

The Point of Departure:

Moira Dryer
Jessica Stockholder

Sept. 21 - Oct. 29, 1997

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

The Point of Departure: Moirra Dryer, Jessica Stockholder and Abstract Painting

Lucy Lippard, in an essay from 1967 titled "Cult of the Direct and Difficult," addressed the relationship of the emerging generation of artists to the conditions set upon them by Abstract Expressionism. Lippard writes, "Beauty,' 'prettiness,' 'decoration' and 'subtlety' have become suspect words in their suggestion of easy communication, of professional weakness on the part of artists who paint likable pictures and have not forced themselves into less familiar areas." She goes on to point out that, "Contrary to popular opinion and continual complaints about the triumph of novelty over originality, such a turnover is produced not by an increasingly commercial atmosphere but by the artists themselves, through their commitment to a grueling, self-demanding ethic based on a distrust of the accepted and the acceptable." This is the definition of difficult art and the ethical responsibility of an artist to art, if not to culture and society as a whole.

Moirra Dryer and Jessica Stockholder make difficult art, but not in the aggressive manner of the Ab Ex artists who intended their work to manifest their existential and metaphysical message of individualism and

presentness. Nor do they engage, as the Pop and Minimalist artists did, in the notion of an anti-aesthetic that would constitute an aggressive and aggravated assault on taste. Instead, they embraced abstract painting at a time when novelty, cynicism and irony had become the most acceptable approaches to artmaking.

Dryer and Stockholder's relation to "painting" – "abstract painting" to be specific – is critical but not negative, for they do not approach it as a historicised subject or a lost cause, but as a viable mode of expression. Their work is located within the tradition that begins with the Synthetic Cubist collages of Picasso and Braque. Synthetic Cubism's innovation consisted of using non-art materials to make paintings; this resulted from and gave impetus to the historic avant garde's endeavors to use nontraditional materials and unconventional formats to augment and transgress the terms of painting. This led to the practices of assemblage (Kurt Schwitters), the ready-made (Marcel Duchamp) and industrial fabrication (Alexander Rodchenko). Until the mid-'80s, it was thought that these concerns had come to an end in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and such post-Minimalists as Alan Shields and Tina Gerard.

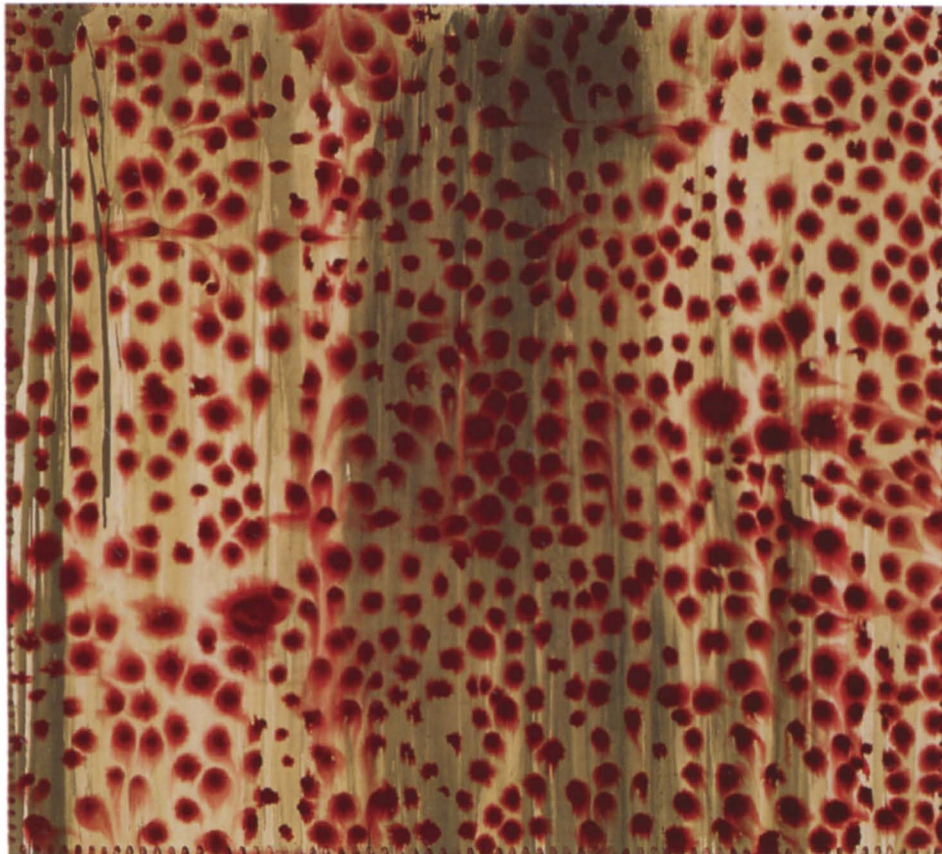
Although sharing the tradition of testing the limits of painting's format is their point

