Aljoscha • Beck • Caveney • Curtis • Gadbois
Gallagher Stout • Hallard • Hollenback • Kim
Metzger • Pearson • Pollock • Polashenski
Stillman • Schlosberg • Schuh • Sinclair
Stockwell • Vetter • Wren • Yeager

Contemporary Painting After a Century of Abstract Art 3/3

fuzzy logic

Well, even nonsense has a right to live.[1]
Marcel Duchamp

*I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products.
I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the
mind.*[2]
Marcel Duchamp

Fuzzy Logic is the third and final installment of our series, *Contemporary Painting After a Century of Abstract Art*, which presents a cross section of contemporary artists who combine non-figurative imagery with rule-based painting practices. *Namesake*, our first exhibition, examined observation-based abstraction with its tendency to reduce, alter and edit the visible world. It demonstrated a crucial point about the observation-based approach, which is always inspired by nameable objects and spaces no matter how stylized the end product evolves away from its source. *Deconstructing Chaos*, the second exhibition, examined intuitive-based abstraction, which exposed the power and vitality of exploring hard-to-pin-

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[1] Paul Matisse recounting Marcel Duchamp in conversation with PMA curator Michael Taylor, at the First Annual Anne d'Harnoncourt Marcel Duchamp Symposium, Philadelphia Museum of Art, September 12, 2009, as reported by Michael Oatman.

[2] The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946, p. 20.

down subjects via visual cacophonies of shapes, forms and elements of design, with ceaseless networks of markings, amorphous imagery and associative connections to subjects, which can all be layered or juxtaposed through both additive and subtractive means. Intuitive-based abstraction often unites memories and emotions that allow us to construct and make sense of the universe from such visual and visceral cues and triggers, but the final product is never a known quantity; intuitive-abstraction is always an adventure in the making. Whereas, semblances and connections, respectively, informed the work in our first two exhibitions, the art of *Fuzzy Logic* is abundantly vested with conceptual strategies that for the most part are not at all about such things. Thus, *Fuzzy Logic* de-emphasizes semblances and associations in favor of exploring cognitive systems of paint dispersal, or, put another way, *Fuzzy Logic* illustrates non-retinal, idea-based painting.

Having established the above platform, we may now succinctly acknowledge that the first hundred years of abstract art are punctuated by a handful of trends, which *Contemporary Painting After a Century of Abstract Art* groups into three basic categories: observation, intuition, conception. *Fuzzy Logic*, the most recent and arguably most prevalent development, is an attempt at examining contemporary practices that tend to emphasize idea-based approaches while de-emphasizing imagery, design and discovery. The show aims to emphasize Sol LeWitt's important distinction*: In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.*[3]

At first, it may seem an incompatible relationship to join together an overtly idea-based painting practice with nameless imagery. Logic that attempts to create content out of patterns of non-objective painting material, with established limitations of design, seems fuzzy, at best. But at its core, *Fuzzy Logic* aims to demonstrate how painting ideas gains strength when semblances and connections are minimized if not expunged from the visual record. It is as though images of things get in the way and to better see the idea, they are purged, unless somehow, such imagery can revert attention back to the initial idea in the first place. And indeed, we will see in a few instances that rule-based abstraction does not necessarily preclude the possibility of observational or associational underpinnings. *Fuzzy Logic* allows for such contradictions.

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[3] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", Art Forum 5, no. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 79-83

Though visibly obvious relationships abound, the varied work in *Fuzzy Logic* is difficult to separate into groups. For example, circles are a common trait as is the use of a grid as an organizing principle. But, as strategies are compared among the twenty-one artists, such affinities remain only visually connected. Some artists use circles as a way to approximate the biology of living systems, made up of countless numbers of small parts. Others use circles to express understandings of algorithms or to catalog the daily color of the sky. Several artists align in general resonance with regard to mutual interests in mathematical organizing principles, but no two artists work with the same principle twice. There is a tendency for many pieces to relate to more than one grouping despite visual cohesion. Several groupings are not immediately apparent and require the aid of an artist's statement to recognize. Many works blur the distinction between polar opposites such as: painting and sculpture, representation and abstraction, portion and entirety, individual and group, system and choice.

A small group of artists focuses on theoretical concerns. Works in this category tend to catch the viewer thinking about thinking as much as they also critique abstraction or directly comment on abstraction as an activity. The work in this self-reflexive category tends to confound the viewer at the onset of looking at it, tends to raise questions about how it was made, and in one way or another appears deceivingly simple to apprehend, or otherwise seems out of place.

Several artists fall into a category that could easily be considered intuitive abstraction were it not for their governing principles, which keep them far away from associative and connective practices as they expose issues having nothing to do with any kind of expressionism. The unique ways in which this group of artists uses paint is of great interest. Paint is extruded through fabric, or machines, or syringes. Paint is built up into sculptural forms, or poured. In one case, paint is not even used, except as a tinting agent to colorize cement, the main medium. And in another case clothing is used in place of canvas. Some artists in this group are finding visual equivalents of mathematical properties or they mimic the natural world through a set of visual expressions of mathematical models. While other artists work with computer systems to generate imagery that is then painstakingly made by hand. In each case, the material means are secondary to the ideas examined.

One thing that seems clear is that while the imagery of *Fuzzy Logic* is abstract and hard to place, the ideas that governed the creation of the work

are palpable and made to be understood logically. Perhaps, that small but important point says a lot about our series and the history of abstraction. *Fuzzy Logic* is a celebration of a way of painting that is innovative and intellectually stimulating at a time when both artists and critics alike have been skeptical and critical of abstraction as a process in all its various derivations. Nevertheless, as we have seen, working non-objectively stems from an impetus to devolve a particular *Namesake*, or it can be about *Deconstructing Chaos*, or it is a kind of *Fuzzy Logic*; regardless, each of these approaches captivates us in thought. Indeed, since abstraction's inception a century ago, the activity and the work to come out of its myriad practices have been dubious from many points of view. However, if viewers find themselves imagining and thinking about *Contemporary Painting After a Century of Abstract Art*, then the ideas that govern this non-objective art have re-invested painting to be *in service of the mind*.

Todd Bartel, Curator
Gallery Director