

Television—Building a sweeps-worthy “Joan of Arc,” from the rubber armor up. Page 3
Music—Thomas Quasthoff’s triumph. Page 7 • Movies—Glass ceiling? Not in the old Hollywood. Page 9

SUNDAY Calendar

THE CASE FOR PAINTING

It's not back,
because it never
left. After decades
out of fashion, in
contempt and on the
margins of
contemporary art,
painting is again
center stage.

PLUS

New painters
who matter.

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT ■ PAGE 4



Kurt Kauper
“DIVA FICTION #10,” 1999

Fresh Paint

Now that painting has reemerged from a difficult stretch, isn't it time for a survey of the best new work?

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

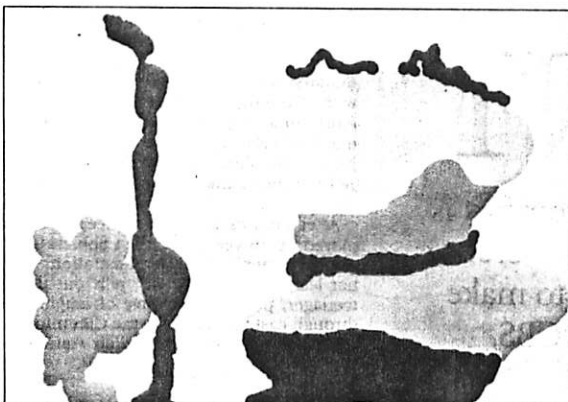
Three years ago, I asked distinguished artist John Baldessari what major museum exhibition of contemporary art he'd most like to see organized now. Baldessari, a pioneer of the Conceptual art movement 25 years before, answered my query without hesitation: "I'd really like to see a survey that says, 'Where is painting right now?' Because I don't have a good idea.... There's so much of this 'Isn't it interesting how the kitchen door looks like a painting?' school of art. Rather than that, I'd just like to see a painting."

I smiled—partly because Baldessari's humor is always pleurably wry, but partly because I shared his desire. I still do. His wish, voiced in 1996, has not been fulfilled. Surveys of contemporary painting were once a museum staple, but not any longer. I can't recall the last one I saw. Yet the reasons for organizing one now grow more pressing every day.

In the 1990s, something has been changing in the landscape of art. It's hard to put your finger on this inchoate shift, but painting certainly has something to do with it. A smartly chosen survey, selected with critical care



Christopher Grimes Gale



Acme Gallery

Sharon Ellis
"DUSK," 1999

Her eye-popping landscapes put perceptual consciousness on vivid display.

Monique Prieto
"LAST CHANCE," 1998

Plotted first on a computer, the 10-foot-long canvas leaves nothing to chance.

rom what seems to be an abundance of terrific painting being made by new artists in the last several years, might go a long way toward understanding what's afoot.

What is definitely not afoot is a so-called "return of painting." Painting has returned periodically, ever since its supposed "death" at the hands of Conceptual, Post-minimal and other artistic strategies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Usually, the trumpet-blast about this or that return of painting is sounded by the art market, eager to package product with a gloss of newness for ease of consumption. The most prominent episode came in the early 1980s, when the newly market-mad art world brought us Neo-Expressionism. Mini-boomlets, like Neo-Geo, have flared up (and died down) since.

Claims for painting's return are also usually surrounded by a tinge of benighted relief, as if some grievous wrong has at last been righted, a prodigal child come home, a deposed monarch restored to the throne. Painting was the spine of Western art culture since the Renaissance, so any discussion of painting's condition now is easily endangered by that kind of reactionary nostalgia.

Then there's the not-insignificant fact that painters of many different stripes (and assorted ranges of talent) have been working all along, regardless of whether or not painting was in fashion. Some have even developed serious reputations and important bodies of work.

Yet my interest in the state of painting today is not about a new style, a movement or putting it back on some pedestal. (In the end, a pedestal is just a tiny prison.) It's more about a change in attitude.

