

Anne Barnes

Stuart Steck, Academic Advisor

Paper #3

4 April 2019

From Abstract Painting to Creative Freedom

One of the central motives behind my decision to go back to school and pursue an MFA in Visual Arts, is the wish to shape a greater understanding of where my creative practice lies within the art historical narrative. On a deeper level, I am starting to realize now, that this process has also allowed me to see the ways in which my own desire to create—with its resident inspirational themes and urges—is a universal creation myth shared by all artists throughout time. This thought has taken a clearer shape in my mind's eye each time that I learn about another artist's process, which of course often includes their own unique inspirations, creative ticks, material impulses, and usually a very different physical outcome from my own. And yet I almost always feel an instant familiarity with their story, as some aspect of it tends to mirror exactly my own path to creation and artistic discovery.

It seems though, that the stories that continually resonate the most with me and for which I feel the keenest kinship, are those that revolve around the path to artistic abstraction and the need to cast off objective representation in one's work. This is something that I would loosely define as “breaking the rules,” which to me simply means, leaving room for the freedom to create from a deep well of internal and deeply personal inspiration. To be able to create my art in any way that I choose to express myself, without the need to follow any specific rules. Indeed, I recognize now, that from childhood on many of the artists to whom I was repeatedly drawn, those artists whose paintings I would spend more time looking at and wondering about, and whose work I would try to learn from, if not emulate, were some of the first artists who dared to

lean towards abstraction in their work. These artists included Wassily Kandinsky¹, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró. But what was it though that drew these “original” artists to abstraction in their work and to feel the need to break all of the established “rules” that had guided the formation of Western art towards representational imagery for the roughly twenty-five hundred years before them? (Heartney 66) Additionally, now that over a hundred years have passed since then, and this form of creative expression is no longer such a shocking reversal of the culturally accepted rules for making art, indeed it has become so normalized as to seem commonplace: What does it mean for the artists who are still creating abstraction today? And more personally, what is it that has drawn *me* as an artist towards this form of creative expression in my own artwork?

To answer those questions from the historical perspective, art theorists fall on two sides of the *cultural* divide. One side of the divide aligns the creation of this new form of expression in art as a positive response to the revolutions in science and technology that were emerging at the beginning of the 20th century, and the other side saw abstraction as a “reaction against” the emergence of these new technologies and their impact on our culture and humanity (Heartney 66). As Eleanor Heartney states in her book *Art & Today*, “From this perspective, the emergence of ‘non-objective’ art ... is a search for the unchanging and eternal forms underlying both nature and human consciousness, a rejection of the materialist philosophies introduced by industrialization, and a counterbalancing expression of universal harmonies.” (66)

Furthermore, the original “roots” of the abstract movement seemed to follow two different *creative* paths to their production as well, with one based on geometric form and the

¹The Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky, is widely credited with creating the first abstract painting in Western art in 1911 (Heartney 66). Although, I recently viewed the blockbuster Hilma af Klint exhibition, *Paintings for the Future*, at the Guggenheim in New York City, and learned that she was creating abstracted paintings as early as 1906 in Sweden, a full 5 years before Kandinsky. (Bashkoff 17) This is important to note considering the current debate around women in the arts and the dearth of representation for their work in major arts institutions, as well as with the fact of the absence of many important female artists from the official historical narrative.

other on a more natural or organic output (Heartney 66). “Geometric abstraction” is defined by straight, angular and mathematically derived shapes. Its early practitioners were “influenced by Plato’s argument that the visible world offers only pale imitation of a set of underlying universal forms.”² (Heartney 66) These concepts were further distilled down to include the “mystical nature of color”³ and were reflected in a reduced color palette and basic forms that encompassed an implied meaning through their use.⁴ On the other hand, “organic abstraction” incorporated a more vibrant color palette with “free floating” lines and curved, organic shapes that were influenced by the artist’s emotional response to everything from music to the shapes and textures of the natural world⁵ (Heartney 66).

Once the seeds of abstract painting were planted into the collective consciousness of Western art, its root system and its tributaries shot off in all directions through the various stylistic movements that emerged from it, which leads us to another question: What does abstraction in painting mean now in the 21st century? And I suppose to a certain extent the

² While Plato was speaking of the natural world, I find this even more meaningful today when you think about computer technology. This is a technological world, made up of all of those “ones” and “zeros” that form the backbone to the coding or “underlying universal form” behind all of the gadgets that we rely so heavily on in our everyday lives, as well as the math behind the engineering executed in the building of the complex structures and technologies of the modern world. As I always tell my daughter, when she complains about her math classes, “math makes the world go ‘round!” Unfortunately for me, this level of advanced mathematical thinking has always been beyond my grasp, so the visual path is the one I have always taken.

³ Many of the early 20th century avant-garde abstract artists were influenced by Madam Blavatsky, a Russian Theosophist, who’s belief system encompassed the mystical nature of color and geometric form (Heartney 66). Theosophy is an occult movement that originated in the 19th century, but whose roots go back many centuries to some of the earliest religious belief systems. While it encompasses many different branches, all forms embrace certain “common characteristics” that include the belief in a “deeper spiritual reality and that direct contact with that reality can be established through intuition, meditation, revelation or some other state transcending normal human consciousness.” See Theosophy. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 20 Dec. 1999, www.britannica.com/topic/theosophy.

