

...and painting continues

Friday 31 May 2024, University of Nottingham, Clive Granger A48

Convened by Will Atkin, Chloë Julius, Mark Rawlinson

*

The persistence of painting is an art-historical conundrum, one that the Centre for Research in Visual Culture is considering throughout the academic year 2023-2024. Painting has survived many assaults, blows that – at the time – were deemed to be fatal. By tracking the continuity of painting in the face of these challenges we are as interested in exploring the possibilities posed by chemical and material innovations as we are the pressures of stylistic and transmedial shifts. Drawing on current scholarship on the time and temporalities of art and art history, this conference will capture the many ‘times’ contained and sustained within painting, taking on the temporalities involved in its production, display and reception, as well as those citational and allegorical references that pull individual paintings across time and space.

*

PROGRAMME

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 9.30 – 10.00 | Teas and Coffees |
| 10.00 – 10.05 | Welcome Will Atkin, Chloë Julius, Mark Rawlinson) |
| 10.05 – 10.15 | Introduction (Will Atkin) |
| | PANEL ONE: THE PERSISTENCE OF PAINTING SINCE 1900 |
| 10.15 – 10.35 | Manet After Neoliberalism
<i>Saul Nelson, University of Cambridge</i> |
| 10.35 – 10.55 | What if I used Printing Press Like A Paintbrush? Helen Frankenthaler's
Painterly Perseverance
<i>Cora Chalaby, University College London</i> |
| 10.55 – 11.15 | Abstraction, Appropriation, & Representation in the paintings of William T.
Williams
<i>Christa Noel Robbins, University of Virginia</i> |
| 11.15 – 12.00 | Discussion |
| 12.00 – 12.30 | Curator's Talk: Fiontan Moran (Tate Modern) on Mike Kelley's Paintings |
| 12.30 – 13.30 | <i>Lunch</i> |
| 13.30 – 13.40 | Introduction (Mark Rawlinson) |

PANEL TWO: PAINTING AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHY

- 13.40 – 14.00 Painting the Movie of Life: Rosalyn Drexler, Kathe Burkhart, and the Ambivalence of Appropriation
Beni Muhl, University of Fribourg
- 14.00 – 14.20 “Down with all this modern junk that takes thinking to understand”:
Bringing Readers of Playboy Round to Abstract Painting
Jason Derouin, Carleton University
- 14.20 – 14.40 An ‘Exhilarating Tension’: Situating Paul Klee’s Factice and Materiality in
the Painting versus Photography Debate
Charlotte Healy, The Art Institute of Chicago
- 14.40 – 15.15 Discussion
- 15.15 – 15.45 Teas and Coffees
- 15.45 – 15.55 Introduction (Chloë Julius)
- PANEL THREE: PAINT, WRITE, REPEAT**
- 15.55 – 16.15 Surrealism Africanus? Ellen Gallagher’s Black Fantastic, abstract art and the
question of literature
Amna Malik, Independent art historian
- 16.15 – 16.35 Having Words with Painting: *October* contra Neoexpressionism
Matthew Bowman, University of Suffolk
- 16.35 – 16.55 Modes Under Investigation: Abstract Painting and Art Writing in France,
c.1968.
Natalie Adamson, University of St. Andrews
- 16.55 – 17.30 Discussion
- 17.30 – 17.45 Plenary
- 17.45 – 18.30 Drinks Reception

*

ABSTRACTS

PANEL ONE: THE PERSISTENCE OF PAINTING SINCE 1900

Manet After Neoliberalism

Saul Nelson, University of Cambridge

What is it about Édouard Manet? Deep into its latest ‘comeback’, more obsessed than ever by its own history, contemporary painting keeps rediscovering that history in the reworked contents of modernism’s first masterworks. Critics and curators praise the two men reading in the sun in Doron Langberg’s *By the Lake with Emre* (2018) as a ‘Queer *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*’. Mickalene Thomas’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noirs* (2010) swaps the two men and two women of Manet’s primal picnic for three clothed Black women. And Salman Toor returns, in painting after painting, to the bar at the Folies-Bergère. In such work, a historicist attention to modernist tradition overlaps with an identity politics rooted in the painter’s background and experience. Compositions are

repeated, identities change. In Toor's *The Bar on East 13th* (2019), the Folies-Bergère becomes a Manhattan gay bar, Manet's barmaid an androgynous barman.

Such switching of content has become so prominent a feature of contemporary painting as almost to amount to a new genre. In this paper I enquire about its aesthetic and political implications. Contemporary figurative painters have been celebrated as, simultaneously, champions of identity and conservers of tradition. I argue, by contrast, that the new paradigm is fundamentally anti-traditional. If Toor and his peers can't stop coming back to Manet, this is only to reaffirm, each time, the inaccessibility of the values such as difficulty, reserve, autonomy, and illegibility for which his painting once stood. This is no bad thing; rather, it bespeaks a kind of painting attuned to those forces in contemporary culture – digitisation, globalisation, and neoliberalism – that have rendered those values illegible.