Over the last 30 years, painting has been charged with everything from being irrelevant to life in a post-industrial society to being a politically indefensible relic of a waning age of patriarchal empire and colonial expansion. Pronouncements of its death were linked to an unshakable symbolism of exclusionary establishment values. Partly in response, a variety of nontraditional forms flourished: performance art, video, found objects, mail art, installation, photo-based art, new genres, post-studio art.

You could tell painting had some atoning to do, if only because of the popularity of one approach toward navigating the problem of whether or not it was legitimate. Painting got loaded with irony, a method of often subtly sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning is the opposite of its usual sense. Ironic painting gave a wink-wink signal to a tuned-in audience, which said that the artist knows that the audience knows that the artist knows what's up.

A greater irony has long since emerged, though, swamping any feeble sort that painting might now muster. By the 1990s, a quarter-century of suspiciousness toward painting and increasingly ironic antidotes to its charged status had themselves become the closely held, restrictive premises within establishment art circles. As the context itself became ironic, ironic painting pretty much canceled out its own effectiveness.

That's a big reason last summer's mid-career survey of paintings by New York-artist Christopher Wool at the Museum of Contemporary Art was such a bust. Wool has used rubber rollers to print floral wallpaper patterns, stencils to print slogans ("Please Please Please," "You Make Me") and spray cans to scrawl graceful graffiti on slick white surfaces. These ironic "paint-

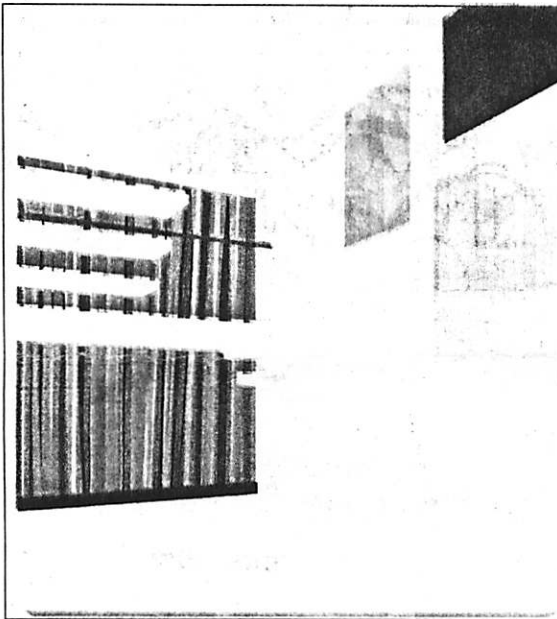
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Kurt Kauper
"DIVA FICTION #5," 1997

Acme Gallery

His exquisitely rendered, life-size work equates the painted object with the painted subject: tough, elegant, volatile.



Kevin Appel
"LANDING," 1998

Angles Gallery

In vaguely ominous images of modern interiors, he adds a Pop edge to L.A.'s otherwise abstract Light and Space tradition.

Post-Boomers Spearhead the Boom

Provocative American painters have been coming to the fore just about everywhere recently.

This is a tale of two art generations: the boomers and the post-boomers.

American artists of the baby boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, arrived upon (and contributed to) an especially tumultuous art scene. From about 1966 to 1972, traditional artistic practices like painting and sculpture were regarded with extreme wariness, generating what insightful critic Lucy Lippard once aptly described as the wholesale "de-materialization of the art object" and Harold Rosenberg called the "de-definition of art."

Attention shifted away from discrete art objects and toward ephemeral ideas—toward art as a way of knowing, and how context shapes meaning. Video, performance, Conceptual art, Earthworks, installation, photo-based art and other fresh, new genres flourished. They set exciting standards for new art in the next two decades.

Today, though, a generation led by post-baby-boomers is just beginning to come into artistic focus—and things couldn't be more different. One inescapable sign: A painting boom is on. Provocative painters have been turning up everywhere in recent years, often bursting on the scene with remarkable gallery debuts.