of origin, Dryer and Stockholder arrive and depart from this juncture according to very different agendas. Separated by only one year in age, the difference in their work may be accounted for by the fact that Dryer (who died of cancer at the age of 34 in 1992) made her debut as an artist in 1986 with an exhibition at John Good Gallery, just at the moment when post-Modernist theories and practices were making their most significant inroads into the cultural field. Stockholder, on the other hand, did not gain critical attention until 1990 with her first exhibition at American Fine Arts Gallery, just at the moment when abstract painting was re-establishing itself as a viable practice within the post-Modern environment. Unmistakably, their respective relationships to abstract painting are conditioned by the maturing of post-Modernism's paradigms.

Abstract painting, as Modernism's highest achievement (at least in the U.S.), was the primary target of the post-Modernists in the States. In the early '80s, they proposed that it had become nothing more than an icon of Modernism's historicised project of self-definition and self-referentiality. This task was thought to have been fulfilled with art's conceptualization as self-determining, leading to abstract painting (art) being declared irrelevant. Significantly and paradoxically, this sense of closure did not apply to either painting as a medium or to those figural styles that had been judged, in conformity with Modernist criteria, to be inferior, insignificant or unessential to its ongoing practices.

This post-Modernist account of painting's "theory" death reiterated and revised a view that had been voiced in the early '70s. The one significant difference is, at the time, painting's demise was thought to have been a result of post-Minimalism's assault on the categorical imperatives that separated painting from sculpture. This had eroded painting's territory. In the case of both scenarios, abstract painting does not cease; it is simply judged to be no longer a source of innovation or enlightenment. The inference to be drawn from this was that those who continued along this path were motivated by a romantic faith in painting or a nostalgia for Modernism's lost glory.

It might have been the internal logic of Modernism itself, or perhaps the feeling of having been closed out because "everything had already been done" between the years 1950 and '70, that led the generation of the late '70s and early '80s (David Salle, Tom Lawson, Ross Bleckner and Sherri Levine, et al) to turn to the practice of simulating, appropriating and replicating those styles and values marginalized by High Modernism. These became the tools with which they would debunk the Modernist myths of



Moirra Dryer, *More Random Fire*, 1991, acrylic, wood, 78" x 86", courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York



Moira Dryer, *Random Fire*, 1991, acrylic, wood, cardboard, metal music stand, 88" x 130", courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York

originality, authenticity and historical determinism. Ironically, to achieve this, they had to turn Modernism and its practices into fixed objects, resulting in abstract painting being defined as synonymous with a caricatured version of Clement Greenberg's Formalist doctrines.

With much less fanfare than the death of painting or the emergence of post-Modernism received, artists by the mid-'80s had begun to establish the terms for abstract painting's post-Formalist, post-Modernist life. Some artists such as Jonathan Lasker, David Reed and Mary Heilmann, who had been working in near obscurity since the mid-'70s, and younger artists such as James Hyde, Polly Apfelbaum, Fabian Marcaccio and Bill Komoski found in the discursive practices of Frank Stella, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Imi Knoebel a model that could conceptually sustain the suspect practice of abstract painting. This return was the point of Dryer's and then Stockholder's departure. Painting's resuscitation allowed them to re-address those contemporary practices that had been prematurely terminated by the crisis of Modernism, rather than the historical

