

The Four Corners of Painting  
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Something quite striking has happened in the world of art. It is not, as one might expect, something that has suddenly appeared, but rather something that is no longer there. Modern art in general, and painting specifically, have been characterized by successions of “movements” – often annoying oversimplifications (particularly to the artists), but a fact of life nonetheless. Or at least it was. Strangely (or perhaps not) neither I nor anybody else with whom I have spoken has been able to come up with a widely recognized art movement – in particular, a movement in painting -- that emerged after the late 1980s. (The only exception is Relational Aesthetics, which has nothing to do with painting -- unless, I suppose, if a relational aesthetician paints your house.) This is certainly the case in the United States and it is my understanding that something similar has happened in France.

I am most familiar with art produced in the U.S., but I have been following French painting for quite some time, and I believe that France and the United States are home to the most vital painting going on today. Both countries have a long modern painting tradition, but in both countries painting has been under siege. There has been a great deal of dismissal – curatorially, critically, and from the practitioners of other media. Painters seem to be in a habitually defensive crouch. Painting is elitist, commercial and bourgeois; painting is irrelevant; painting fails to address important issues; painting is hopelessly limited and old-fashioned. And yet despite this, painting is a remarkably vital field. Most artists in the U.S. identify themselves as painters (and they are operating at all stages of career and development); there are painting exhibitions everywhere, and the market for painting flourishes. What has happened?

In this essay I will be looking at the general state of painting, but I will not be taking sides nor giving priority to any one way of painting. It is perhaps a fault of this approach, but also I believe, the key to its strength. This way of thinking about the problem also – most emphatically – does not suppose a linear view of history. Rather, my hope is to create a *non-judgmental* format for viewing painting, and to allow for growth and expansion in a non-linear -- that is in a real world way, not one that supports a market-driven culture of "breakthrough" (and implicitly sequentially ordered) masterpieces. (Although it doesn't deny the possibility of them.) My approach is synchronous -- synchronicity used here in de Saussure's sense to indicate a 'language state' at a given moment of time. As the critic Lawrence Alloway said, “Synchrony provides cross-sections, arrays of simultaneous information in terms of co-existence rather than succession.” I only address sequence in the broader sense that historically things *did* follow other things and were perceived that way -- geometric abstraction did, by and large, come before gestural abstraction, and artists that subsequently combined the two were likely to have been aware of the historical and ideological differences. (Needless to say, sequence and chronology are different animals).

I have apportioned painting from the modern period into four large but divisible areas. In this article, for the sake of convenience, I have only subdivided the Fully Abstract. Importantly, all painting today fits into these overall arenas. This is an all-inclusive rubric.

1. The Mimetic
2. The Stylized Mimetic
3. Abstract-Mimetic Hybrid
4. The Fully Abstract

This article presents a general overview of the field of painting. What I am not dealing in any real detail with at this time are specific analyses of individual painters. I mention some American painters and also a number of French painters. Since *all* painters fit somehow into this rubric, it is a matter of choosing the right mix to make the points clear. A reader might disagree with where each painter is placed, but that is understandable. Also, given that artists change their work, a painter might find himself or herself in a number of different categories at any point in time. This is certainly the case for me as a painter. In addition, many painters do not just paint, and making different forms of art might very well be key to their project. Nonetheless, when they do paint, their paintings can be put into this system.

Why devise a rubric like this? Why not allow painting to be what it is? I think that painting (and the viewing of painting) finds itself at a turning point. An overall ordering, a taking of stock is needed -- even if it may be a provisional one. Essentially painting is now in a situation that it has not found itself in during the entire period of the modern project. That period (characterized by art made by independent artists concentrating, for the most part, on the demands of the art itself rather than cultural or social utility) was marked by a compulsion for differentiation – a tendency to form movements, to write manifestos, and for artists to talk incessantly amongst themselves. It was rather like the Big Bang. However not all the mediums evolved at the same pace or at the same time. Painting was first and it has matured the soonest. While the disciplines might have moved together at various points in the modern project's trajectory, they do not now. Another space metaphor: modern art is like a multi-stage rocket, and the painting stage has now separated itself out.

