

Thames
&Hudson



Contemporary Painting

Suzanne Hudson

An international survey exploring the many ways in which painting is re-approached, re-imagined and challenged by today's artists

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Book

Key Sales Points

- Suzanne Hudson's incisive, compelling text deals sensitively with hot topics and contemporary issues (e.g. queer narratives, race, activism and climate).
- Richly illustrated and wholly international, featuring more than 250 diverse artists from around the world.
- First published in 2015 as *Painting Now*, but now in the World of Art series for the first time, the book has been updated throughout, with revised text, new artists and illustrations, and a new chapter and endmatter.





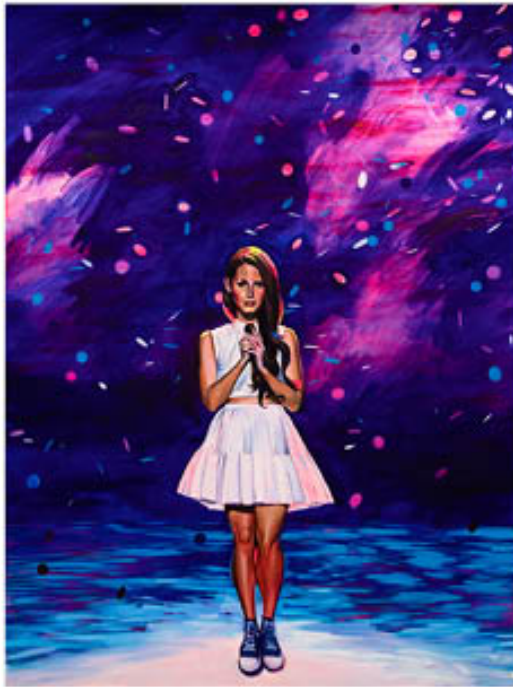
15 Left Florian Meisenberg, from the series *Continental Breakfast*, *Overmorrow at Noon*, 2011
 16 below Analia Saban, *Cíalm (From Choir)*, 2013
 17 opposite Ana Teresa Fernández, *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)*, 2011



unravelling painted canvases or shrink-wrapping paintings to distort the paint underneath.

Some work turned to the analytic deconstruction of painting's materials and procedures so utterly that abstraction again came to seem solipsistic. It was charged as lacking content apart from a narrativization of how it was made. This produced a powerful backlash against abstraction – but this time, interestingly, it did not bring all of painting along with it. Figurative work running counter to this strain came to the fore instead, intersecting with issues of identity politics and social justice. Chapter 7: Living Painting, and so the book, concludes with painting holding a space for active engagement with current issues. In one such project, Ana Teresa Fernández (b. 1980, Tampico, Mexico) first made *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)* in 2011, when she and volunteers took a stretch of the wall dividing the United States (San Diego) and Mexico (Tijuana) and painted it the colour of the sky so that it would look as if it had disappeared. She has since painted other sections in Mexicali, Nogales, Agua Prieta and Ciudad Juárez, imagining a continuous landmass without borders.

Real as these chapter divisions are, they are artificial barriers that apportion material in ways that might imply a fixity that they should not. The rubrics are there for clarity, as provisional containers of arguments and ideas, giving thematic shape without reverting to older taxonomic divisions of genre, such as landscape or the nude (although these do pop up as artists



tabloids to online outlets. His paintings feature quasi-cinematic stories, cast with characters resulting from a Google search. In exhibitions, McKinniss clusters these vaporous captures amidst paintings of art-historical emblems of transience, such as his imitations of Henri Fantin-Latour's lush dahlias and fairy roses, as well as cute animals, imagery native to the Internet culture that is, beneath all these pictures, his great subject.

Even with the prevalence, the history of art remains the primary point of reference for some artists, whether through first-hand observation of artworks or their mediation through books and online resources. Tomoo Gokita (b. 1969, Tokyo, Japan) creates surrealistic portraits of archetypes from art history, such as the Madonna and child, as well as geishas and Hollywood ingénues, all recounted in a gradient from black to white. A comparable absorption of art-historical references can be seen in the work of Makiko Kudo (b. 1978, Aomori, Japan). She shows young girls amid traditional Japanese imagery of



28 OPPOSITE: Sam McKinniss, *American Idol (Lana)*, 2018
 29 TOP: Tomoo Gokita, *Mother and Child*, 2013
 30 ABOVE: Makiko Kudo, *Missing*, 2010

Artists such as Rayne and Guyton deliberately subvert their technical skills, a manoeuvre referred to as de-skilling. Yet taking away one kind of skill – traditional draughtsmanship, say, or varnishing – necessitates re-training in others. Plus, these artists clearly instigate the process, and evaluate, conclude and legitimize it through the authoring of self-imposed rules.

