

## **How Painting has become popular again.**

For many years painting was seen as being a bit retro, male dominated, macho, gallery based, confused with ideas of skill and hopelessly compromised by the fact that paintings are perfect commodities. By the end of the 1960s painting was about as unfashionable as it could possibly be. Before looking at paintings re-emergence it is useful to consider the factors that made it so out of favour.

The invention and rapid popularization of photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century provided a direct challenge to the position painting had enjoyed for centuries as the chief way the world was recorded. Virtually from its inception artists such as Degas were keen to take on the new medium and its conventions. The story of avant-garde/modern art could be said to stem from a series of ever more extreme responses to the threat of photography; the Impressionists set the tone with their break from illusionistic (photo-like) landscape painting in the 1860s.

The rapid pace of change led to Cubism and the use of non art objects, real things from everyday life being used in drawings and paintings, from this in turn emerged the decisive break from the past that was the Readymade. Marcel Duchamp coined the phrase readymade to describe objects from the real world that he selected and exhibited as art, such as Fountain of 1917 which was a urinal. The use of the Found object by artists brought with it 'deskilling', a move away from the range of traditional craft of painting/sculpting/drawing etc. The process of deskilling culminated with Minimalism in the late 60s and 70s, and the production of work that was completely without the kind of human intervention one normally associates with painting. With the advent of film, and then television and video, the pressure on painting as a medium increased. Painting today has to compete with the barrage of images we are presented with on a daily basis with pretty much the same materials and processes used by artists since the renaissance

### **The 70s**

Sigmar Polke embodied an approach to painting that took some of the themes of Pop art (engagement with the idea of consumer society) and fused it with a more conceptual approach. Gerhard Richter adopted an approach many artists still take to painting as a form by his lack of adherence to one style, he does sweeping abstract paintings but also photo realist works and figurative paintings that have been deliberately blurred. In the work of these two artists one might find the seeds of the re emergence of painting; if painting could be used in conceptual way it could be used in much the same way as installation, video or found objects and could be 'back on the menu' in critical terms.

### **The 80s**

The 1980s produced approaches to painting that were a perfect mirror to the times. Steven Campbell, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel, and David Salle engaged in excesses in subject matter, materials, size and

handling. They often adopted ironic positions for their work based on the premise that painting was a problematic medium.

In a sense their work was a reaction to the dominance of Minimalism and the emergence of video art, in a way the most outrageous thing an artist could do was make paintings with figures in them. This reflex combined with post modernist critical theory to produce an art of quotation and deliberate hyperbole.

### **The 90s and the Noughties**

Fiona Rae made a series of influential paintings in the early 1990s that summarised what could be described as the fun side of postmodernism for painters. Her works were carefully choreographed compositions containing a number of stylistic approaches from Modernism and beyond. The sweet shop approach was a logical extension of the work of Richter and the 1980s painters outlined above.

Ian Davenport and Gary Hume have played around with the idea of abstraction. Davenport has made paintings that allude to the severe abstract art of the 60s but with the catch that he uses gloss paint and therefore creates completely different surfaces. Hume started by using imagery that could at first be mistaken for abstract shapes but was in fact very representational – a painting with one central line and two circles turns out to be a pair of hospital doors. Chris Ofili and Michael Raedecker have used collage (including elephant dung (and sewing to add to their painted surfaces.

The collector Charles Saatchi famed for his promotion of Artists such as Damien Hirst, has also consistently championed painters and his influence on the YBAs and their approach to art making should not be underestimated. The show 'The Triumph of Painting' in 2005 was the summation of his interest in Painting and put down a marker that painting was definitely 'Back'

It could be argued that because of the demands of the art market, there is a cyclical demand for things to hang on walls, meaning that every so often Painting is declared Back!

Two artists who have made deliberately 'bad art' and commentaries on public expectations of skill in painting are Glenn Brown and Martin Maloney. Brown has fused an interest in the kind of art you would find on a teenage boys bedroom wall with an eye popping photorealist technique. Maloney's work depicts a cast of characters with crudely painted and discordant colours, referring to the history of naïve art championed by modernist artists and critics.

### **Recent Developments.**

Raoul De Keyser and Luc Tuymans have produced highly influential work. It uses found imagery and a bleached out and stripped down aesthetic to quietly reintroduce history painting that articulates ideas about such things as Post Colonial guilt. There has been much talk of a new quietness in art- Tomma Abts the Turner Prize 2006 winner epitomizes a new approach which is modest in scale and pared down in its visual language and terms of reference. Abts is also important for her use of art historical sources outside what might be termed the

mainstream. She uses the language of the less well known artists of Cubism/Futurism in a knowing but strangely unironic way.

There has been a resurgence in American Painting in general and specifically American figurative painting. Cecily Brown, Laura Owens, Karen Kilimnik, Elizabeth Peyton and John Currin, all use the figure in different ways. Kilimnik and Peyton are interested in celebrity, the cult of youth and the idea of surface. Despite the seeming superficiality of their work they tap into the rich art historical tradition of Artists such as Manet and his role of the 'Painter of modern Life'.

Cecily Brown and Laura Owens return to the sumptuous possibilities of paint as a material. The way Cecily Brown uses the high art style of American Expressionism to depict scenes from pornography neatly summarises the approaches used by artists at the moment. It is neither Conceptual painting nor painting in the modernist sense.

A new relationship with the past and New Inspirations is a defining characteristic of much current art. Tim Eitel quotes Friedrich and John Currin quotes Rubens. Less overtly the work of Marlene Dumas and other artists concerned with those two key components of art through the ages – sex and death -engage with artists such as Caravaggio or Artemisia Gentileschi.



Andy Parsons, Hoodie, 2007

A lecture by Andy Parsons, 2007.