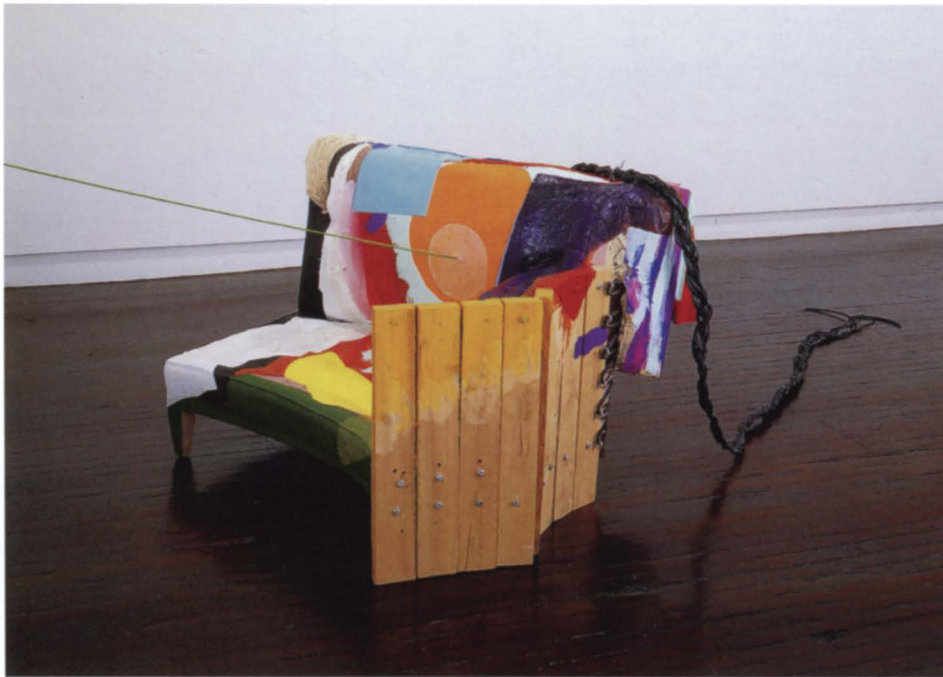
concerns that the post-Modernists had represented as constituting a dead end. Dryer seemingly reconceived painting as constituting the means to produce nonlinear though symbolic narratives without recourse to expressionism or the mimetic, while for Stockholder, it became the means to resist the circumscription of experience by history, technology and language (representation). The contrast between their approaches is comparable to those between Picasso's cardboard construction of a guitar and Tatlin's counter-reliefs. It is this division that eventually marks the line between Donald Judd's literalism and the literary aesthetic of Jasper Johns and eventually between conceptual and phenomenological art.

Stockholder's prime object is formalist – almost in the Greenbergian sense of the term – yet this is a formalism that does not take as its subject optical purity or the maintenance and recuperation of the whole historical tradition of painting as it has developed since the Renaissance. Its object instead is the diverse practices and innovations of the historic avant garde of the 20th century. Despite her variety of mediums and formats, painting for Stockholder is a

process defined by the inherent qualities of her materials and their physical and visual relationship to one another. At times, this has included its architectural site and material qualities as well, which places her viewers within the frame of her work rather than at some comfortable distance.

Premised on the viewer's ability to turn the somatic (bodily) experience of surface, mass, scale, color, form, etc. into information, Stockholder uses these qualities to order her work into at first enigmatic events. It is these transformations of sense data into cues that give us access to the narratives that are attributable and discernible in her work. For instance, her use of furniture such as a pink couch or a metal and plastic lawn chair as the armature for the body of her paintings is not a commentary on middle-class domesticity or taste gone awry, but a way to reference the relation between bodily scale, vision and recognition. By denying us access to these spaces, she makes us aware of how vision is an extension of the body into spaces where we cannot go and vice versa.

Such transposition of the senses is not the full extent of Stockholder's content, for



Jessica Stockholder, 1994, oil and acrylic paints on pink couch with wood, hardware, electric wiring, newspaper maché, plastic, twine, clothing, string and nail, 47" x 61" 180", courtesy private collection, New York

she seemingly also has a concern for exploring language's limitations. She often uses objects that are linguistically contradictory in nature: for instance, containers made of holes and plastic oranges or objects whose material qualities – scale, texture or color – perceptually differ; yet the same linguistic description can be applied to them. By doing this, she imposes upon us a recognition of the relationship between perception and language. Her message, if there is one, emphasizes that cognition is an integrated information system based on comparison and differentiation, rather than a series of isolated and incongruous experiences. Stockholder's work makes us aware that language produces abstractions, because to function it must create categorical generalities.