⁴ Piet Mondrian with his basic, geometric grid abstractions that were painted in primary colors on a stark white ground, is the purest example of this school of thought.

⁵ Early practitioners of the organic form of abstraction included Wassily Kandinsky and Arthur Dove (who is considered to be the first American abstractionist). (Heartney 66) A very cursory search did not uncover an American women abstract painter whose work predates Dove’s, but that could be an interesting research project to delve into at some point.

answer is, that this is hard to discern. The exact definition feels elusive and is hard to quantify due to the fact that there are probably as many theories on the topic as there are practitioners, as Eleanor Heartney writes about artists who paint from the abstract perspective today:

It is regarded alternately as an expression of the individual psyche and a set of conventions that mock true individuality. Some critics argue that abstraction probes the essence of nature, others that it reflects the artifice of the urban world, yet others that it explores the secret world of private feelings. For some it's a harbinger of spiritual truth, for others it offers a celebration of obdurate matter.

(66)

All this *disagreement* on the subject seems just about right to me. Because if there is one main lesson we can take away from the original turn towards abstraction in painting and all of the subsequent cultural reactions to it—as well as the stylistic backlashes that were eventually born from it such as Pop Art and Minimalism (to name just a few)—is that to be an artist now does not mean only being able to create from an academic tradition, but instead allows for the *freedom* to create in any way imaginable (Heartney 67).

Maybe the answer to the question that I pose above should actually be then, that when you distill down abstract painting *today* to its most simple definition, it would be that it is the manifestation of the artist's need for independence and the freedom to create the work that they want to create, in any way that they chose to do it. This is aptly demonstrated when you look at the collection of eighty artists whose works illustrate Bob Nickas's 2009 book, *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*. From Elizabeth Neel's organic, earthy toned paintings inspired by "nature and death," and whose preoccupations include "accidents, violence and decay," (Nickas 54–57) to Amy Sillman's more brightly colored exertions in which she

“translates the figure into the abstract and abstraction into figuration” while employing her own “visual language” in which to process her preoccupations onto the canvas (Nikas 222–227).

You can see that the artistic impulse to create and think abstractly is still going strong and that the reasons for doing it are as varied as the artform produced. Bob Nikas writes that “abstract painting can be its own subject, its own world, one that reveals itself slowly over time and may not look exactly the same to us from one day to the next.” (Nikas 7) I would add that it can also be an art practice that doesn’t look the same from one artist to the next. Each process of creating is as unique and varied as there are stars in the universe.

Finally, it seems that for me—at least for the moment—in my creative practice this means that I am feeling most aligned with the American Abstract Expressionists who were living and working in New York City after World War II. Many of these artists were traumatized by the war. They either fought in it or lived through the fear and deprivations of the times, and in many ways their art is in response to these traumas (Gabriel 8). As Mary Gabriel wrote in her 2018 biography *Ninth Street Women* (which includes a detailed history not only about the American Abstract Expressionist movement, but also the key female artists who helped to shape it):

Mankind had unleashed its hidden beast and the result was not only the tangible horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima but a miasma of hatred, suspicion, and bigotry that lingered still. Under such circumstances artists continued to work, but they could no longer paint or sculpt the reassuring “things”—objects, landscapes, or people—that had occupied their predecessors for centuries. To do so would have seemed false, tantamount to nostalgia for an innocent past that most likely never existed in the first place. (8)

Gabriel goes on to write:

Artists who were able to, who *needed* to work despite the desolation of the times, had been forced to look deeper for a subject, to look inside the only thing they could be sure of—themselves. The result was abstraction free of anything but the material with which the art was made and the naked energy of the artist who produced it. (8)

While it is clear that many of the traumas we face in today's modern world are far from the mass genocide and ethnic cleansing of millions of innocent people in concentration camps and the catastrophic devastation of atomic bombs, it is no less, a world that is still filled with a similar "miasma of hatred, suspicion, and bigotry" that existed after World War II. It also appears that the human capacity for ethnic cleansing and destruction has not been too far diminished, as has been proven most recently in the Middle East. And don't even get me started on the ugliness that is closer to home ... let alone the alienation and anxieties that exist due to the state of the environment and our addictions to technology and social media. All of this is to say, that my current creative urges are flowing from a similar head space as the Abstract Expressionist group.

As Bob Nikas states in a section of his book that falls under the title *The Persistence of Abstraction*:

Artists today, even those with an awareness of what came before—and maybe these artists have a distinct advantage—are not particularly concerned with the reproduction of more abstract paintings to "keep the species alive," or to be seen as sharing a common name: abstraction. (5)

I agree with this statement, and I would add, that artists today are simply enjoying the freedom they have to pursue their creative urges in any way that they choose and to many of us,

the form that it takes is through abstraction. Like many battles for freedom, our right to do this today was originally won by the pioneering abstract artists who dared to break some of the “rules.” And like Nikas, I do think it is to our advantage to remember those who came before us, as well as to give them the credit they are due.

Works Cited:

Bashkoff, Tracey. *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2018.

Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*. Little Brown and Company, 2018.

Heartney, Eleanor. *Art & Today*. Phaidon Press Limited, 2008.

Nikas, Bob. *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*. Phaidon Press Limited, 2009.

Theosophy. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 20 Dec. 1999, www.britannica.com/topic/theosophy. Accessed 1 Apr. 2019.