For example, R. H. Quaytman (b. 1961, Boston, MA) goes through the same procedure for each series, beginning with researching an aspect of the location where the work will first be exhibited and viewed. Quaytman uses standardized sizes of wood panels, which she brushes with a traditional primer before adding layers of other paints and surface items (including Spinel Black, the oil paint engineered to make the Stealth Bomber undetectable, and crushed glass); she also silkscreens photographs or abstract patterns. She then organizes her paintings into thematic series conceived as 'chapters', which she numbers chronologically: *The Sun, Chapter 1* (2001), *Lódź Poem, Chapter 2* (2004), *Optima, Chapter 3* (2004), and so on, to *+ x, Chapter 34* (2018). The latter was made to be shown in conjunction with Hilma af Klint's gnomonic spiritual abstractions in 'Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future' at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Each group of Quaytman's works is interdependent, containing references to

54 R. H. Quaytman, Installation view of *+ x, Chapter 34*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018



55 Rob Pruitt, Installation view of 'Pattern and Degradation', 2010

its constituent members – often by means of hall-of-mirror-like repetitions within the images – and to their site. Her paintings' bevelled edges also stress the picture plane and, crucially, emphasize the oblique position from which they will be viewed after the exhibition, once returned to storage racks.

While Quaytman has established a governing framework that she operates within, her appropriation is still poignantly motivated by personal inclinations. This is perhaps exemplified in *Distracting Distance, Chapter 16* (2010), a group of works created for the 2010 Whitney Biennial, which were partially based on Edward Hopper's painting *A Woman in the Sun* (1961). The latter was made the year of Quaytman's birth, and it solemnly depicts Hopper's ageing wife (and long-time model) standing alone, naked and introspective in a shaft of sunlight. Quaytman recreated a similar scene in the gallery space of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and silkscreened this on wood panels for several works in *Distracting Distance*. The series was then hung in that same gallery space. The chapter demonstrates an element of personal engagement, and a possible emotive connection to the original.

Contrarily, Rob Pruitt (b. 1964, Washington, D.C.) could be said to demonstrate hostility towards the objects of his appropriation, as well as highlighting unseemly claims of taste and sociability. He is known for his glitter-encrusted paintings of zoo pandas, and for perversely instigating a range

that Williams has made since 2012 propose another model of genesis. Decisions are made on a computer or digital-drawing pad and then printed, at which point Williams sometimes layers hand-applied strokes onto the print and sometimes leaves it unaltered. In *Middle Game 1* (2018), the result is a prostrate towel-draped man who appears to merge with an oversized rotary telephone the colour of his skin. Face down in overstuffed pillows, his delineated body hovers off-kilter, an illusionistic mass without weight capable of denting the covers: a wry meditation on the lightness of being of a painting without paint. Another work from the year before, *Truth About Painting 2* (2017), differently allegorizes the creative act, showing a group therapy session for paint tubes taking place in chairs in the artist's studio.

In a 2018 show at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, Williams framed his engagement with the long history of painting as if his works are prosthetics, bolstering, rather than undermining, the authority of analogue painterly practices. He appropriated a quote from futurist and computational neuroscientist Anders Sandberg as the show's epigraph:



110 LEFT Michael Williams,
Truth About Painting 2, 2017
120 OPPOSITE Simon Ingram,
*Radio Painting Station:
Looking for the Waterhole*,
2011/2017



In the truly long run stars burn out and cease to form (in a few trillion years), so that is the end of normal planet-life. We can likely make artificial heating lasting much longer but over time energy will become scarce. Living as software would give us an enormous future in this far, cold era but it is finite: eventually energy runs out. If not, we still have the problem that matter is likely unstable due to proton decay on timescales larger than 10^{36} years—one day there is not going to be anything for humans to be made of. That is likely the upper limit.

Sandberg's analytical appraisal of humankind prolonging a finite existence through adaptation – living as software – is a continuation of the already symbiotic relation between species and technology. Rather than revel in the eschewal of the analogue for the digital, Williams keeps hold of the analogue but tactically re-motivates it, adapting to and embracing the digital age.

