

ART IN REVIEW

'Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s'

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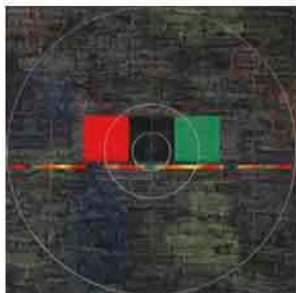
Painting today is not what it was. The last time painting seemed to be urgently important was the 1980s, when Neo-Expressionists like Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer, Conceptualists like Peter Halley and Sherrie Levine, and fun-lovers like Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring were ascendant.

Organized by the critic Raphael Rubinstein, "[Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s](#)" fruitfully if inconclusively reconsiders painters who did not fit into then fashionable categories. His 15 artists, all born between 1939 and 1949 and each represented by one piece from the '80s, are diverse. The show includes humorously updated Surrealism by Carroll Dunham and Elizabeth Murray and plays with Modernist devices by Thomas Nozkowski, Jonathan Lasker, Mary Heilmann and David Reed. Bill Jensen and Terry Winters introduce organic, vaguely botanical imagery, while Louise Fishman and Pat Steir revive Abstract Expressionist-type compositions. Joan Snyder and Stanley Whitney created wide, landscapelike works made of myriad paint strokes, and Gary Stephan, Jack Whitten and Stephen Mueller proffer different sorts of

enigmatic symbolism.

Did these artists "reinvent" abstraction? That claim doesn't sound right considering that they all deal in familiar formal vocabularies and that many of them folded in representational imagery. In his catalog essay Mr. Rubinstein rightly credits all with faith in a grand painting tradition dating to the early Renaissance. Implicitly he laments a widespread loss of faith among artists today. But why the medium no longer elicits such quasi-religious devotion from later generations of artists remains to be explained.

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Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Jack Whitten's "Red, Black, Green" (1979-80), from "Reinventing Abstraction."