The variety in their work is astounding. Monique Prieto makes surprising abstract paintings with the lively vivacity of cartoons. Steven Crique blends the conventions of High Modernism and Pop with old-fashioned Dutch mercantile art. Laura Owens assays subtle figure-ground ambiguities that play off the actual space of the room in which her paintings hang.

In vaguely ominous images of modern interiors, Kevin Appel adds a domestic Pop edge to L.A.'s otherwise mostly abstract tradition of Light and Space art. Michelle Fierro literally builds abstract paintings from studio flotsam, while Keith Sklar accomplishes a similar feat in figurative images of the Wild West.

Ingrid Calame finds her abstractions in parking lots and alleys, tracing errant stains on urban pavements. Sharon Ryan finds hers in the patterns of wood grain, which she highlights with delicate, oddly spooky tracery.

Like a carpenter, Carolee Toon builds sleek, obsessively well-groomed chunks of color. Adam Ross unfolds extraterrestrial landscapes of acrid (yet strangely appealing) hues, while Sharon Ellis' eye-popping landscapes put perceptual consciousness on vivid display.

Lusty paintings of marauding little girls roll out of Kim Dingle's brush. Jane Callister paints lurid confections, as if a Japanese pillow book or the Kama Sutra were being rendered by a suburban housewife wielding a sensual pastry tube. Monica Majoli labors over paintings at the rate of about one a year, creating ambiguous pictures of pleasure and pain.

And there are many more—not only in L.A., as are all of those mentioned above, but in New York as well. There, Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin are two of the more interesting painters in a city where exceptional home-grown painting hasn't been abundant for 30 years. In distinctly different ways, both Yuskavage and Currin are avidly rethinking what is perhaps the central icon of

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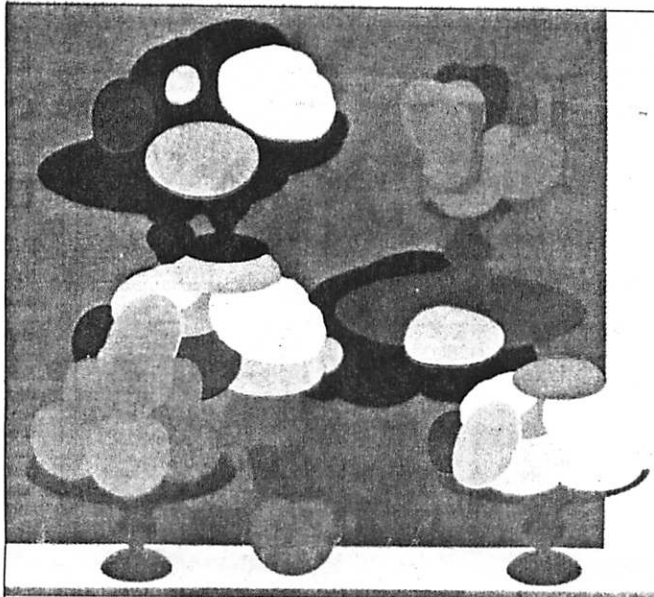
ings," which display metaphorical quotation marks like a downtown version of the Good Housekeeping seal, emerged into prominence in the late 1980s, when the art world had gotten fed up with all the heroic, high-ticket posturing of Neo-Expressionism. The young are always the most important barometers of where culture is headed, though, and by the summer of '98, when lots of compelling new painting by young artists from coast to coast was plainly as *un-ironic* as it could be, MOCA's canonization of ironic painting just looked tired—not to mention indifferent to emerging realities.

As a new century dawns, the multiplicity of artistic forms that mushroomed at the 20th century's end—from performance to installation art—is not going to go away. Each one once caused a double take, but all are now taken for granted as useful practices. They're publicly and privately funded, bought and sold, taught in art schools by tenured professors. They're here to stay.

Painting was for years the only form not taken for granted—not merely assumed to be capable of turning heads. Yet, especially among younger artists, it is now. That's the attitude change.