In his longstanding engagement with painting and computer science, Simon Ingram (b. 1971, Wellington, NZ) has made numerous painting machines, ingeniously fashioned from consumer-grade robotics kits, industrial robotic arms and other custom hardware and electronic components. He frames this as an act of collaboration between himself, an apparatus and lived experience. He does not paint directly, but rather builds

as a means to improve conditions in general. Zhang Xiaogang (b. 1958, Kunming, China), a member of the avant-garde South West Art Group (a group active in the 1980s, known for frank explorations of personal experience), became interested in representing national character. Beginning in the early 1990s, after traveling in Europe, he completed fictional portraits of Chinese citizens – bespectacled girls in braids and fathers in party attire, all with porcelain-smooth complexions and hauntingly glistening eyes – inspired by the sort of quasi-patriotic studio portraits that were popular in the 1950s and 1960s and largely lost during the Cultural Revolution. Each discrete work in Zhang's *Bloodline* series is connected to the others by a thin, meandering red line of paint that roams across the sitters' faces and torsos in ironic solidarity (a testament to Mao Zedong's 'revolutionary family' of the state), with some also bearing blotches of the same red, or patches of shaded imperial yellow.

Yue Minjun (b. 1962, Daqing, China) has also made portraiture central to his practice. He uses his own appearance as the template for repetitive paintings of grinning men, their faces contorted into frozen masks that evoke the Laughing Buddha. These pink-fleshed caricatures reference the icon worship associated with Mao, but instead it is the artist who they elevate to the status of hero and logo, easily commodified

128 BELOW Zhang Xiaogang, *Lovers*, 2007, from the series *Bloodline*
129 OPPOSITE Yue Minjun, *Inside and Outside the Stage*, 2009



and instantly recognizable on the surface of related merchandise available across multiple platforms. The political implications of the forced smiles – so maniacal in their zealotry – here remain allusive, but they gain in significance due to the explicit charge of the work that precedes them: *The Execution* (1995), Yue's post-civil-protest updating of Edouard Manet's 1867 painting of the death of Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, and his generals, which was itself an updating of Francisco Goya's *The Third of May* (1808).

Yue's work can be read in parallel with that of Fang Lijun (b. 1963, Handan, China), who produced his own emblems: a bald man engulfed in water or buoyed by clouds, and babies endowed with Fang's face. Fang and Yue were associated with what became known as cynical realism, an artistic movement sparked by the events of 1989 in China, in which parodic appropriation of the figuration that was key to socialist realism is used as a form of critique.

Although the events of 1989 were also experienced by Liu Xiaodong (b. 1963, Liaoning, China), and had an irrevocable impact on him, too, his art occupies a radically different position to that of the cynical realists. In his, social and material changes – and their effects on human lives – are addressed head-on, rather than through irony. His realism is



173 Jennifer Bartlett, *Recitative*, 2009–10

comedian Zach Galifianakis's celebrity-interview series, while also pointing to where his own work might end up: between houseplants, maybe above a couch. This is an acknowledgment that painting is liable to end up as furnishing – a continuation of the modernists' fears that the 'apocalyptic wallpaper' of meaningless abstraction would lead to the unwelcome fate of decorative irrelevance (see Chapter 6, pp. 000–0, for further discussion). The *F* in the title of the ongoing series stands for *Fehlermalerei*, German for 'failure painting', prompting questions as to the nature of the failure: is it within the painting or the ways in which it is ultimately put to use?

As much as the preceding artists conceive their work in installations, they do not seek to assimilate it into existing architecture, even when the work uses it as a buttress or exuberantly swells to cover a great deal of it. This strategy finds a point of contrast in Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941, Long Beach, CA), who has described *Recitative* (2009–10) as an unending painting without edges. Running to nearly 49 metres (160 feet), it covers three walls and comprises 372 enamel-coated steel plates. *Recitative* groups together abstract notations – coloured dots, lines of different lengths and widths, hatch marks and brushstrokes, all of which might be infinitely recombined – before trailing off in a loopy black line. In dispersing an entity across so many constituents, Bartlett revisits her groundbreaking *Rhapsody* (1975), which she exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in 1976. *Rhapsody* follows abstract and figurative panels with images of houses, mountains, trees and oceans through varying colour patterns and configurations. It pluralistically encompasses

