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ART

Color Them Retro

A new generation is dabbling in the discredited Color-field style.

August 16, 1998 | David Pagel | David Pagel is a regular art reviewer for Calendar

Color has come back into abstract painting with a force that hasn't been seen since the 1960s. Bright, bold and out of this world, the palettes of many young artists are looking like super-charged versions of the synthetic spectra once favored by artists from the movement known as Color-field painting. While borrowing from earlier styles is commonplace in the world of contemporary art, what's most remarkable about recent works by such artists as Polly Apfelbaum, Linda Besemer, Ingrid Calame, Penelope Krebs, Laura Owens and Monique Prieto is that in looking to Color-field painting, they are harking back to a style that for the past 25 years has been treated as the laughingstock of recent art history.

Color-field painting was invented in the mid-1950s in response to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Spreading his canvases on the floor, Pollock did not apply paint in brush strokes, but dribbled and flung it, forming linear webs that were celebrated for their delicacy and complexity. He changed the way artists looked at the act of painting, and his influence was profound. Among his followers were Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Larry Poons, a group that became known as Color-field artists because they stained their pigments directly into the weave of their canvases. Going beyond Pollock's gestures, they literally fused their works' image and surface.

These artists' work was championed by Clement Greenberg, the most influential art critic of his time, and the man largely responsible for drawing attention to Pollock's work. With Greenberg's backing, the Color-field artists got attention initially; but unlike the Abstract Expressionists, their time in the limelight didn't last.

By the mid-1960s, Color-field painting had become synonymous with everything wrong with Modern art. Derided as elitist, authoritarian and vacuously decorative, Color-field was overshadowed by the emergence of Minimalism and Pop Art. Along with Op Art, another abstract style that was an indirect outgrowth of the Abstract Expressionist movement, the work of Color-field artists eventually was dismissed by critics and art historians.

Although with evolving tastes, virtually all styles eventually fall out of fashion--or are vigorously rejected by artists trying to establish different styles--Color-field's bad reputation has demonstrated a perverse type of longevity.

At a time when it is difficult for artists to know what they might oppose--after more than 100 years of avant-garde rebellion--Color-field painting has served as a surprisingly versatile foe, one that has been attacked and ridiculed from all sides.

Until now.

In place of the now-routine academic critiques of Color-field, Apfelbaum, Besemer, Calame, Krebs, Owens and Prieto are doing something much more ambitious: They are attempting to redeem the style from the dustbin of art history. In the process, their diverse works have begun to make Color-field painting look interesting again.

Significant differences distinguish the work of these young, female artists--all but one of whom are from Los Angeles--from that of their mostly male, East Coast predecessors. Apfelbaum, Calame and Prieto all employ some type of stain making, yet none of their techniques is as straightforward as those of the original Color-field painters. Apfelbaum uses an eyedropper to squirt an exceptionally artificial rainbow of fabric dyes onto swatches of synthetic stretch-velvet, which she then cuts into circles, ellipses and slinky, beaded configurations before laying them out on the floor like discombobulated carpets endowed with seemingly hallucinatory powers.

Calame traces stains she finds on streets and sidewalks, using the silhouettes of these everyday spills to form the sharp contours of her meticulous compositions. Painted on aluminum panels in an unnatural palette of highly toxic enamels, her precisely copied accidents resemble paint-by-number puzzles or maps of imaginary lands.

Prieto uses a computer to design the oddly elongated blobs that populate her pristine expanses of raw canvas. With impossibly crisp edges, these indescribable shapes of supersaturated color cavort and cooperate, acting as if they had one foot firmly planted in a Dr. Seuss picture-book and the other in the world of monochrome painting.

Besemer's works beat the Color-field painters at their own game. Made of nothing but layer upon layer of stripes of acrylic paint--and no canvases--her 100% pure paintings join surface and support in three-dimensional pieces that resemble oversize dishrags. These eye-popping stripe paintings playfully suggest that they'd have no trouble cleaning up a spill before it becomes a stain--painterly or otherwise.

Likewise, Krebs' vertical bands of dazzling color recall Color-field artist Gene Davis' mural-size stripe paintings from the 1960s. Smaller, stronger and more self-contained, Krebs' taut compositions consist of fine-tuned arrangements of electrifying tertiary hues that flaunt her skills as a colorist as they give abstraction the giddy energy of a circus.

Owens is less interested in fusing paint with a canvas surface than in confounding distinctions between the illusion of space in her paintings and the real space around them. Often depicting simplified galleries filled with stylized paintings, her sweetly disorienting canvases flip-flop between two and three dimensions,

making contradictory propositions about art's place in the world.

Just five years ago, a group of female artists garnered considerable attention for making works that referred to recent art history's biggest success stories, primarily to point out their shortcomings. Owens, 27, says that the strategy of directly addressing one's predecessors no longer dominates the art world, because the art world is less unified today than it was 10 years ago: "Coming out of CalArts with an MFA in 1994, I felt an incredible freedom. Artists are not limited to looking at a single style or movement. I'm as interested in Impressionism as I am in new music. I like to look at Richard Neutra's architecture as well as paintings by Richard Estes, Bridget Riley, Jules Olitski and Larry Poons.