So painting is not being reborn, nor is it back again. Instead, the generalized uneasiness with painting as a practice—which for a generation tacitly defined the context within which painting was made, exhibited and argued over—has simply vanished. What the 1990s seem to have brought us is the death of "the death of painting," which no longer functions as an operating principle, either overt or covert.

From the vantage point of Los Angeles, a curiosity about new painting has a special resonance, since painting has never been widely regarded as a major practice here. The city's emergence as a cosmopolitan center for new art coincided with the period of skepticism about painting. Sure, individual painters of stature could easily be named, but



Steven Criquei
"UNTITLED (MATERIAL/ABSTRACTION)," 1998
Angles Gallery

Dutch still life meets the conventions of High Modernism and digital Pop.

they're just that—individuals.

I've often wondered what role an inadvertent pair of local events might have played in this dynamic. In 1963, the old Pasadena Art Museum held a now-legendary retrospective for Marcel Duchamp, the French-born American expatriate who, around 1913, famously abandoned painting; rather than paint, Duchamp began to make art composed of ordinary, manufactured objects placed in altered contexts—a urinal tipped on its side and made useless so it could be claimed as a sculpture, say, or a

store-bought snow shovel leaned against an art gallery wall and titled "In Advance of a Broken Arm." A few months after the Pasadena show, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held "Post-Painterly Abstraction," which couldn't have been more different—organized by guest curator Clement Greenberg, then the dominant New York critic, the show was a big, widely noted survey of recent abstract painting.

In a sense, these two nearly simultaneous exhibitions drew the artistic lines for the battle that followed in the next 10

years: Duchamp's razor wit and emphasis on the transformative power of critical context versus Greenberg's mandarin authoritarianism and schoolmasterish hauteur about painting's primary cultural role.

Needless to say, Duchamp won that fight. He went on to expand his already considerable position, becoming the single most influential artist for American generations after Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg, the critic whose prescient championship of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s devolved into an increasingly noxious stranglehold on what was acceptable for painting, went on to become the single most reviled figure in the American art world. Greenberg the Painting King got clobbered by Duchamp the Anti-Painter. Painting "died."

But just how much of an anti-painter was Duchamp, really? Last fall, I did a double take when reading the catalog to a lovely survey of paintings by David Reed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Reed, a San Diego native who now works in New York, had journeyed to the Pasadena Art Museum as a 17-year-old high school student especially to see the Duchamp retrospective. In the galleries, he encountered both the art and the visiting 76-year-old artist, with whom he struck up a conversation.

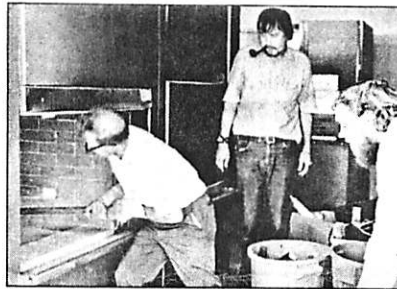
"I regret giving up painting," Duchamp told the inquisitive young man, who had voiced his own aspiration to become an artist. "I shouldn't have given up painting."

Duchamp's remark startles, given the profound impact his found-object art has had and the edifice of academic law that has grown up around it. Still, it doesn't seem like a statement of repudiation of long-held ideas. As an artist, Duchamp was always most interested in art as an activity—that is, in art as a way of knowing, rather than as a specific form. He could be counted on to remain curious about most everything, including

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Painting,
R.I.P.

In 1970, Conceptual artist John Baldessari (center, with pipe) demolished his paintings, incinerated them at a crematorium and posted a funeral notice in the local paper.



Photos courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery

JOHN ANTHONY BALDESSARI
MAY 1953 MARCH 1966

8/9, 10, 11 (37406) Maria K. Lloyd, President

AFFIDAVIT
(GENERAL)

State of California,
County of San Diego

ss.
Being First Duly Sworn, deposes and says:

Notice is hereby given that all works of art done by the undersigned between May 1953 and March 1966 in his possession as of July 24, 1970 were cremated on July 24, 1970 in San Diego, California.