What if I used Printing Press Like A Paintbrush? Helen Frankenthaler's Painterly Perseverance
Cora Chalaby, University College London

This paper investigates the material and conceptual persistence of abstract painting during the American Print Renaissance of the 1960s-1980s. Canonised as a moment radical departure within histories of printmaking, the reciprocity between painting and printmaking has been overlooked. I argue that the American Print Renaissance also formed a conduit for the hybridisation of painting. Pivotaly, the efflorescence of printmaking coincided with a period in which abstract painting was challenged by artistic, technological and socio-political forces. As such, this paper considers the status of painting as an impostor and interlocutor, a spectre and support within printmaking.

Helen Frankenthaler's oeuvre forms a rich case study for this paper. Her mode of painting has often narrowly been associated with soak-stain, a technique connoting anachronistic notions of purity. Contrastingly, Frankenthaler emphasised that her approach to printmaking was driven by the question 'what if I try this?'. 'What if', has an undertone of subversion and a desire to disaggregate boundaries, which I argue is as applicable to Frankenthaler's approach to painting as her printmaking. Notably, Frankenthaler was described as using a printing 'press like a paintbrush' suggesting painting's instigating role. Attending to Frankenthaler's approach to materiality and mark-making, this paper argues for a painterly persistence.

Abstraction, Appropriation, & Representation in the paintings of William T. Williams
Christa Noel Robbins, University of Virginia

This talk presents [William T. Williams's](#) long-term use of appropriated reference in order to explain the position he carved out for himself in relation to both modernist abstraction and neo-avant-garde inquiry. In 1986 Williams, a late-modernist abstract painter who began his career in Manhattan in 1968, was the first African American artist to be included in H.W. Janson's widely used textbook *History of Art*. But, as Dawoud Bey has pointed out, just as Williams was finally folded into a history from which he had long been excluded, the rest of the art world moved sharply away from pictorial abstraction and into a practice grounded in the semiotic interrogation of representation. Focusing on Williams's use of appropriation in his abstract compositions, this paper returns the pictorial to the critical strategies of the neo-avant-garde, troubling the distinction between abstract modernism and semiotic inquiry, while also considering the representational imperatives placed upon artists of color. In addition to presenting Williams's works as self-conscious interventions into histories of modernist and neo-avant-garde practice, the paper asks us to seriously consider how maintaining stylistic distinctions, grounded in chronological advancement, aids in the erasure of artists working at the margins of institutional art history.

PANEL TWO: PAINTING AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHY

Painting the Movie of Life: Rosalyn Drexler, Kathe Burkhart, and the Ambivalence of Appropriation

Beni Muhl, University of Fribourg

The history of postmodern painting was initially not written against photography and its ally, the movie. The presumably “objective” photographic medium was considered ideal by counterculture artists to question notions of authorship and originality and, therefore, integrated into painting. With the theorization of appropriation, which led to a valorization of photography and film as an analytical medium (Douglas Crimp), painting seemed doomed as a bourgeois, ideologically tainted art form. Focusing on the women Pop artists Rosalyn Drexler (*1926, Bronx, NY) and Kathe Burkhart (*1958, Martinsburg, WV), this paper aims at tracing the intertwined history of painting and the photographic image as well as their relation to anti-modernist practices. Oscillating between affirmation and criticality, Drexler and Burkhart, each differently, pursue an ambivalent approach that results in excessive meaning production and an outburst of emotions. Invested in destabilizing binaries, the two artists continue the romantic strategy of delimitating the self (*Entgrenzung des Selbst*), which targeted the early modern separation of mind and body (Andreas Reckwitz). However, ambivalence is not only an aesthetic phenomenon but one that generally marks postmodern subjectivity.

“Down with all this modern junk that takes thinking to understand”: Bringing Readers of Playboy Round to Abstract Painting

Jason Derouin, Carleton University

The cover of the August 1956 issue of *Playboy* magazine features a collage-style illustration of an anthropomorphic male rabbit pondering a group of paintings—three big, brushy renditions of semi-nude women arranged around a small geometric abstract. Cover designers Arthur Paul and Norman C. Harris juxtaposed the Mondrian-esque with the Renoir-esque likely to illustrate the crux of the issue’s feature essay, “The Death of Painting” by Evelyn Waugh. Waugh’s fulmination against non-representative art stemmed from his belief that it was indicative of deteriorating technical skill. He argued that photography’s ability to quickly produce an accurate representation of the subject was leading artists to abandon the exacting procedures for achieving painted verisimilitude, thus eroding that ostensible hallmark of the craft and imperilling the vocation. Though the *Playboy* editors expressed neither agreement nor disagreement with Waugh’s position in the August 1956 issue, an answer as to which genres and mediums corresponded to the *Playboy* ethos would soon be clear. In its slowly mounting campaign to sell readers on the idea of modern art, *Playboy* evoked painting and photography for distinct purposes. This presentation enquires into *Playboy*’s visual citations of both art forms and their operation in readers’ education on modern art.

