GAMBAROFF
KREBBER
QUAYTMAN
RAYNE

BERGEN KUNSTHALL
As painting is an art form in constant flux, any exhibition of paintings can be justified simply by saying that the medium ‘merits a continuous critical inquiry and thorough investigation’. So when we assert that the heading for this exhibition is not ‘painting today’ or ‘what counts as painting’ but that it is instead based on a dialogue that manifests constellations, both planned and spontaneous, between the individual approaches to painting, this solidifies the claim that the exhibition has a different objective.

The exhibition begins with the recognition that the concept of painting is usually as broad and all-encompassing as the concept of art. The exhibition is therefore not about what can be painting and what is not. Rather, it elucidates how four artists pass their distinctive artistry through a filter we can call ‘painting’, a filter whose complexity we as curators acknowledge equally with the artists, and only fragments of which will be touched upon in the exhibition. Thus the exhibition does not set out to define the position of painting within the current art scene – a definition that would in that case only contribute yet another component to this filter. Instead we want to shift the focus from the filter itself (the classificatory activity surrounding painting) to what comes out of it: the after effects of the conflict of art history, a conflict that also allows for historical, discursive, material and social interactions. In recent times we have seen a number of exhibitions and articles that have attempted to actualize and elucidate the concept of painting, but often the result has only helped to obstruct matters further. Nevertheless the response to some of these attempts has been a kind of canonization, instead of seeing them for what they really are – a series of investigations; and it is here, in this unexplored territory, that we want to situate this exhibition. The exhibition makes no attempt to be didactic, or to let a thematizing or explanatory attitude shine through. This is why we do not use a title or associate the exhibition with a generalized, defined content or theme within which the artists are to structure their work. And since no unequivocal definition of contemporary painting has determined the linkage of these artists either, we are left with an open space without firm categories for classification.

Despite these initial curatorial reflections on the pretensions of the exhibition or its alleged lack of them, this essay still attempt to illuminate this ‘open space’ and the various aspects that have arisen in the work with such an exhibition. Painting as an aesthetic, practical and theoretical entity in contemporary art will therefore be a pivotal concern of the text. The remarks on painting that appear here can be viewed as an independent component in the exhibition project, a voice that moves through and among the works, rather than over them like a didactic narrator’s voice.

The dialogue that arises in the exhibition space is the foundation on which the exhibition builds, and the project has been created against the background of an understanding that the concept of painting has now completely exploded. The result is that myriad elements can enter into this ‘equation’ before any definition can sum them up. And often this is just what happens. A wide range of elements can physically materialize in artworks in which three-dimensionality, sculptural elements and architectural structures are incorporated; and in some cases the whole format of painting as we normally know it has perhaps been quite abandoned.

Several of the artists in the exhibition engage in a praxis where aspects outside the physical painting factor into the making of the work. This lies close to what the theorist David Joselit has recently called ‘transitive painting’, which according to Joselit comprises paintings that attempt to reveal the networks and surrounding structures that lie outside the production of painting itself.

PAINTING AS INSTITUTION AND THE PERIODIC DEATH OF PAINTING

It has often been asserted that painting is an institution in itself, precisely because it is so saturated by art history, theoretical guidelines and institutional implications. The predominance of painting in the history of art, and later its salience as a target for attacks, is indisputable. However, one possible risk in attributing such historical weight to painting is that we may appear to reduce its options rather than identify the potential the medium can have in contemporary art. Painting is turned into a passive historical category with a great future behind it with which everything is compared. Is it instead possible to operate with a concept of painting that functions actively? Such a concept would be an entity that is mobile and flexible, and which can oscillate between a medium for criticizing/discussing both conceptual and institutional strategies. The artists in this exhibition can all be viewed in relation to such an ‘active’ concept of painting. However, this activation need not take place through painting as Joselit’s above-mentioned concept implies. In this exhibition a broader contextual reading is activated equally often through the act of painting. What has probably been the most frequently repeated framework for any critical discussion of painting over the past forty years has revolved around ‘the death of painting’, and any possibilities for its rebirth. One common feature of these discussions has been a claim that the essence of painting is either imperilled, transcended and dead or put behind us – as if painting were the art form that had to be eliminated before new art forms could take over. The exhibition is not an attempt to break with painting. It takes place within the recent history of art, with its repeated proclamations and prophecies of doom and rebirth on behalf of painting. Today this is no longer a theme that actively determines the thinking of most artists. But this history has laid the basis for a deeply internalized form of self-reflexivity among artists who work with a critical type of painting which is palpably different from the more bombastic painting one could often see among some of the painters of the 1980s; or masculine, ‘cocksure’ painting – a category that has prevailed from Abstract Expressionism to postmodern painting. Perhaps it is rather doubt, a certain and tentative self-critique, that enables the artists we are dealing with here to employ painting more flexibly and contextually than before, without necessarily having to break with recognizable strategies where the formal and even the decorative are valid.
selected pictorial issues, Kребber takes a far more subtle, careful approach where strategies like deferral, hesitancy and even artistic failure are signified as an inseparable part. Throughout his highly influential career Kребber has maintained a relatively limited production and has constantly avoided pegging himself within a particular style or mode of production. Whole oeuvres take the form of a long succession of digressions or evasive actions, the lack of focus and stability may seem to be the only unifying criterion one can find.

