remember meeting George Condo in the mid-80s, and for whatever reason he asked me if I was a painter. I answered no in such an irritated way that he immediately turned and walked off. But as I started to see works by Jack Goldstein, Philip Taaffe, and Sherrie Levine, my interest in painting was very much renewed. Olivier was friendly with Sherrie, and I think he saw in her work a play between authorship and anonymity that was something new and open to possibility—an "end game" that, paradoxically, propelled painting forward.

PENN: What is it about abstract painting that compels you to write about it

today?

NICKAS: Ad Reinhardt once said that it's more difficult to write about abstract painting than any other kind of painting because it's content is not in its subject matter but in the actual painting activity. I agree, but you have to keep in mind that he wrote this in 1943. Abstract painting today often has a subject beyond itself. When Wayne Gonzales makes a painting that, seen up close, is a proliferation of overlaid gray dots and ovals, but from a distance coheres as an aerial view of the Pentagon, he offers an image of power and the war. When Steven Parrino mis-stretches a large expanse of metallic silver canvas and titles it Death in America, he's not simply offering the world another shiny monochrome. This is a work that reminds us of abstraction's privileged relation to language. The very same painting, given a neutral title, or untitled, is simply not the same painting. Reinhardt's text posits abstraction against illustration. To my mind, there is absolutely nothing compelling about illustration. We all make our choices.

PENN: This book was conceived during a "boom" period, and is now being released in the midst of a recession. Do you anticipate that there will be another backlash against abstract painting?

NICKAS: Another backlash against abstract painting? I didn't know there had been one. Whether the economy is "up" or "down" doesn't seem to have anything to do with the kind of art that is shown and bought and sold. I'm not even sure there is a recession for wealthy people. I was at an opening the other night and all the works were sold, and at $175,000 each. My thinking is that the so-called global financial crisis is in fact a total scam, a golden moment in which companies can get their employees to take broad pay cuts, and give up medical coverage, simply thankful that they still have their jobs. The savings for big business now has to be in the billions of dollars. Michael Bloomberg can wreak havoc in the New York City school system by firing all the teachers who aren't tenured, while spending an obscene $100 million to get himself re-elected as Mayor after lying to us, first saying that he was

against extending term limits, then changing the law so he could run for a third term and remain king of New York. The Museum of Modern Art recently fired 100 employees, mostly in the Education Department. They didn't fire anyone who works in the gift shop. Who need education in a museum anyway? How abstract is that?

Bob Nickas has organized another show of figuration, CAVE PAINTING, with traveling exhibition space Gresham's Ghost. The second portion of the show opens November 7, 6–9 PM, at 511 W. 25th Street, New York.