The makeshift though pragmatic self-referential analysis of our senses and their relation to language that Stockholder's work represents complement Dryer's focus on how the material qualities and painterly processes can be transformed into a symbolic phantasmagoria by syntactically ordering every material nuance to accrue meaning. Though her work appears more logical than Stockholder's, Dryer combines the materialism of the "informale" and symbolist concerns generated by Surrealism to order painting's qualities into a sign system capable of objectifying her associative texts. This concern for how a choice of objects, pictorial structures and painterly processes may invoke a semiotic of relationships can be discerned in *Random Fire* (1991). In this work, we are presented with two green and white paintings organized by different struc-

tures and processes. Set upon a music stand is a painting the size of an open book, its surface covered with hard-edged green and white concentric circles forming a target. Hanging on the wall nearby is a 7 x 9-foot painting whose surface is pierced by multiple dime-sized holes seemingly placed indiscriminately and covered with an all-over process derived from the splattering of green and white blotches.

Beyond the literalist reading of object and support and the seductive appeal of its painterly surface, *Random Fire* tends to call up language to organize and transform its physical features into such opposing concepts as chance and order, fragment and field. The key to many potential interpretations of these concepts is the music stand. This object comes from the real world and has a prescribed function that Dryer uses to cue us to the fact that we are being asked to deal not only with the interplay between the paintings' contrasting features, but between a practiced score and an improvised one. The implication is that in a manner, the artist is like a musician; her virtuosity lies not only in her ability to perform the score, but to interpret it. Significantly, many of Dryer's late paintings forgo such theatrical devices and instead internalize the oppositions and contrasts that are an essential part of the text of her work. Fingerprints frame a fluidity that calls up the image of blood cells seen under a microscope. The edge of the painting is used to reference the exteriority of the body; the painterly surface the fluid interiority. In others, the very fluidity of the painting process obliterates the pattern of stripes

it is employed to produce. Here the making and unmaking of the image is one and the same. Much of the sensuousness of these works conceals their schizoid nature.

In direct opposition to the post-Modernist preference for the anti-aesthetic of the ready-made and deferential qualities of commercial culture, Dryer and Stockholder found the means to achieve their differing goals in the notion of aesthetic engagement. The fact that they have had no fear of "beauty," "prettiness," "decoration" and "subtlety" – or any other term – is decidedly a challenge to the conceptual biases of our society, which put greater trust in narratives and explanations than in bodily experience. One may only speculate as to the reasons these artists took such a turn. Theoretically, such a decision may be thought to have its roots in a critique of Modernist formalism or feminist theories addressed to the personal and object; I think it represents instead a general desire to resist the increasingly denigrated role the senses play in an age when the spectacle of mass media and telecommunications has become all-encompassing. It is important to note that they do not "represent" this resistance or its object; instead they supply us with an alternative that is neither reactionary nor didactic.

The fact that their works can be described using such heterogeneous terms demonstrates that abstract painting is not a singular project fixable or definable, but is merely an umbrella term. Its conventions are products of differing practices and objectives. This realization of abstract painting's multifarious identities is a consequence of post-Structuralism's ongoing revision of our cultural norms. In this environment, the difference between abstract painting's terms and practices can be exploited rather than restrained by an ideologically imposed need to resolve or repress such dichotomies in the name of either progress or truth. In this way, abstract painting's inherent nature as a form of hypertext – a series of interrelated divergent subjects – is now made explicit.

Saul Ostrow, New York

Saul Ostrow is an artist, critic, curator, art editor of Bomb Magazine, co-editor of Lusitania Press and general editor for the Critical Voices Series for the Gordon and Breach Publishing Group Arts International. He teaches critical theory at New York University and the School of Visual Arts and in the graduate program at Parsons School of Design.

Cover: Jessica Stockholder, 1996, oil and acrylic paints, fish bowl, candies, glass light shades, plastic fruit, clothesline wire, hardware, rubber mat, 64" x 62" x 120", courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York