Some general thoughts on painting:

While other media (sculpture and three dimensional work, photography and video, performance and “life into art” strategies) ostensibly offer more opportunity for overt innovation, painting has now essentially marked off its boundaries and is engaged in the task of elaboration and infilling.

There is much work to be done in painting, but something has changed. Painting has fully ripened. Innovation is more bounded. While new things will happen in painting, that “newness” will be of a different order. (For example, colors can be combined in new ways, but will an entirely new hue be added to the spectrum?) We have, metaphorically speaking, lifted off from Earth and can see the shape of the world. The concept of terra incognita cannot be the same. But just as a shoreline has an infinite length when measured closely, there is no end to the possibilities inherent in the discipline. That painting is successful in this endeavor is proven by the continual creation of stylistically distinct bodies of work by painters. We can go deeper, make new spaces between existing areas, reference new subject matter as the world around us changes. However, new subject matter does not make new arenas of painting. This marks a key stage in the development of art.

If painting is its own continent, how then might it be mapped? I am trying to recognize the situation on the ground, to see things for what they are, and importantly not to put a hierarchical order or any kind of historical inevitability on these different approaches, although one must acknowledge the historical arc of which painting is a part. This formulation allows for a more clear-eyed vision of the state of the art: a focus on what a painting looks like and what it does. It removes from the discussion confusing and potentially self-aggrandizing issues of intention and subjective or non-evident referential systems. It provides a more readily verifiable means of sorting painting – by objective appearance and historical position. It does not impose the conditions of one form of painting on other forms and does not impose the conditions of painting on other media: in short, this is non-Greenbergian, and non-formalist, in the older sense of the term.

Painting by its nature tends toward conditions of material separation from the world. It resists the interactive and the interdisciplinary– an important part of our culture today and something that other media deal with more naturally. Certain outliers notwithstanding, it has remained largely a matter of a certain specific material – paint – applied to flat rectilinear surfaces coincident with a vertical wall. That this surface over the years (both in the time of the modern project and the centuries before) has predominantly been cloth stretched onto a wooden support is significant. If something does not change, there is a good chance that it is necessary to the enterprise. Painting is also (again with outliers notwithstanding) resolutely two-dimensional. No matter how “realistic” the technique, the fully dimensional outside world is brought into the convention-bound domain of two-dimensional representation and is thus distanced from the world depicted. Works of art that exist on the continuum between painting and sculpture are reasonably easy to categorize as either sculptured painting or painted sculpture – almost invariably the artist does so. In the case of sculptured painting, actual space complements traditional depicted or perceptual space.

Painting is generally more engaged with (and bound by) the history and development of painting than other media are with their histories. There is more self-reflection, more analysis of the medium itself – not surprising considering the long history of painting’s preeminence.

In the world of art there is a confraternity of painters, joined together by common purpose, educational experience (most often variations on Bauhaus pedagogies), broadly similar techniques and materials, and knowledge and appreciation of the medium's history.

What is vital to note is that now, really for the first time, *all* of the areas of painting are equally in play. Since one aspect of history – the value-imbued sequential has disappeared for painting, no one model of practice has more historical validity or value than any other. Your practice might be invested in, say, Gestural Abstraction – which is fine – but that manner of painting has no more claim to primacy *now* than, say the Mimetic. This was not the case in the 1950s, but it is today.

To recapitulate: I have divided painting from the modern period into four distinct areas:

1. The Mimetic
2. The Stylized Mimetic
3. Abstract-Mimetic Hybrid
4. The Fully Abstract

These areas have an historical arc – they developed in this order, but once the Fully Abstract was formed, it moved back into the Abstract-Mimetic Hybrid, particularly with the introduction of photographic images and text elements. A note: history is both *sequential* and *recursive*; there are ongoing actions and repeating themes. In modern painting, the sequential until relatively recently seemed to be of the greatest significance – one movement followed another, and while the older painting was not tossed out, it felt *retardaire* and inefficient. There is a technological underpinning to this (not surprising in a world where technology and the machine were both the facts and the metaphors of the world), where newer technologies of necessity replace older ones, and where mixed technologies are unwieldy (a combination MP3 and cassette player, for example.)

Now to the main divisions – again, I am not using a lot of examples at this point. I do, however, put in a number of contemporary and historical examples, both French and American. A note: these examples are absolutely not inclusive, and do not take into account the often-varied histories of the painters. I invite readers to supply additional examples.

