

TO THE EXTREME

THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX OPENS ITS ENTIRE GALLERY TO ABSTRACT EXHIBIT THAT PUSHES BOUNDARIES OF SIZE AND SCOPE

BY RICHARD HUNTINGTON - NEWS CRITIC

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Twenty or so years ago, abstract art seemed deep into its decadence. Banks and hotels, in efforts to buy into the cache of modern art, would bedeck lobbies with the most ghastly abstract paintings. Home decorators would fervently seek that spiffy splash of abstract color that would magically tie together lime green walls and Tuscan red sofa. Corporations would commission big geometric structures to dominate downtown plazas, a constant reminder to work-a-day citizens that corporations were big and dominating presences in their lives.

Those who followed the story of abstraction to that point might not have noticed that abstract art was quietly, busily expanding, cross-breeding and mutating all the time, right up to the present day.

"Each generation has made abstraction its own," says Albright-Knox associate curator Claire Schneider. "Abstraction is such a flexible, amazing language. You can do things with it that can't be done with narrative art and photography. I've stopped calling it a style: It's a language. You can take it and morph it, move it in all sorts of different directions."

Schneider should know. For more than a year and a half she has been seeking out abstraction on these shores and abroad, working with Albright-Knox director Louis Grachos as co-organizers of a massive and far-reaching exhibition called "Extreme Abstraction."

This monumental affair, which opens today at the gallery, contains a staggering 200 art works (a number still in flux when this was written) by 150 artists from the national and international scene.

X-art

It is a great sprawling affair that for the first time in the gallery's history takes over every gallery in the old and new buildings, including the adjacent Clifton Hall and its connecting Link Gallery, and encompasses the auditorium, where a light piece by Leo Villareal can be seen (best at night) flashing within the black glass walls. Art invades the vestibules and stairways and spills out onto the gallery lawn where new pieces like Liam Gillick's color-charged "Stacked Revision Structure" join those that have long been part of the gallery's outdoor display, such as Tony Smith's imposing corten-steel geometric zig-zag, "Cigarette."

And don't think that Grachos and Schneider were just bandying about a catchy term when they chose "Extreme Abstraction" as the title. This is extreme abstraction. The show demonstrates that artists today have redirected abstraction toward formerly alien fields such as computer science, mechanical engineering, statistics, animation and graphic design. They are willing to activate just about any space and employ just about any non-art item if it fits their purposes.

Among 18 site-specific installations (11 of them commissioned), for example, are Jim Isermann's redesigned door mats by and Jim Lamb's colorful striped design carefully fitted to one of the low stairways in the 1962 building. There are quirky applications of abstraction to big pillows in the case of James Hyde and a video, projected on the floor of the stairwell outside the Link by Jennifer Steinkamp.

Many artists in this show may even seem on a giddy material binge, employing all sorts of new or esoteric materials, such as industrial foam, gaffers tape (for a Piet Mondrian remake, no less), vinyl, latex and decals, to name a few.

And if you thought the gallery's Clyfford Stills were big, take a walk down the long run of a dark, web-draped canvas by Katharina Grosse hanging in the Sculpture Court. It measures 30 foot long, and is only beat in scale by those works that cover, mural-like, an entire gallery.

Ingrid Calame does indeed cover three walls with her immense "Secular Response 2AJ," a lime-green painting on mylar featuring patterns that seemingly have no particular derivation.

The artist explains that those patterns are actually derived from a particular source: stains traced from streets in Los Angeles, on Manhattan's Wall Street and in Las Vegas. From there it was to the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, where Calame arranged selected tracings -- "selected" because she has about a third of an acre of them, thus far -- on the floor working around various units of furniture.

What we see on the wall are the patterns made by the traced stains interrupted by white areas designating the furniture units. Calame says she has done related projects in her home town church and plans to do another at an observatory. "These three architectural structure represent ideas of immortality --money, science and religion," she says. "I think of the stains as traces of mortality."

Guests to the gallery

Many of the Albright-Knox's most famous and familiar holdings are placed in such unexpected company. Masterpieces by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Morris Louis and the rest of the abstract expressionist and post-ab-ex gang crop up among young rebels like Damien Hirst (infamous for his dissected cows in formaldehyde, which, thankfully, are ruled out because real cows, no matter how they're sliced, are not abstract) and aging rebels like Lynda Benglis, who lays out in front of Louis' airy "Alpha" a huge piece of colored latex rubber called "Fallen Painting." (By a condition of the artist's original gift, Clyfford Still has his own room, where he is exempt from this aesthetic head-banging.)

Sprinkled in among today's hot abstractionists and midcentury giants are the real old masters of abstraction -- fabled figures like Mondrian, Joan Miro, Josef Albers, Frantisek Kupka (who with Wassily Kandinsky, his work unfortunately out on loan, is credited with establishing abstraction), and Kazimir Malevich, among many others.

"What's great about this show is how you can see artists taking abstraction in directions that deal with their times," Schneider says. "There are examples from every decade of the 20th century to the present."

And she adds, it's not only the absolute masters that turn up either. There are also well-plotted resurrections of lesser-known pieces from the ever-rich permanent collection that are pertinent to the show's context.

Surprisingly, abstraction sometimes appears in the guise of functional objects, such as the aforementioned floor mats and pillows. Roxy Paines's "PMU (Painting Manufacture Unit)" is a sophisticated motorized machine.

Grochos says that "PMU" will give the spectator a chance to witness the odd phenomenon of seeing a machine make a painting, some of which will go on display. Plus, with modern eyes attuned to the beauty of the machine, we can enjoy the sleek device itself as a kind of complicated abstract sculpture in its own right.

Some works mock the idea of the functional, the objects of John Beech providing the prime examples. Beech's funky, slightly absurd creations are enshrined in their own glass cases like sacred relics. These are mostly "platforms," often with casters sticking out from all surfaces and fresh from a bout with an over-enthusiastic paint bucket. They are totally useless artifacts, comical and somehow deeply satisfying in the way they upset the ordinary logical world.

Obviously, this isn't just another abstract art show. It's big, ambitious, bold and so ingeniously installed that it should wake up the art-going public to the fact that abstraction is again a vital, joyous, witty and sometimes wacky contemporary art form.

Schneider goes even further: She thinks that "Extreme Abstraction" just may be one of the most important exhibition of abstract art in 40 years.

She just may be right.

WHAT: "Extreme Abstraction," contemporary works by international artists, including 18 site-specific installations

WHEN: Through Oct. 2

WHERE: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1285 Elmwood Ave.

ADMISSION: \$8 to \$10

INFO: 882-8700

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