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The Smoothing of Things

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Private View: Thursday 29 January 6 – 8pm

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Image: John Nixon, Silver Monochrome, 2003

The Smoothing of Things

Among these eleven artists a 'smoothing' operates. It operates differently whether thick and buttery or applied in slickly layered glazes. The painter's attentiveness, whether pressing, rubbing or sealing over warp and weft or board, creates an intimate relation between their touch and our being touched¹. Such an exchange allows the viewer to find allusions that keep the conversation of abstraction open. All these terms are related to the smooth.

A 'smoothing' does not mean a flattening. There was a time in abstract painting's past when the canons of American abstraction decreed flatness as the one defining element of painting: the point at which it was purely itself and not partaking of other arts such as sculpture². We seem to know better these days than attempting to locate single principles, and in the face of so many previous 'truths' we are spoilt for choice amongst the multiple defining moments of abstraction. Clement Greenberg's one time dogmatic purity, while still posing its question of simplicity like a repository of the blank canvas, has given way to more complex and hybrid formalisms.

In this exhibition alone, there are references to monochromes, minimalist impulses, venerable European formalism where compositions evidence a relation of parts, pop abstraction and appropriated form, as well as traces of that American formalism where material automatism and spontaneous residues have a part to play. With this temporal collapsing of once disparate and antagonistic formalisms around the question of painting it may well be that the smoothing referenced here is of modernism. Smoothing becomes an alleviating mechanism of once conflicting manifestos now put to work in a temporal equivalence. There will be no more modernist manifestos, but to have such voices ghosting convivially together, tempered by the dulcet tones of contemporary conversation is a marvellous thing. The rigour of this work is in how those past voices have been tempered and combined.

The current MOMA exhibition of contemporary painting in New York has proposed the term 'atemporality' as defining our present moment³. Ours is an epoch where the Internet presents images from all periods in one continuous, and smooth, expansive now. Atemporality would refer to work without their time bound references, and present painting as ahistorical, where different generations and cultural eras of style, subject matter and concept could coexist, in an exhibition, through an artist's oeuvre, or in a single work.

Such an atemporality is at play in this exhibition. The first example of this is not so much about the artist's practice as it is about their placement in the show. Milan Mrkusich, one of New Zealand's great patriarchal modernists, who painted the first single-mindedly abstract work on these shores in 1946⁴ – well before any of the other exhibiting artists were born – is represented here with a painting from two decades later. He is somehow

¹ I'm paraphrasing here de Duve's reference to touch as, simultaneously, a physical act and a psychological affect. See Thierry de Duve, 'Here You Are' in *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art* (Ghent, Ludion 2001).

² Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Blackwell Publishing Massachusetts, Oxford, Victoria, 2003).

³ *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. Showing December 14, 2014–April 05, 2015.

⁴ A fact highlighted at the retrospective survey of his work in 2010 at City Gallery Wellington: *Trans-form: the Abstract Art of Milan Mrkusich*

remade and suddenly current amongst the company of this show. The place of Mrkusich is not in his capacity as a forebear, but rather positioned like a contemporary. The 'conversation' of abstract painting is no longer bound here by chronology so that, as Deleuze and Guattari might have put it, the art of these painters is released into a 'smooth space'⁵, no longer striated by the sequential plotting of time. In this uncharted territory abstract painting renews itself and finds boundless possibilities for further positioning. The striated space of modernism, marked as it was by the heroic avant-garde, is released and made smooth so that abstract painting might continue. This smooth space is the nonvanguard posture of our moment.

Although smoothing is opposed to flatness here, the adjectives smooth and flat are in fact synonyms of each other. Yet it is where their meanings are nuanced that a way of thinking about this work is suggested. The psychology of each adjective veers towards different affective and behavioural tendencies. Consider the sometime contrary sense of what it is to be flat: strident, assertive, yet also dim, feeble, supine, prostrate, cheerless, tedious and dull. Could this be said of Greenberg's modernism? Its affect as a continued presence is perhaps all this. Now consider what it might mean to be smooth: alleviative, facilitative, courteous, elegant, lubricating and also deceiving. Arts ability to deceive with its allusions and metaphors is nothing new, and although once thought purged by modernist recourse to pure abstraction, our currency in the impure mixings of our past have allowed them, on the most part, to enter again.

Smooth, however, is also a verb and in this regard implies the action of touch. Touch, as well as a physical pressure, might imply an intimacy, and attentiveness. It is the very word around which the critic Thierry de Duve imagines Greenberg's modernism might have ushered in other exemplary painting, or facilitated a greater insight into what was otherwise precluded⁶. His flatness remained an untouched affair and yet because of this necessitated, in his theory, some kind of optical affect to become a picture: to be activated as painting. This was tricky but meant that while illusions of three dimensions and trompe l'oeil affects were discarded, they were ultimately traded for allusions. This is not what Greenberg intended for his 'opticality,' but allusions touch us and create intimate connections.

This smoothing of things is therefore a material act and an affective connection that hinges around the artist's touch. But more than this, it is a paradigmatic shift across the spaces of abstraction since its modernist inception.

- Glen Snow, January 2015.

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This article can also be found, along with related images at Two Rooms website:
<https://tworooms.co.nz/exhibition/the-smoothing-things/>

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, '1440: The Smooth and the Striated' in *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1987).

⁶ Thierry de Duve, 'Here You Are' in *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art* (Ghent, Ludion 2001).