The four main areas of modern painting:

1. The Mimetic.

This category consists of straightforward representations of the observable world. The primary generators of difference in this area are subject matter and technique. The perception of stylization has changed with time, so that Seurat's pointillist landscapes, which were seen as stylized at the time, are now more firmly in the area of the straightforwardly mimetic, whereas the *Grande Jatte* or *Parade* are still in the realm of

the Stylized Mimetic. The Mimetic encompasses a range of traditional painting approaches -- from portraiture and figure painting to still life and landscape. Impressionism, much of Post Impressionism, the Surrealism of painters like Magritte (along with contemporary surrealist revivals), the majority of Pop Art painting, Photorealism, and the contemporary varieties of landscape or figure painting belong in this category. Pop Art was (along with Gestural Abstraction), a major infill to the map of painting. Contemporary American painters in this area include: Rackstraw Downes, Eric Fischl, Alexis Rockman, Elizabeth Peyton, Karen Kilimnik, John Currin, Alexi Worth, Robert Bechtle, and Mark Tansey. French painters include: Yves Belorgey, Guillaume Bresson, Bruno Perramant, Yvan Salomone, Jean-Olivier Hucleux, and Marc Desgrandchamps.

## 2. The Stylized Mimetic.

This category pushes Mimesis toward distortion and stylization. There is a nascent tendency toward abstraction in this category, but representation is the driving force. Example of this range from Matisse and the Fauves, to important sectors of Picasso's production as well as Léger's, to German Expressionism and up through figurative Abstract Expressionists like Fairfield Porter and Grace Hartigan, the more straightforwardly representational German and Italian neo-Expressionists, and contemporary American practitioners like Kara Walker, Charles Garabedian, Susan Rothenberg, and Dana Schutz. French painters include: Françoise Pétrovitch, Philippe Mayaux, Beatrice Cussol, Jean-Charles Eustache, Régine Kolle, Denis Castellás, Hervé Télémaque, Djamel Tatah, and Daniel Schlier.

## 3. Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract.

This is the most historically complex division. The *historical* arc went from the Mimetic to the Stylized Mimetic to Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract to Fully Abstract. Once however the Fully Abstract came into being, artists approached the Mimetic again to add complexity and overt reference to their work. In the Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract approach, Abstraction and Mimesis meet as more or less equal actors. Earlier examples of this are the many variants of cubism, the majority of Dada-inspired painting, the surrealism of Miro, and much of the work of the Russian Constructivists. Later American examples include Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, artists who followed in their footsteps, like David Humphrey and David Salle; text-based painters like Glenn Ligon, Christopher Wool, and Suzanne McClelland, conceptualists like John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, Peter Halley, Byron Kim, and David Diaó; and geometric artists like Al Held who create abstract perspectival spaces. French painters include: Jean Michel Alberola, Agnès Thurnauer, Olivier Nottet, Dominique Figarella, Xavier Noiret-Thomé, Pascal Pinaud, Christophe Cuzin, Sylvie Fanchon, Guillaume Millet, and Baptiste Roux.

## 4. The Fully Abstract.

This is work with no overt reference to the observable world. If the reference is absolutely essential to the painting (for example David Diaó's red dot paintings indicating

his art sales over the years, Byron Kim's skin tone monochromes, or Peter Halley's prisons and factories) then the painting belongs in the Hybrid-Mimetic category. The Fully Abstract can be divided into four sections, with considerable (and conscious) overlap between them. They are:

a. Gestural (freely brushed) abstraction.

This is the last truly major addition to the map of painting. While first evident in the early work of Kandinsky, it was left essentially dormant until picked up by the Abstract Expressionists and the Tachistes in the 1940s and 1950s. The fact that there was such a big space left open (why is an interesting question) encouraged both a large number of young painters to be engaged with it and fostered the supposition that Abstract Expressionism represented the next logical step in the progression of art. Clement Greenberg's dismissal of de Kooning's (and Pollock's) figurative explorations, and importantly (and perhaps more subtly, de Kooning's use of cubist methodologies) made sense in the context of a sequential, progressive reading of history and as a critical tool to understand and evaluate certain newly emerging sectors of the Fully Abstract – Gestural Abstraction and Field or Atmospheric Abstraction. While Greenberg thought of his formulations as universal, they were in fact extremely specific. Contemporary American painters in this area include: Brice Marden, Bill Jensen, Louise Fishman, Melissa Meyer, Cora Cohen, and Sue Williams. French painters include: Jérôme Boutterin, Edouard Prulhière, Rémi Hysbergue, and Jean-François Maurige.

b. Field or Atmospheric Abstraction.