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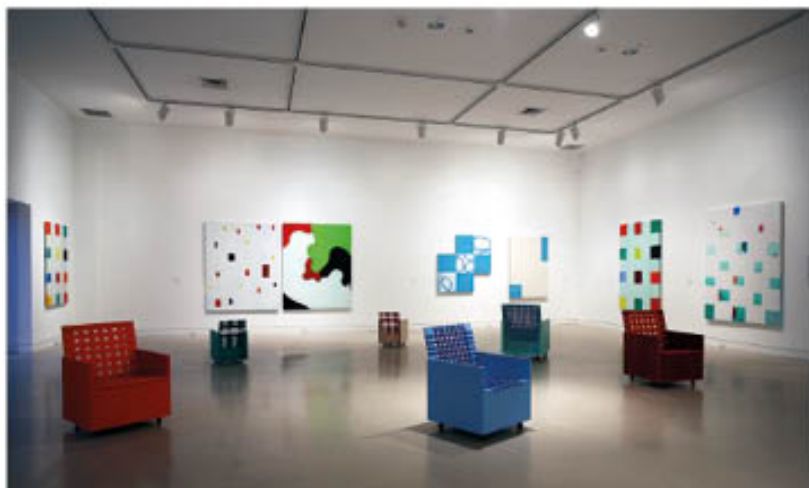


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aspects of period styles including photorealism and Pattern and Decoration.

In conflict with the conceptual orthodoxy of the California Institute of the Arts, where she studied in the 1990s, Laura Owens (b. 1970, Euclid, OH) is invested in the possibilities for painting. She fills canvases with lush landscapes and playfully wonky abstractions, employing a variety of techniques and media, ranging from impasto to silkscreen; she sets paintings freestanding in space, where they might be cast in the shadow of an inflexible architectural feature, and has added clock hands to others so that they may tell the time. Early works include multiple versions of paintings with wooden supports, one painted as though the viewer is looking at the back of the painting, and four others cropped to reveal the corners as though they could create a composite when placed together. After years of organizing and contributing works to other shows, in 2013 Owens presented twelve large-scale paintings covered with bold, computer-generated motifs in a warehouse near downtown Los Angeles. She had taken the site over as a studio, and it soon became 356 Mission, a venue for curated exhibitions (including Ruth Root's 2017 show, discussed on p. 00), programmes and the art bookstore Ooga Booga, as well as a studio for other artists.

In 2016, Owens made 'Ten Paintings' at CCA Wattis in San Francisco. An immersive installation, it featured a single 5-by-46 metre (16-by-150-foot) painting that covered three walls with silkscreened, flocked, painted, and hand-printed wallpaper. To make the work, Owens scanned a crumpled-up piece of white paper and converted the image into a bitmap (an image



189 TOP Michael Lin, Installation view of *Locomotion*, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila, 2016

190 ABOVE Mary Heilmann, Installation view of *To Be Someone*, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California, 2007

191 OPPOSITE Sarah Crowner, Installation view of *'The Wave'*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, 2014



191 wrap tautly around their stretchers like vernacular quilts. Large scale and often immersive, they serve as backdrops for unscripted actions in the gallery, with some even suggesting theatre curtains opening to an empty stage. Referencing futurist stage sets, such as those by Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla, 'Ballet Plastique' at Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels (2014) featured a raised plywood stage on which visitors had to climb to inspect the paintings at closer range. For 'Acrobat', a show of the same year at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York, Crowner exhibited small wooden sculptures, envisioned as proposals for subsequent theatrical incarnations. Indeed, this was borne out in her painted backdrop for a Robert Ashley opera at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 2012 – a project that has inspired others, including Crowner's 2018 contribution of scenery and costumes for the American Ballet Theatre.

