



# New American Paintings

JURIED EXHIBITIONS-IN-PRINT

80

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Virtually nothing is as it seems. The 2008 Olympic ceremonies in Beijing, that vial of “yellowcake uranium,” our “fundamentally sound” economy...We know as world events unfold, our impression of them is increasingly mediated by images disseminated with great reach, haste, and

stakes. So there are many reasons to be skeptical of the picture of instant “reality” streaming through our TV and computer screens. As our certainty in what shapes contemporary reality erodes, it is no surprise that the works reproduced in this volume

of *New American Paintings* dissect, disrupt, parody, or reject conventional modes of realism—and, by extension, notions of the real—with a refreshing dose of criticality and imagination.

Or at least they seem to.<sup>1</sup>

Through inventive figuration and abstraction, these works deflect the assured immediacy or assumed accuracy (“I was there”) of drawn-from-life observation. Instead, they offer a more layered and less obvious look at how images might derive meaning from multiple sources. Direct experience, distant memory, photography, art history, pure fantasy, formal geometry—all are filters through which these works transform simple visual impressions into complex subjective expression. And what they might express are states of self-reflection, flux, or fracture, of warped inwardly-turning perspective, of instability or breakdown of the most productive sort.

<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: As all artists who submit work to *New American Paintings* know, even my role as juror of these paintings was mediated by a review only of reproductions in slide or digital print form. So my assessments are a degree removed from real experience, as are yours.

Even in the most life-like full-frame images, verisimilitude is employed as a means not an end. Ben Weiner, Hannah Cole, Jennifer Present, and Hooper Turner use photo-based imagery in ways that call into question the contemporary status of painting’s physical presence. Weiner’s hi-def depictions of white oil paint, gel medium, and wax isolate such materials of painting as if specimens of an alien culture. Cole mimics the exact scale and shape of views from moving car interiors that evidence painting’s dependence on photography to capture the external speed and internal stillness of such space. Pesant depicts floor-to-ceiling projected images that silhouette viewing figures in their glow—perhaps the video installation as the new painting. While Turner’s auction catalogue imagery of painted figurines reveals the mechanisms by which potentially outmoded

art might be sold off. In each case, this realist painting deftly second guesses and yet affirms its own material worth in today’s virtual age.

Other convincing depictions raise intriguing doubt of the real through surreal extremes. Matt Brackett presents individuals in idyllically rendered landscapes subject to some unseen psychological or supernatural planetary unravelling: David Lynch scenarios in a Thomas Eakins light. A similar tension is achieved in works by André Pretorius and John Jacobsmeyer, who satirize mainstream Norman Rockwell realism with absurd subcultural imaginings: mysterious portraits of scrape-kneed skater girls mid flip or wood-grained interiors in red alert. Here, keyed-up realism makes unnatural or unexpected scenes seem uncannily undeniable.

But many painters undercut realism, literally breaking the illusion of the image plane through a range of formal and pictorial devices. Debra Hampton, Cindy Workman, Nancy Drew, and Nathan Ritter-pusch quote and collage photo-based sources like magazines and

television, splicing their superficial depictions of the idealized female figure with new dimensions of complexity or critique. Joe Wardwell’s rock lyrics visually interrupt his riffs on Hudson River School landscapes, like album art for mash-ups that amplify the distinct romance of both genres. Likewise, Jason Samson and Abby Goodman layer their figurative fantasies with non-painted things like light bulbs or patterned wrapping paper that literalize a physical split between the real and psychedelic. Others, like Mala Iqbal and Emily Sartor, let the drips, washes, and pools of paint itself morph otherwise figurative imagery into melting, trippy acidic scenes of wet ruin and luscious flood. While less is more for Colette Murphy, Dean Monogenis, and Matthew Hamilton, who employ blank space as a device to lend their otherwise realist renderings a less certain gravity. And the ambiguity of the silhouette is exploited by Adam Eckstrom, Cosme Herrera, Ryan Mrozowski, and Theresa Marchetta, so that recognizable contours flatten into evocative patterns or open-ended narratives, like Rorschachs awaiting projection and analysis.

Deflected realism gives way to the full-on abstraction in works that bend the familiar with their own formal and expressive logic. Imaginary figures, as those quoted by Timothy Kadish and Alexander DeMaria from popular cartoons and animation, or newly invented by Nick Z, Steve Budington and Chris Nau, offer alternative depictions of social relationships or psychological states. Abstracted spatial webs painted by Cristi Rinklin, Kristen Cammermeyer, Yoon Lee, Darina Karpov, and Michelle Mackey suggest the meteorological, biological, neural, and virtual networks through which forces of pressure, energy, and information pulse and flow. And then there are the pure strokes of Rob Nadeau and Alexis Semtner and the raw textured angles of Ethan Greenbaum that immerse us in the potential for color, geometry and physical surface to speak to us directly, unmediated by illusion.

Our newest American paintings can make concrete visual statements about the slippery, shifting image blur in our contemporary times of “change.” Because nothing is as it seems, and will seem different in no time, my advice: Look to paintings like these for real signs of change you can believe in.

- Q What is the first painting that made an impact on you?  
A Alice Neel’s 1970 portrait of Andy Warhol. It confirmed painting’s power to capture even what the pop icon famously sought to elude: a hauntingly accurate visceral and emotional impression.
- Q What is the best painting that you have seen in the past year?  
A Mark Bradford’s *A Truly Rich Man is One Whose Children Run Into His Arms When His Hands are Empty*, 2008.
- Q If you could have any artist paint your portrait who would it be?  
A Chuck Close. His signature process tangibly illustrates not just likeness, but how representation is derived from abstraction.
- Q What painting would you most like to live with?  
A One of Agnes Martin’s most poetic evocations of the sublime: *Untitled* 1962, a modest canvas punctuated by tiny brass nails.
- Q What artist(s) has most influenced contemporary painting?  
A Gerhard Richter continues to push what Andy Warhol sparked through photo-based processes.
- Q What has the greatest affect on contemporary painting: the internet, MFA programs or photography?  
A Photography. Even in its digital form, photography undergirds all contemporary image circulation and innovation—even in this book.
- Q Who is more responsible for a contemporary artist’s success: curator, gallerist, critic or collector?  
A How about the artist him or herself, and the artist’s peers and mentors? From your list, I’d say the gallerist is most responsible.
- Q Besides being a curator, what job would you most like to have?  
A Special-access tour guide for the White House, starting 1/20/09.
- Q What is the next big thing in painting?  
A Renewed recognition of the significance of its physical presence—a potential “aura” too often forgotten in our digital age.
- Q Name three emerging painters to watch?  
A Håvard Homstvedt, Lisa Sanditz, Matt Saunders,