Begun essentially by the Rothko, Newman, Still wing of Abstract Expressionism (Pollock's drip paintings are crossovers between this and gestural abstraction), it continued on in Colorfield painting, and in later large-scale monochrome and minimalist painting (another important addition to the map, although not with as much breadth as the Gestural.) American examples include: Robert Ryman, Robert Mangold, Marcia Hafif, and Joseph Marioni. French painters include: Pascal Ravel, Didier Demozay, and Emmanuelle Villard.

c. Geometric Abstraction.

This is the earliest branch of the Fully Abstract, starting with Mondrian and Malevich and continuing unabated until today. There are many, many contemporary examples. American painters include Odili Odita, Harriet Korman, Don Voisine, Richard Roth, Joan Waltemath, and Valerie Jaudon. French painters include: François Morellet, Miquel Mont, Bruno Rousset, Soizic Stockvis, and Emmanuel van der Meulen.

d. The Organized Organic. Historically this is an abstracted distillation of 1930s biomorphic Picasso and Miro. In contemporary painting this presents itself

as a form of abstraction characterized by a more distanced and grammatical approach, often borrowing elements from both geometric and gestural abstractions. American examples are Frances Barth, Shirley Kaneda, Richard Kalina, Jonathan Lasker, Elizabeth Murray, Tom Noskowski, David Reed, Mary Heilmann, James Siena, Joanne Greenbaum, and Allison Miller. French examples are Olivier Gourvil, Shirley Jaffe, Bernard Frize, Bernard Piffaretti, Nicolas Chardon, Isabelle Champion-Métadier, Samuel Richardot, Sylvie Ruaulx, Miguel Angel Molina, Philippe Richard, Emmanuelle Villard, and Erwan Ballan.

Modern painting is now in a position it has rarely occupied: all of the forms of painting are being practiced in equal measure. There is no one leading format, and therefore one approach cannot claim the mantle of historical inevitability or a place at the leading edge. This is in some way an extension of the common understanding that painting is no longer the dominant form of art. A not unimportant question: what was all the talk of painting being dead really about? There was a strong element of hostility and dismissal, and of course it elicited and still elicits a counter-reaction from painters. But perhaps painting's detractors were on to something: they were sensing not painting's end, but a change in its methodology of innovation, a quiet transformation of its deepest sense of itself. This change of identity resulted in certain losses: a key one was (starting in the 1990s) the surrendering of the ability to produce the kind of iconic images that painting was accustomed to making. It seemed that those images now came more naturally to photography, video or installation. (Shark in a tank?) To strive directly for the "important" statement in painting risked over-determination, pretension, cleverness, self-consciousness, and sententiousness. These are all the hallmarks of academicism, and now firmly reside in those more "interesting" and "relevant" forms of artistic expression. But painting's limitations are now its advantages -- an example of the economic principle of creative destruction. Something is lost, but that loss is a gain as well. (Interestingly, renunciation has been at the heart of avant-garde practice, and the questioning of originality is an intrinsic element of postmodernism.) The unpromising, the uninteresting, the familiar, the modest or the mundane have proven to be especially productive areas for making lasting art. Painting's necessary distancing from the world allows for the mysterious and the inexplicable to take root. A body of painting will be seen as important for what it does rather than what it says it refers to: a change in subject matter or reference is scarcely change at all. Mapping the state of painting today and sensing its boundaries does not imply stasis, but rather a new kind of growth. Painters are, as ever, finding spaces for themselves and creating readily recognizable and unique bodies of work, work that is as capable as ever of emotional power, the giving of deep aesthetic pleasure, and the creation of the visually unexpected and surprising.

An afterword: I would like to thank my colleague, Olivier Gourvil for his help and friendship.

Richard Kalina, 2012