"While I have no firsthand experience of what the art world was like 10 years ago, it seems that back then artists felt the need to engage in a critical discourse that was specifically aimed at earlier works. Today, things aren't so coherent or logical."

Although New York-based Apfelbaum, 43, belongs to the generation to which Owens refers, having graduated from Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art in 1978, she shares the younger artist's eclectic interests: "I've always been drawn to the marginal, idiosyncratic people--to underappreciated misfits like Anni Albers, Sam Francis and Paul Feeley. I'm attracted to the lesser-knowns because there's a relaxed quality to their work. It's not on a pedestal. The history is there, but you're not intimidated by it.

"With painters like Myron Stout, Yayoi Kusama and Alfred Jensen, you get to fall in love, and it's not such a big deal. It's like a casual love affair. You get to escape with these works. They just become part of your life. You can look at them in your jeans. You don't have to get dressed up to go visit them."

Like Apfelbaum, Calame, 32, prefers the hands-on quality of the everyday to the abstract ideals of art history. She recalls, "Four years ago, while I was working toward my degree in art and film at CalArts, I had a revelation about Pollock. I was pouring brightly colored acrylics onto sections of black velvet when I realized that the paint that seeped through the fabric and puddled on the floor looked a lot better than the god-awful paintings I was trying to make.

"So I began to work backwards, tracing the stains on my studio floor and transferring their silhouettes to wood panels. To my surprise, the garbage marks looked more like art than the art marks did. That's when it became clear to me that the marks Pollock had been making were generic, and that what he had been doing was a lot more related to everyday life than to museum art. Before then, I had believed what I had been told. I had always looked at abstract painting as an art movement, with a certain look and aura. I guess I just didn't believe that the real thing could be experienced from the inside--not as a larger-than-life-size myth, but as something I could come to grips with on my own."

Prieto, 36, didn't come into her own as a painter until she had been out of school for a year and was raising the first of her two children with musician Michael Webster. After a rather timid solo debut in 1994, her exhibition the following year exploded with a wacky parade of vividly colored shapes and goofy cartoon energy.

"With kids, it suddenly becomes clear what's important and what's not," she says. "I realized that in the studio I had nothing to lose. Everything I wanted was in the little person upstairs. Painting got really easy--being much lower on my list of priorities."

A classmate of both Calame and Owens, Prieto says, "I don't think about Color-field painting at all. I'm not trying to rework it. But I do have a great attachment to abstraction. I grew up in a home with a TV in every room. My parents were divorced, and on weekends my dad would take me to [the Los Angeles County Museum of Art] and to the galleries on La Cienega Boulevard. We'd look at abstract art and make up stories about what we saw. This was a refuge from my daily life. The museum was a special place. It was magical.

"As a kid, I didn't care about who made what. I had no idea that art was a critique. For me, art was fun. In my own work I want to hold onto that. There's not enough time to do what you want to do anyway, so why use your energy to make someone else look bad?"

A similar sentiment drives Besemer's abstractions, which explicitly engage the works of the Color-field painters. Two years ago, the 41-year-old artist exhibited a stunning series of round paintings directly affixed to the gallery's walls. Made with a single 360-degree sweep of a specially designed compass-like squeegee, these acrylics combined the instantaneous impact of Color-field artist Kenneth Noland's target paintings with a Space Age optimism.

A new series of folded stripe paintings simultaneously reveals the fronts and the backs of each piece. Besemer, who earned her MFA at Tyler in 1983, explains, "I'm interested in color--in the ways it seems to permeate an object and to form its surface. I'm drawn to extreme colors because there's always more there than can be translated into words.

"In contrast to Pollock, who usually worked with muted tones, the Color-field painters really keyed things up. Their paintings--especially those by Morris Louis--have a plastic quality that interests me. Historically, the Color-field painters have been dismissed as loser-sissies because they embraced color so unapologetically. I think of my works as a way of bringing seriousness and pleasure back together."

Krebs' palette is even more synthetic than those of the Color-field painters are. Acidic yellows, luminous lime-greens and florescent oranges repeatedly pop up among luxuriant burgundies, deep greens and blazing blues. Although Krebs' canvases condense an impressive variety of wildly unnatural colors into a tight tonal range, she does not think of herself as a colorist.

"For me, color is never a goal or conclusion. I use color as a tool to generate experiences. I'm fascinated by the relationships between and among colors, and by the rhythms that get set up by their juxtaposition, arrangement and scale. Color opens a painting up. Its parameters are unbelievably wide."

Krebs, 44, who graduated from the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara in 1981, believes that color is often ignored by artists and critics because it so readily elicits personal associations. "With color, you're always fighting subjective interpretations. Of course, you can't get away from these references, but I want my paintings to keep your mind open as long as possible. To really see them, you have to be free of what you've seen and learned. Their unpredictable equilibrium proves that they're working."

Looking back on the past 20 years, Apfelbaum summarizes: "Back then, we were all embarrassed by Modernist painting. Now it's coming back. Today, it's

almost OK to be a formalist.

"Five years ago you had to be socially transgressive. As an artist, you had to be scary to be taken seriously. Above all else, you were not supposed to like art. Now it's OK to like things again. For a while, we were scared away from our instincts. What's the matter with being smart and pretty at the same time?"