The self-reflexivity we are talking about here is of course something quite different from the modernist modus operandi where the painting became self-reflexive in the light of a particular view of what were and what were not the medium’s defining qualities. On the contrary, Kребber’s art is perhaps the best example of how painting is woven into an intricate system of external references. In most cases these references are not directly apparent in the work itself, but are pointed to by his solo exhibitions which this well exemplified.

The press release for the exhibition, authored by the artist himself, directs our attention away from the works exhibited, towards things that ostensibly have little to do with them: “The Dog Years to which the artworks themselves are partially destroyed. The sculptures from this exhibition is also exhibited in 2010 vorbei – with an allusion to the period as it is perhaps the ‘hard years’ that are overcome.” In several of his projects Prina suggests doing away with overtly representational imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa- tive imagery, he still uses what one could call ‘stand-ins’ for the conventions of painterly production – as in his most recent exhibition, Folder and Application, where he used real-world cures from the personal systems of belief? How does an artist commit to any particular set of rules and methods? The production of art has to be at all possible, it may be necessary to have a range of methods to build on and launch into life. For example, even though Blake Rayne has for the time being moved away from the use of figurative representa-
cal, personal and architectural contexts enduring experience of painting as an assessment of the larger social, histori- cal, political and institutional context in which Quaytman’s work appears.16

Besides the consistent use of wood- en panels as support material, the artist also has a meticulously laid-out system of sizes for the paintings, all based on the golden mean, the one exceptional paint- ing being 20 x 24 inches. Quaytman’s paintings never rest in themselves, they constantly point to something outside the frame of the picture. Small distractions in and around the pictures help us to find underlying references and elements in the pictures that draw the attention away, often to many different places at once. There is al- ways something that disturbs the imme- diacy of the paintings and their potential for contemplative calm — despite the fact that Quaytman’s paintings are among the most stylistically seductive in the exhibi- tion. Nevertheless the artist works against the old myth of the iconic image and its abstractive contemplation. And this is precisely the way Quaytman renegotiates the subtle intermediate position that sequesters these artists from other pain- terly stances through the use of formal strategies combined with an insistence on relevance and active discursivity.17

With their modest materials and sophisticated surface treatment, Quayt- man’s pictures take on the character of images with clear parallels to the Ameri- can painting of the 1960s. At first glance the paintings can easily be associated with the now traditionalist base of Frank Stella and瑙 Frank Stella’s statement “what you see is not what you get” is a world away from the way Quaytman builds up pictures. Although using a different formal idiom, Quaytman, unlike the later predecessors, fills it to the brim with narratives, references and connotations. Here it is the layers beneath the sur- face of the painting that emerge to the surface on closer examination. What you get as you see it (which is also one of the reasons for organizing the exhibition) is a contin- uously growing book where each exhibi- tion forms a new chapter. Without thinking of the context of the pictures as explicitly biographical, Quaytman is preoccupied with creating a kind of home-made or personified art history within which the references the paintings can be located. The contextual framework that Quaytman builds upon the paint- ings thus draws on a partly biographi- cal and personal level, and at the same time on an art-institutional level. In a painting one could potentially find allusions to the specific museum or city where the artist is exhibiting, to architectural anecdotes and the artistic choices of the museum directors – all woven into the vocabulary of artistic output. At other times other artists are used as subjects in Quaytman’s own works. This can be seen as a kind of institutional analysis, more than as traditional appropriation or quotation of strategies. The artist’s colleagues and friends are acknowledged as part of the institutional ‘game’ within which the paintings themselves are situated. The exhibition in Bergen Kunsthall presents Board, Chapter 19 which completes a decade’s work on the artist’s ‘Chapter’ project. Here Quaytman uses as a foundation a nude photograph of Thomas Beard, a male homosexual friend of the artist, known for his project Light Industry in New York. The photo- graphs simultaneously exemplify and disrupt historical notions of painterly processes. The set of paintings presents the figure as a vessel of possibility: the figure as a viewer, as an artist, as an object and also as a site of contempla- tion. In addition, the chapter weaves linguistic and societal constructs into the fold of art-historical discourse; for ex- ample, ‘beard’ is a term which describes a particular set of positions on the shadowy fronts for another person, whether he is someone’s illicit affair or, more likely, one’s sexual orientation. Considering how Quaytman’s paintings always reflect their own exhibition context, it is also tempting to see the motif of the rear end of a gay friend as a kind of (humorous) response to a group exhibition where the other artists are straight men. By fusing his own personal and institutional ‘game’ strategies combined with an insistence on institutional ‘game’ within which the references the paintings can be located. The contextual framework that Quaytman builds upon the paint- ings thus draws on a partly biographi- cal and personal level, and at the same time on an art-institutional level. In a painting one could potentially find allusions to the specific museum or city where the artist is exhibiting, to architectural anecdotes and the artistic choices of the museum directors – all woven into the vocabulary of artistic output. At other times other artists are used as subjects in Quaytman’s own works. 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