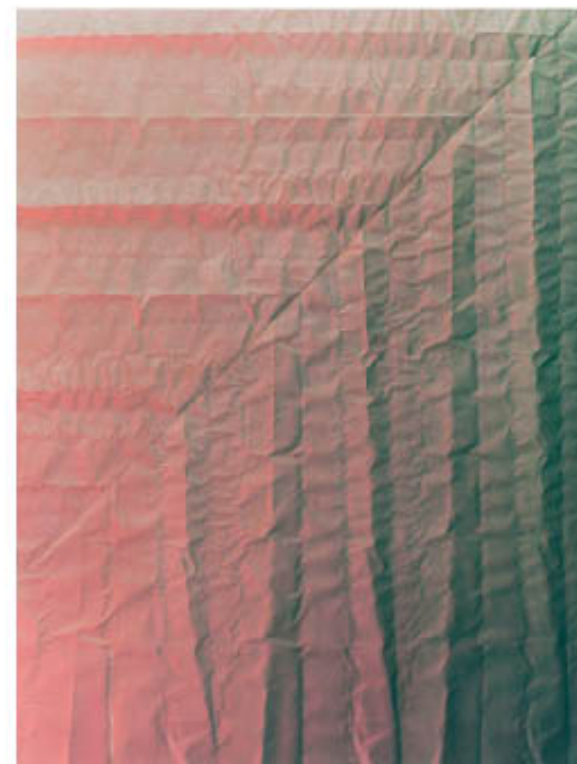
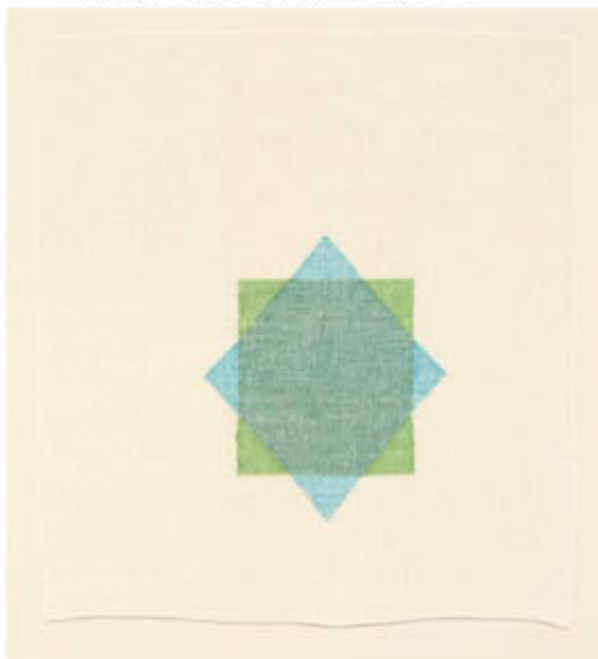
Crowner has also been working with hand-glazed ceramic tiles that she fabricates in Guadalajara, Mexico, which, when complete, she lays out in patterns on the floor or wall as though composing a painting. These may extend from wall to wall or layer over a platform (a room within the room), though in either case, Crowner refuses the illusion of totality (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art) by ensuring there are positions from which the outside of the scenario remains in view. 'The Wave', Crowner's 2014 show at Nicelle Beauchene

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conceptualism and ushered in many ways of making paintings through increasingly baroque techniques. These are seen in the works of Ruth Laskey (b. 1975, San Luis Obispo, CA) and Tauba Auerbach (b. 1981, San Francisco, CA), among others.

By focusing on process in this manner, many artists reevaluate painting as both a manual and conceptual activity. This is achieved by some through exploration of the ethical dimension of craft, albeit in very different ways. After becoming dissatisfied with more traditional painting materials, Ruth Laskey began to make paints from scratch and to weave her own canvases. She now uses a loom to make her pieces, the individual threads of which she paints and then laces into the structure of the canvas. The resulting effects – which follow preparatory sketches (each titled *Study for Twill Series*) on graph paper to ensure mathematical exactitude for her colour fades and designs – show figure and ground to be inseparable as part of the woven matrix. Once complete, Laskey's intricate woven paintings recall the maligned 'women's work' of fireside embroidery.

222 clockwise Ruth Laskey, *Twill Series (Robin's Egg Blue/ Yucca/Light Green)*, 2007
223 opposite Tauba Auerbach, *Untitled (Fold)*, 2012



Tauba Auerbach engages with the materiality of the canvas in a different manner. Having worked with diagrams of the semaphore alphabet and patterns derived from the binary language of digital technology in her earlier work, in 2009 she began her *Fold* paintings. These appear three-dimensional, but are, in fact, after-images of their pre-stretched state; the folded, crumpled canvas was spray-painted with an industrial gun before being re-flattened on the stretcher. Functioning as charged clues to prior configurations, each crease is both illusionistic and literal: a 1:1 relationship exists between the surface and its image. In her *Weave* paintings, form is developed not from the surface but from the support beneath: strips of canvas bound into geometrical patterns imitate the architecture of the wooden stretchers. Taking the corner as her