

## Painting Gets a Broader Brush

The art form has long been given up for dead, but just because New York no longer dominates the scene doesn't mean it's failing. Young artists in L.A. help it thrive.

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A student at one of Los Angeles' premier art schools recently asked a question that had been troubling her for some time. It surprised me.

Her problem was the dismissive, sometimes patronizing attitude toward painting her faculty and fellow students -- not all of them, but enough to notice -- regularly tossed her way. Painting is what she wanted to do, not video, installation, digital photography, performance or any of the other myriad art forms that have proliferated since the 1970s. But constantly defending her desire to be a painter was beating her down.

Part of my surprise came from a simple clash with daily experience: I see lots of new paintings in gallery and museum shows -- more than ever before. Doesn't she?

"When they sneer and say I'm foolish because painting is obsolete, I don't know what to say to them," she said, sighing.

Oh, I thought, that old chestnut. Art, like science and technology, used to be discussed in terms of progress. That meant an ancient practice like painting could become obsolete, like absolute monarchy or 8-track tapes. We don't think that way anymore.

"That's easy," I replied. "Say, 'Thank you.' And mean it."

The short explanation for expressing gratitude is that every young artist should take hostile groupthink -- the promiscuous pressure to conform -- as a cue that she's on the right track. Those pressures can be especially acute at school. That's one hazard of the current pervasiveness of academic training for artists.

The long explanation is -- well, longer, although not by much. It begins with another question: What century is this?

Lingering animus toward painting is so end-of-the-20th century. Painting hasn't been the black sheep of the art family for a couple of decades now, except in academic backwaters of provincial thought.

It wasn't always so. But the recent change in fortune of painting's status -- at least outside the academy -- turns out to be revealing.

In 1975, art critic Max Kozloff took note of a widespread indifference to painting among his scribbling colleagues. Writing in *Artforum*, then the leading intellectual art journal, he noted that "for at least five years . . . a whole mode, painting, has been dropped gradually from avant-garde writing, without so much as a sigh of regret."

Painting seemed to have evaporated.

After the 1970s and even in the face of a sputtering "return to painting" in the 1980s, the actual practice of slapping paint around on canvas took a back seat to academically inspired Conceptual art. "Ideas about painting," which is one strategy the inspiring first generation of Conceptual artists employed to shake-up the status quo, superseded painting itself. But the ideas were getting monotonous by the time the second- and third-generation Conceptualists came around.

Today, by contrast, actual painting is a staple in gallery exhibitions from Santa Monica and Culver City to mid-Wilshire and Chinatown. And paintings made by L.A. artists are everywhere. Lots of them are by younger artists, under 45. When California's deep recession of the early 1990s eased, galleries exploded across L.A. Now they number well into the triple digits. The number of painters, promising and accomplished, has likewise mushroomed. Painting -- of all kinds --

is as prominent as any other art in the city's galleries.

I think of them as "the undead." Do the math: Born in the 1960s and 1970s, these are artists who came of age in a world where painting was widely and sometimes loudly proclaimed to be finished, kaput -- *dead*.

Or, as Kozloff complained, more likely it was just being ignored to death. Painting was the crazy old uncle rambling around in the attic, and about whom the less said the better.

Why did painting disappear? And why has it reappeared in such abundance?

One reason is rarely voiced: The postwar rise of New York's cultural dominion -- and its more recent fall -- explains a lot of it.

Painting was always said to be "a New York thing." After World War II, when the New York School bumped the School of Paris off the charts, a few sculptors were present at the coronation. But mostly they were painters -- Pollock, De Kooning, Rothko, Kline, Still, Frankenthaler, Guston, Newman, Hartigan and many more.

Back then the bond between Modern painting and New York was intense. Eventually, it swelled to imperial proportions.

The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, initially slow to respond, got on board. The otherwise adroit 1970 history of the New York School by NYU professor Irving Sandler (himself a former painter and gallerist) is titled "The Triumph of American Painting." It was axiomatic: Masterful American art was painting, and masterful painting meant the New York School. A local event was inflated into a national phenomenon, claiming worldwide stature.

But that was then, and this is now.

The triumph of American painting was actually a thrilling neighborhood affair with great public relations. So was the subsequent skirmish over painting's death.

These vicissitudes mattered in Manhattan, where the triumphant painters' watering hole at the Cedar Bar gave way to the anti-painting grim reapers' club at Max's Kansas City. But neither posture prevented Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke in Germany or Ed Ruscha and James Hayward in L.A. from painting up a storm.

What actually was dying was not painting but its complement -- a provincial enslavement to the primacy of the New York School. As the 21st century approached, surging globalism meant the slow, irreversible erosion of New York

as contemporary art's preeminent center.

First Los Angeles and Cologne, then London and Berlin, lately Beijing and Mumbai joined the party. It turns out the old argument over the freshness-or-obsolescence of colors smeared on canvas was less about painting's legitimacy - really, how can an artistic medium be illegitimate? -- than about shifting centers of power.

### **Overlooking history**

UNLIKE New York, Los Angeles never had an established reputation as a painting town. That might help to explain the abundance of painting now: Without history's heavy baggage, the field seems wide open -- ripe for the picking.

Still, the lack of historical identification of painting with L.A. is somewhat odd, since Southern California's first brilliant postwar artist -- John McLaughlin -- was a painter. Deeply informed by an intimate knowledge of 14th and 15th century Japanese Literati painting and its 19th century revivals, McLaughlin began to consolidate his own contemplative brand of radical abstract geometry as early as 1950-51.

Not until the second half of the '50s did the primary achievements of such marvelous Beat Generation assemblage artists as Wallace Berman and Edward Kienholz appear. Yet the dawn of important L.A. art is regularly misrepresented as emerging in their great sculptures.

"The Cool School," an otherwise impressive documentary film about the Los Angeles art scene of the 1950s and 1960s by director Morgan Neville and journalist Kristine McKenna, just now going into theatrical release, takes this erroneous tack. So did last year's great exhibition at Paris' Pompidou Center, "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Artistic Capital." (Note the start-date of the European survey of mature postwar Southern California art -- five years after McLaughlin went into gear.) But "Birth of the Cool," a snazzy exhibition now at the Orange County Museum of Art, definitively confirms that painting, not sculpture, actually occupies pride of original place in L.A.'s stunningly inventive contemporary art history. And expect painting's local longevity to be a subtext of the next LA Weekly Annual Biennial, a mashup titled "Some Paintings" and featuring the work of more than 70 living L.A. painters, opening at Track 16 on Jan. 12.

In fact, I wonder whether the ingrained confusion about painting and assemblage sculpture isn't itself a legacy of capitulation to the power of the New York School. Starting with assemblage represents the assumption -- mistaken, I believe -- that 1950s painting is all locked up in the history books. Pimping the primacy of

assemblage sculpture offers L.A. art a veneer of independent, maverick style.

But that's just silly -- and redundant too. Painting is by definition maverick.

Painting, unlike most image-making practices in industrial or post-industrial society, is already pretty much a solitary job. Rarely do production assistants, teams of fabricators and collaborators gather in a painter's studio, as they do for movies at Paramount, TV shows at HBO and at the far-flung art factories established by video artist Bill Viola, sculptor Jeff Koons or installation artist Ann Hamilton. Usually it's just one person in a room, with a flat plane and some colors, trying to juice the corpse and make it dance.

That's the real legerdemain facing anyone determined to be a painter, whether the student who asked the original question gets the support of her teachers and peers or not. Painting isn't dead -- or, more precisely, it always has been and always will be. The perpetual trick is to give a painting life.