



## Some Options in Abstraction

Carroll Dunham  
Adam Fuss  
Laura Owens  
James Rosenquist  
Aaron Siskind  
Wolfgang Tillmans  
Sue Williams

Curated by  
Klaus Kertess

On view 15 October to  
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Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts  
Harvard University

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Carroll Dunham *Solar Eruption* 2000/2001  
mixed media on linen, 84 x 100 x 1 in., courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, NY

### Crossing Borders

Since the early 1970s, the borders between abstraction and figuration so militantly guarded by late modernists have been thrown wide open; abstraction has intermixed with figuration and vice versa. The canvas plane once guarded against outside referentiality has been invaded by metaphor, narrative, and gleeful appropriation of historical styles. Already in 1953 with his exhibition *Paintings on the Theme of the Woman*, Willem de Kooning breached the borders so insistently established by his fellow Abstract Expressionists; he proclaimed quite simply that he painted

abstractly when he painted abstractly and figuratively when he painted figuratively—and everything in between. And so it is today. As its title states, this exhibition presents just a few options in abstraction; it includes artists who range from the generation of the Abstract Expressionists to those just now venturing into their artistic maturity.

In the 1940s, Aaron Siskind began to focus his camera close up on little events marking time's passage: peeling paint, sections of posters clinging to a wall, a stray piece of rope on the pavement, etc. Siskind's sense of

frame and scale transformed these fragmentary documents of the material world's transience into enigmatic abstractions that call to the imagination's associative powers much as did Leonardo da Vinci's exhortation to dream into the random stains on a wall. Often Siskind's sensuous restraint and black and white tonalities as well as his aerial perspectives call to the work of his friend and peer Franz Kline.

Like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist turned away from the abstract metaphysics of such as Mark Rothko and Jackson



**Sue Williams** Red and Purple Deal 2001  
oil on acrylic on canvas, 72 x 84 in, courtesy 303 Gallery, NY

Pollock and embraced the ordinary and the mass produced. Trained as a billboard painter, Rosenquist mock mechanically recreated the disjunctiveness of media and advertisement bombardments. In his most recent work, he has turned to abstraction and created simulated high tech, graphic depictions of the differing observations made by the traveler/artist (*Rider-Speed of Light*) and by the observer (*Spectator*) of that artist. Einstein's theory of relativity becomes a challenging metaphor for the shifting reciprocity of artist and viewer. The marvelous conundrum of the speed

of light becomes the conundrum of the speed of the imagination.

Some twenty years Rosenquist's junior, Carroll Dunham, in the 1970s began to draw his way backwards from Robert Mangold influenced, linear geometries to Cy Twomblyesque doodles and then to a cosmicomic delirium of Surrealist organics. More recently, snarling figures have emerged from his abstract phantasmagoria. In *Solar Eruption*, we slowly see figments and fragments of raging molars and disembodied genitalia emerging from the abstract globe of the sun. As in Dunham's work, linear acrobatics played a key



**Adam Fuss** From the Series "Details of Love" 1992  
unique Cibachrome photograph, 59.5 x 48.375 in,  
courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, NY

role in Sue Williams' painting; but she has moved from purgative caricatures of acts of sexual abuse tumbling across a pale plane to a now almost completely abstract, lyric gesturality related to the pared down, graphic arabesques of de Kooning's paintings of the 1980s. In her *Red and Purple Deal*, only shadows of the figure remain in the continuous dance of the paint loaded brush.

Adam Fuss' photograph *From the Series "Details of Love,"* might appear to be as gesturally formed as Williams' painting, but is instead the outcome of one of his continuing explorations of organic transfor-



**Wolfgang Tillmans starstruck #3 2000**  
 artist's proof, approx. 84 x 57 in, Framed C-print, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY  
 photo: Oren Slor

mations of nature—in this case, the chemical interaction of rabbit intestines with the photographic paper they were placed upon. His refusal to be ruled by the representation embedded in the camera's lens and his interest in alchemy and nature's often mysterious metamorphoses has led him back to the negativeless light exposing techniques found in the images of plants created by William Henry Fox Talbot in the mid-nineteenth century and called by him *The Pencil of Nature*.

The negativeless photography occasionally practiced by Wolfgang

Tillmans such as the fugitive wisps of color he calls *Blushes*, relate to Wolfgang Paalen's *fumage* works made in the 1930s with smoke. But Tillmans is just as likely to photograph the clothes discarded on a bed by a friend or an all night rave. And Laura Owens moves as freely from figuration to abstraction as does Tillmans. Her *Untitled* painting seen here seems to embody a seamless mimetic space, but weaves together delicate painting invoking Chinese ink brushed reveries with discontinuous collage elements and a quilt-like abstract motif that seems to have emerged from



**Laura Owens Untitled 1999**  
 ink, acrylic, pencil and charcoal on canvas, 72 x 66 in, courtesy gavin brown's enterprise  
 Collection Gavin Brown

a 1970s *Pattern and Design* painting. Any style and any material might be layered into the illusory coherence of her childlike, delicate paintings that can only briefly camouflage the joyous intelligence of their maker.

And so we see one of the options of abstraction is figuration. Abstraction can as readily harbor the figure as the non-representational, can as readily harbor anger as wonder or mystery or joy in its beauty, and can as readily provide refuge as challenge.

— Klaus Kertess



**James Rosenquist** *Glimpse-Speed of Light* 2001  
oil on canvas, 55 x 83 in, courtesy Gagosian Gallery

## Reception

Please join us for a reception  
with curator Klaus Kertess

Thursday, October 18, 5–7 pm

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts  
Harvard University  
24 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
telephone 617.495.3251

front: **Aaron Siskind** **New York 6, 1950**  
one of two prints, printed in 1987, gelatin silver print mounted to aluminum, 48 x 36 in  
courtesy Collection Arlette and Gus Kayafas