An ‘Exhilarating Tension’: Situating Paul Klee’s Fracture and Materiality in the Painting versus Photography Debate

Charlotte Healy, The Art Institute of Chicago

An essential yet largely unacknowledged component of the aesthetic of Swiss-born artist and Bauhaus master Paul Klee (1879–1940) is an awareness of the human hand’s capacity to create and to touch. That is, Klee’s artworks make us aware of his hands and our own hands, of the hand as the artist’s primary tool and the body’s chief source of haptic sensory information. This paper relates the highly tactile paint application of Klee’s paintings to contemporary discussions about the sensory

perception of artworks, in particular a 1927 debate in Germany, initiated by Klee's Bauhaus colleague László Moholy-Nagy and critic Ernő Kállai, about the respective expressive potentials of painting and photography. By emphasizing the haptic and handmade quality of his paintings, Klee seems to have been tacitly contributing to this debate among avant-garde artists and critics that played out on the pages of the journal *Internationale Revue i10*. Klee's relationship with Kállai has been largely unexplored, yet the critic's description of the tension that exists between the spiritual pictorial vision and the palpable materiality of painting—which he argued was something that photography could not emulate—evokes Klee's own pairing of dreamlike images and tactile surfaces in his artworks.

PANEL THREE: PAINT, WRITE, REPEAT

Surrealism Africanus? Ellen Gallagher's Black Fantastic, abstract art and the question of literature

Amna Malik, Independent art historian

The relationship between criticism and painting is examined in this paper through a focus on Ellen Gallagher's painting *Oh Susannah* (1992) that draws together a self-conscious tradition of painting, notably the theme of Susannah and the Elders, and, alongside it, the question of a feminist art history, centred on the reception of Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings. Gallagher's approach to this subject matter is notable for her postmodern fragmentation of the body that combines surrealism with the minimalist grid and draws on the reception of Georges Bataille's writings, particularly *Story of the Eye* (1928) in Rosalind Krauss' *Corpus Delicti* (1986). The focus of this paper is an examination of criticism as it informs Gallagher's practices, as an expansion of the legacies of surrealism within African diaspora art practices, specifically the journal *Documents*, examined from the vantage of Afro-futurism, as a Black Fantastic. The paper considers the significance of her approach to abstract painting from the perspective of the Smokehouse Associates' approach to abstraction as the basis for a radical Black mural art in the 1970s.

Having Words with Painting: October contra Neoexpressionism

Matthew Bowman, University of Suffolk

When Neoexpressionism became preeminent in the North American and European art world at the start of the 1980s, the *October* journal was at the forefront in castigating this tendency. Painters such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz seemed to *October* as exemplifying a mystified false consciousness bent upon the immediate expressivity of the painterly gesture, as if, for those painters, it was painting that existed as a "message without a code."

October's strictures against Neoexpressionism, however, did not constitute a rebuttal of painting tout court. Indeed, while photographic, site-specific, and discursive art practices were uppermost in their accounts of postmodernism, *October* also defended a limited selection of painting practices, especially those that eschewed or deconstructed the painterly.

This paper revisits that moment in the 1980s with two core aims in mind. Firstly, it seeks to analyse how the eruption of Neoexpressionism generated reflection into the language and procedures of art criticism. The battle over painting was, then, a battle over art criticism itself, as if painting and criticism had a particular and indelible stake within one another. And secondly, the paper will touch

upon how *October*'s rejection of Neoexpressionism was a defence of painting—one answerable to an expanded field that *October* implicitly recognized but could not be theorized until much later.

Modes Under Investigation: Abstract Painting and Art Writing in France, c.1968.

Natalie Adamson, University of St. Andrews

Writing in *Art International* in December 1968, poet and art critic Marcelin Pleynet proclaimed that *Peinture 220 x 366 cm, 9 mai 1968* by Pierre Soulages was “incontestably the most beautiful and most modern” canvas in the exhibition *Peintres européens d’aujourd’hui* (Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris). He asserted: “this canvas alone succeeds in the tour de force of taking charge of the pictorial problematic Europe has left to us [...]. [A] perfectly successful theoretical operation.” In this talk, I propose to examine Pleynet’s claims for Soulages’ work as an exemplary contemporary painting. This accomplishment, the critic argued, resides in how the canvas demonstrates painting’s historical grounding through “showing” its procedures and composition. In a seeming paradox, the auto-investigation of painting’s perdurance is also described as perverse. For Pleynet (and some others), this genealogical task presupposes a process of dissolution or ruination for the medium. Moreover, Pleynet’s diagnostic report – and his broader commitment to writing on abstraction – equally contains a reflexive commentary on art criticism that foregrounds the relationality within any claim to autonomy. By way of this particular relationship between Pleynet and Soulages, I will discuss the situation for the traditions of modernist painting and art writing in France, c.1968.

*

Free, booking via [Eventbrite](#)

For other events in the ...*and painting continues* series, please visit the [CRVC website](#).