JOHN BALDESSARI,
National City, California
Subscribed and sworn to before me this 7th day of August, 1970.

MARGARET HAMMERSLEY,
Notary Public

8/10 (37531) in and for said State.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

Painting

Continued from Page 6

ing forms he had cast aside 50 years before.

The other thing that the story opened wide was the generational gulf between two artists, one established, the other just starting out. Today I'd wager that it's a generational difference that's critical to bringing so much interesting new painting to the foreground.

Thirty years ago, a premium was put on the value of art ideas over art objects, out of a deep frustration with the limitations of traditional painting and sculpture. Consider the estimable John Baldessari: In 1970, he carted off to a crematorium most of the paintings he had made since 1953, had them committed to the flames and sealed the ashes in a funerary urn. Painting, R.I.P.

Now, among twenty- and thirty-something artists, that sense of grinding frustration is ancient history, as remote from their lived experience as the Trojan War or the Sack of Rome. The present day is hardly without frustrations of its own; they're just different ones. For young, post-baby-boom artists, painting not only isn't dead, it isn't even fraught.

Convincing evidence of the shift has been turning up all around for many years now. Make a list of names, as I did while working on this article—it could go on and on.

One example: In March, ACME Gallery held the second solo show by artist Kurt Kauper (born 1966). Kauper, who graduated from UCLA just four years ago, calls his riveting pictures "Diva Fictions," and they assert painting's present situation with stunning visual force. In a slick, carefully controlled style that recalls up-to-the-minute celebrity photojournalism seamlessly merged with the long-gone tradition of Grand Manner portraiture, they show monochrome fields of intense color occupied by exquisitely rendered, life-size figures of elaborately gowned, coiffed and bejeweled women.

Not only are these imposing paintings absent any trace of suspicion or irony, but they assert for themselves the unshakable aura of the imaginary opera singers they depict: proud, weather-beaten, slightly dangerous, elegantly put-together, volatile, tough, utterly self-invented, unconventional, thoroughly gorgeous. *Painting is a diva*, these oils declare; and they demand of you a commensurate sense of confident, self-critical rigor.

These are paintings that couldn't have been made 10 years ago. Looking at them now makes me ache more than ever to see a big survey exhibition of what whole rafts of remarkable younger painters are up to—and have been up to for quite some time. □

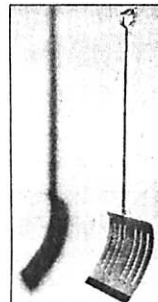
Christopher Knight is *The Times* art critic.



Philadelphia Art Museum

Lost and Found

Marcel Duchamp quit painting ("Nude Descending a Staircase," 1912, above) in favor of found-object art ("In Advance of a Broken Arm," 1915, right).



Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Artists

Continued from Page 5

Western painting since the Renaissance (and a long-standing taboo): the female nude.

You may have noticed that this new crop of compelling painters is loaded with women. The cultural success of the feminist movement, which was itself instrumental in the "de-materialization of the art object" three decades ago, is one foundation on which painting today is re-materializing.

The arc of 44-year-old Tim Ebner's career also shows that the intuitive tide that can largely (but not exclusively) be identified with a post-baby-boom generation is going in both directions: Ebner, hav-

ing enjoyed immediate success in the late 1980s with Conceptually oriented wall reliefs and exquisitely fabricated resin panels, abruptly switched gears around 1991.

Turning away from lovely work that, in part, meant to comment about modern painting without actually *being* painting, he gathered up canvas, brushes and oils and spent the next few years teaching himself how to paint—literally from scratch. The results, while not surprisingly uneven, have included some achingly poignant pictures in which tragicomic clowns and anthropomorphic animals wrestle with their world—a daunting place where wrenching conflicts between instinct and socialization always prevail.

—CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT