

RE

ART  
JUNE  
17,  
2014



# Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?

*By*  
*Jerry*  
*Saltz*

For  
the  
past  
150  
years,

pretty  
consistently,  
art  
movements  
moved  
in  
thrilling  
but  
unmysterious  
ways.  
They'd  
build  
on  
the  
inventions  
of  
several  
extraordinary  
artists  
or  
constellations  
of  
artists,  
gain  
followings,  
become  
what  
we  
call  
a  
movement  
or  
a

school,  
influence  
everything  
around  
them,  
and  
then  
become  
diluted  
as  
they  
were  
taken  
up  
by  
more  
and  
more  
derivative  
talents.  
Soon  
younger  
artists  
would  
rebel  
against  
them,  
and  
the  
movement  
would  
fade  
out.

This  
happened  
with  
Impressionism,  
Postimpressionism,  
and  
Fauvism,  
and  
again  
with  
Abstract  
Expressionism  
after  
the  
1950s.

In  
every  
case,  
always,  
the  
most  
original  
work  
led  
the  
way.

Now  
something's  
gone  
terribly  
awry  
with  
that

artistic  
morphology.

An  
inversion  
has  
occurred.

In  
today's  
greatly  
expanded  
art  
world  
and  
art  
market,  
artists  
making  
diluted  
art  
have  
the  
upper  
hand.

A  
large  
swath  
of  
the  
art  
being  
made  
today  
is

being  
driven  
by  
the  
market,  
and  
specifically  
by  
not  
very  
sophisticated  
speculator-  
collectors  
who  
prey  
on  
their  
wealthy  
friends  
and  
their  
friends'  
wealthy  
friends,  
getting  
them  
to  
buy  
the  
same  
look-  
alike-  
art.

The  
artists  
themselves  
are  
only  
part  
of  
the  
problem  
here.

Many  
of  
them  
are  
acting  
in  
good  
faith,  
making  
what  
they  
want  
to  
make  
and  
then  
selling  
it.

But  
at  
least  
some  
of

them  
are  
complicit,  
catering  
to  
a  
new  
breed  
of  
hungry,  
high-  
yield  
risk-  
averse  
buyers,  
eager  
to  
be  
part  
of  
a  
rapidly  
widening  
niche  
industry.  
The  
ersatz  
art  
in  
which  
they  
deal  
fundamentally



looks  
the  
way  
other  
art  
looks.  
It's  
colloquially  
been  
called  
Modest  
Abstraction,  
Neo-  
Modernism,  
M.F.A.  
Abstraction,  
and  
Crapstraction.  
(The  
gendered  
variants  
are  
Chickstraction  
and  
Dickstraction.)  
Rhonda  
Lieberman  
gets  
to  
the  
point  
with  
“Art

of  
the  
One  
Percent”  
and  
“aestheticized  
loot.”

I  
like  
Dropcloth  
Abstraction,  
and  
especially  
the  
term  
coined  
by  
the  
artist-  
critic  
Walter  
Robinson:  
Zombie  
Formalism.

Galleries  
everywhere  
are  
awash  
in  
these  
brand-  
name  
reductivist

canvases,  
all  
more  
or  
less  
handsome,  
harmless,  
supposedly  
metacritical,  
and  
just  
“new”  
or  
“dangerous”-  
looking  
enough  
not  
to  
violate  
anyone’s  
sense  
of  
what  
“new”  
or  
“dangerous”  
really  
is,  
all  
of  
it  
impersonal,  
mimicking

a  
set  
of  
preapproved  
influences.

(It's  
also

a  
global  
presence:

I  
saw  
scads  
of  
it  
in  
Berlin

a  
few  
weeks  
back,  
and  
art  
fairs  
are  
inundated.)

These  
artists  
are  
acting  
like  
industrious  
junior

post  
modernist-  
worker  
bees,  
trying  
to  
crawl  
into  
the  
body  
of  
and  
imitate  
the  
good  
old  
days  
of  
abstraction,  
deploying  
visual  
signals  
of  
Suprematism,  
color-  
field  
painting,  
minimalism,  
post-  
minimalism,  
Italian  
Arte  
Povera,

Japanese  
Mono-  
ha,  
process  
art,  
modified  
action  
painting,  
all  
gesturing  
toward  
guys  
like  
Polke,  
Richter,  
Warhol,  
Wool,  
Prince,  
Kippenberger,  
Albert  
Oehlen,  
Wade  
Guyton,  
Rudolf  
Stingel,  
Sergej  
Jensen,  
and  
Michael  
Krebber.  
I've  
photographed  
hundreds

of  
examples  
this  
year,  
at  
galleries  
and  
art  
fairs,  
and  
a  
sampling  
appears  
on  
these  
pages.

This  
work  
is  
decorator-  
friendly,  
especially  
in  
a  
contemporary  
apartment  
or  
house.  
It  
feels  
“cerebral”  
and  
looks

hip  
in  
ways  
that  
flatter  
collectors  
even  
as  
it  
offers  
no  
insight  
into  
anything  
at  
all.  
It's  
all  
done  
in  
haggard  
shades  
of  
pale,  
deployed  
in  
uninventive  
arrangements  
that  
ape  
digital  
media,  
or



something  
homespun  
or  
dilapidated.  
Replete  
with  
self-  
conscious  
comments  
on  
art,  
recycling,  
sustainability,  
appropriation,  
processes  
of  
abstraction,  
or  
nature,  
all  
this  
painting  
employs  
a  
similar  
vocabulary  
of  
smudges,  
stains,  
spray  
paint,  
flecks,  
spills,

plotches,  
almost-  
monochromatic  
fields,  
silk-  
screening,  
or  
stenciling.  
Edge-  
to-  
edge,  
geometric,  
or  
biomorphic  
composition  
is  
de  
rigueur,  
as  
are  
irregular  
grids,  
lattice  
and  
moiré  
patterns,  
ovular  
shapes,  
and  
stripes,  
with  
maybe  
some

collage.  
Many  
times,  
stretcher  
bars  
play  
a  
part.  
This  
is  
supposed  
to  
tell  
us,  
“See,  
I  
know  
I’m  
a  
painting  
—  
and  
I’m  
not  
glitzy  
like  
something  
from  
Takashi  
Murakami  
and  
Jeff  
Koons.”

Much  
of  
this  
product  
is  
just  
painters  
playing  
scales,  
doing  
finger  
exercises,  
without  
the  
wit  
or  
the  
rapport  
that  
makes  
music.  
Instead,  
it's  
visual  
Muzak,  
blending  
in.

*Get  
unlimited  
access  
to  
Vulture  
and  
everything*

*else*  
New  
York.  
**LEARN**  
**MORE**  
»

*Get*  
*unlimited*  
*access*  
*to*  
*Vulture*  
*and*  
*everything*  
*else*  
New  
York.  
**LEARN**  
**MORE**  
»

Most  
Zombie  
Formalism  
arrives  
in  
a  
vertical  
format,  
tailor-  
made  
for  
instant  
digital  
distribution  
and  
viewing

via  
jpeg  
on  
portable  
devices.  
It  
looks  
pretty  
much  
the  
same  
in  
person  
as  
it  
does  
on  
iPhone,  
iPad,  
Twitter,  
Tumblr,  
Pinterest,  
and  
Instagram.  
Collectors  
needn't  
see  
shows  
of  
this  
work,  
since  
it

offers  
so  
little  
visual  
or  
material  
resistance.

It  
has  
little  
internal  
scale,  
and  
its  
graphic  
field  
is  
taken  
in  
at  
once.

You  
see  
and  
get  
it  
fast,  
and  
then  
it  
doesn't  
change.  
There

are  
no  
complex  
structural  
presences  
to  
assimilate,  
few  
surprises,  
and  
no  
unique  
visual  
iconographies  
or  
incongruities  
to  
come  
to  
terms  
with.  
It's  
frictionless,  
made  
for  
trade.  
Art  
as  
bitcoin.

Almost  
everyone  
who  
paints



like  
this  
has  
come  
through  
art  
school.  
Thus  
the  
work  
harks  
back  
to  
the  
period  
these  
artists  
were  
taught  
to  
lionize,  
the  
supposedly  
purer  
days  
of  
the  
1960s  
and  
1970s,  
when  
their  
teachers'

views  
were  
being  
formed.  
Both  
teachers  
and  
students  
zero  
in  
on  
this  
one  
specific  
period;  
then  
only  
on  
one  
type  
of  
art  
of  
this  
period;  
then  
only  
on  
certain  
artists.  
It's  
art-  
historical

clear-  
cutting,-  
aesthetic  
monoculture  
with  
no  
aesthetic  
biodiversity.  
This  
is  
not  
painting  
but  
semantic  
painterbaton  
—  
what  
an  
unctuous  
auction  
catalogue,  
in  
reference  
to  
one  
artist's  
work,  
recently  
called  
“established  
postmodern  
praxis.”

Apologists

offer  
convoluted  
defenses,  
saying  
that  
certain  
practitioners  
differ  
from  
all  
the  
others.  
Lucien  
Smith  
uses  
fire  
extinguishers  
to  
make  
his  
little  
drips;  
Dan  
Colen  
uses  
M&Ms  
for  
his;  
Adam  
McEwen  
deploys  
chewing  
gum;

Parker

Ito

paints

fields

of

hazy

colored

dots.

There

are

many

artists

who

make

art

that

looks

printed

but

is

handmade;

others

make

it

look

handmade

when

it's

printed.

We're

told

that

a

painting  
is  
made  
by  
cutting  
up  
other  
paintings,  
or  
that  
it  
was  
left  
outdoors  
or  
in  
a  
polluted  
lake  
or  
sent  
through  
the  
mail,  
or  
that  
it  
came  
from  
Tahrir  
Square.  
We  
hear

that  
the  
artist  
is  
“commenting  
on”  
commodity  
culture,  
climate  
change,  
social  
oppression,  
art  
history.  
One  
well-  
known  
curator  
tried  
recently  
to  
justify  
the  
splattered  
Julian  
Schnabel--  
Joe  
Bradley--  
Jean-  
Michel  
Basquiat  
manqué  
of

Oscar  
Murillo  
—  
the  
hottest  
of  
all  
these  
artists  
—  
by  
connecting  
his  
tarp-  
or  
tentlike  
surfaces  
to  
the  
people  
living  
under  
makeshift  
canvas  
shelters  
in  
Murillo's  
native  
Colombia.  
Never  
mind  
that  
he



was  
educated  
in  
England  
and  
largely  
grew  
up  
there.

At  
28,  
obviously  
talented,  
Murillo's  
still  
making  
his  
student  
work  
and  
could  
turn  
out  
to  
be  
great.

Regardless,  
so  
many  
buyers  
and  
sellers  
are

already  
so  
invested  
in  
him  
that  
everyone's  
trying  
to  
cover  
his  
or  
her  
position.  
In  
one  
day  
at  
Frieze  
last  
month,  
three  
major  
art  
dealers  
pulled  
me  
aside  
to  
say  
that,  
although  
they

agreed  
that  
we're  
awash  
in  
Crapstraction,  
their  
artist  
was  
“the  
real  
deal.”  
I  
told  
each  
dealer  
what  
the  
other  
had  
said  
to  
me,  
and  
that  
each  
had  
named  
a  
different  
hot  
artist.

I'll

admit  
that  
I  
don't  
hate  
all  
of  
this  
work.  
Frankly,  
I  
like  
some  
of  
it.  
The  
saddest  
part  
of  
this  
trend  
is  
that  
even  
better  
artists  
who  
paint  
this  
way  
are  
getting  
lost

in  
the  
onslaught  
of  
copycat  
mediocrity  
and  
mechanical  
art.  
Going  
to  
galleries  
is  
becoming  
less  
like  
venturing  
into  
individual  
arks  
and  
more  
like  
going  
to  
chain  
stores  
where  
everything  
looks  
familiar.  
My  
guess

is  
that,  
if  
and  
when  
money  
disappears  
from  
the  
art  
market  
again,  
the  
bottom  
will  
fall  
out  
of  
this  
genericism.  
Everyone  
will  
instantly  
stop  
making  
the  
sort  
of  
painting  
that  
was  
an  
answer

to  
a  
question  
that  
no  
one  
remembers  
asking  
—  
and  
it  
will  
never  
be  
talked  
about  
again.

*\*This  
article  
appears  
in  
the  
June  
16,  
2014  
issue  
of  
New  
York  
Magazine.*

TAGS:  
ART  
ABSTRACT PAINTING

LEAVE A  
COMMENT

## THE LATEST

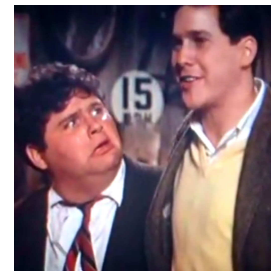
7:32 P.M.

**Police  
Investigating  
Threats  
From R.  
Kelly's  
Manager to  
Joycelyn  
Savage's  
Family**



6:21 P.M.

**Lawyer  
for  
Russian  
Trolls  
Quotes  
*Animal  
House*  
in  
Defense**





5:28 P.M.

## ***Good Trouble***

**101:  
What  
to  
Know  
If You  
Didn't  
Watch  
*The  
Fosters***



5:00 P.M.

**12  
Great  
Movies  
Just  
Added  
to the  
Public  
Domain**



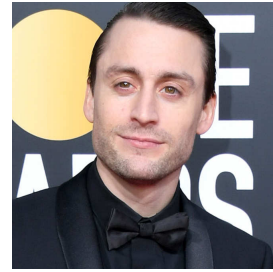
4:54 P.M.

**Here's  
Steven  
Soderbergh's  
2018 Media  
Diet; Unlike  
You He  
Finished *The  
Romanoffs***



4:21 P.M.

**Macaulay  
Culkin  
Reacts to  
Kieran's  
Golden  
Globe  
Nom by  
Asking  
What  
*Succession*  
Is**



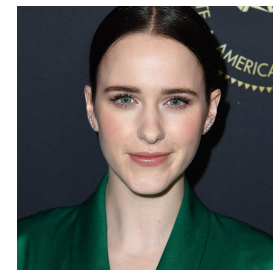
3:11 P.M.

**The WGA  
Nominations  
Shine Some  
Light on  
Long-Shot  
Oscar  
Contenders**



3:01 P.M.

**Rachel  
Brosnahan  
to Make  
Her *SNL*  
Hosting  
Debut  
Next Week**



3:00 P.M.

Every  
*The*  
*Dick*  
*Van*  
*Dyke*  
*Show*  
Episode,  
Ranked



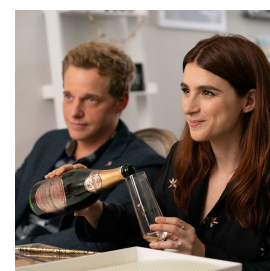
2:55 P.M.

The  
2019  
Golden  
Globes  
Were a  
Ratings  
Win,  
Even  
Though  
Fewer  
People  
Watched



1:50 P.M.

*You're*  
*the*  
*Worst*  
Is Still  
the  
Best in  
Its  
Final  
Season



1:26 P.M.

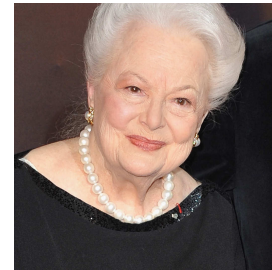
5

## Takeaways From *Surviving R. Kelly*



12:54 P.M.

## Olivia de Havilland's *Feud* Legal Battle Ends As Supreme Court Denies Case



12:50 P.M.

## How Will Those Bonkers Golden Globe Results Affect Oscar Picks?



12:27 P.M.

**Kevin  
Spacey  
Pleads Not  
Guilty at  
First Court  
Appearance  
for Sexual-  
Assault  
Case**



12:24 P.M.

***RuPaul's  
Drag  
Race: All  
Stars 4,  
Episode  
4: We  
Have  
Thoughts***



12:20 P.M.

**We Demand  
More Thomas  
Middleditch  
As Legendary  
Hockey  
Commentator  
Tony Babcock**



12:14 P.M.

**Give  
Barry  
Jenkins  
a Sci-Fi  
Movie,  
You  
Nerds!**



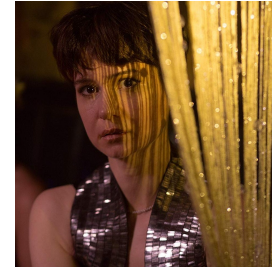
12:10 P.M.

*The Vanishing*  
Is a  
Phenomenally  
Well-Made  
Thriller



11:55 A.M.

*State Like  
Sleep* Starts  
Strong, But  
the Payoff Is  
Criminally  
Unsatisfying



MORE  
STORIES ➔



# VULTURE

TV |

MOVIES |

COMEDY |

MUSIC |

WHAT  
TO  
STREAM





NEWSLETTERS

ABOUT  
US

CONTACT

MEDIA  
KIT

CAREERS

PRESS

TRADEMARK

PRIVACY

TERMS

AD  
CHOICES

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