

December 2 – 8, 2009

**Art**

## Let's Renegotiate!

Irony? Sincerity? The Kitchen cooks up an uneven mix of paintings on painting

**'Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture'**

*The Kitchen*  
512 West 19th Street, 212-255-5793  
Through January 16, 2010

BY R.C. BAKER

**B**efore there was a modernist canon, populist critics relied on such derisive metaphors as "explosion in a shingle factory" to describe Duchamp's 1912 *Nude Descending a Staircase*. As late as 1956, Jackson Pollock's graceful pas de deux with the canvas was reduced to the incoherent frenzy implied by *Time*'s nickname for the abstract expressionist: "Jack the Dripper."

But that was a googol of dissertations and almost as many Jasper Johns exhibitions ago. Audiences and critics are more sophisticated now. For instance, one can resort to critical shorthand to describe just about any painting in "Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture," a group show at the Kitchen of 22 artists who, according to the press release, are "renegotiating histories of painting with a mixture of both irony and sincerity." So indeed, Patricia Treib's *Untitled (Pages)* combines late de Kooning with Milton Avery, Charline von Heyl's *Dudo* grafts R.B. Kitaj's fleshy hands onto Daniel Buren's stripes, and Jessica Dickinson's gossamer *Here*, fashioned from oil and limestone, recalls Rothko by way of Albers.

OK, I apologize for that trio of annoying critical mash-ups, but this lazy style of description illustrates the show's conundrum: Where Pollock declared, "I am nature" to embody his expansive inspirations, this exhibition exists in the realm that critic Robert Hughes aptly termed "Culture as Nature." Think of Stuart Davis's paintings of signboards and Sherrie Levine's ongoing appropriation of other artists' works.

Besides, except for those brilliant muralists who, some 30 millennia ago, depicted now-extinct beasts on cave walls, anyone who has ever picked up a brush has had to "negotiate" the history of painting. Yet few of the artists here look further back than the 1950s. For instance, Richard Aldrich's smudgy panels recall Philip Guston's patches of paint, though with none of that master's delicate chromatic tuning or compositional solidity. (Guston, for his part, counted the classical rigor of Piero's 15th-century frescoes among his greatest inspirations.) Nate Lowman's *The Rejects* features stencils of malformed fruit with such labels as "Pointed ends" or "Exaggerated curvature." The rather laborious wit in this 2009 canvas trails a catalog of Warhols, including 1961's *Before and After*



Ramsay Stirling

nose-job painting, the banana adorning the Velvet Underground's first album, and the underwear bulge beneath zippered jeans on the Stones' *Sticky Fingers* cover.

On the other hand, Wade Guyton's large

**Art's silver lining:**  
**Jacob Kassay's *Untitled*, 2009**

ink-jet-printed sheets of linen demonstrate that he's one of the few artists since Warhol



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to fully appreciate the serendipitous beauty that arises from mistakes in mechanical reproduction, those fascinating flaws that resonate with our own. And even though Agnes Martin's hand-wrought grids haunt his overlapping stripes, misaligned edges, and spotty printing defects, Guyton summons a gorgeous ghost from the machine.

Similarly, Jacob Kassay doesn't let conceptual stratagems get in the way of the startling aesthetic pleasure he wrings from "silver deposit" mixed with mossy brown acrylic on rough canvas. I don't know what price silver fetches on the commodities market these days—no doubt Damien Hirst could tell us—but Kassay's buckled ground battles the viewer's vague reflection in the precious metal, a rare melding of the materials' intrinsic worth with aesthetic value. And Polly Apfelbaum's stained rolls of fabric arrayed across the gallery's floor provide the physical tug that great painting has always exerted on the viewer's body, from Masaccio's Brancacci chapel right up to Bill Jensen's recent abstraction of St. Sebastian. Apfelbaum's *Bones* (2000) is the oldest work in the show and emanates a worn wisdom; the ribs of color striating each of these thick rolls of synthetic velvet hint at an even more luminous procession, if only they could be unfurled.

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Just as I was concluding that the aesthetic chops of some artists had trumped the show's conceptual conceits, I was snagged by Kelley Walker's small canvas, *4870 Series*. The size of a notebook page, I'd barely noticed it, but when I leaned in to study the almost blank white ground, my eyes registered tiny Benday dots. What I'd thought was a spare painting was actually a "four-color process silkscreen on canvas" and the unassuming image suddenly became a sly koan—a mechanical print scarcely discernible from the wall it hung upon. Depending on your mind's bent, such an image might conjure Magritte's picture of a pipe, which is, of course, not a pipe, or Malevich's white on white Supremacist painting, or ruminations on the visual prevarications of our Photoshopped age.

Not enough to look at, but plenty to think about.