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## It's Not Dry Yet

By Roberta Smith

FEW modern myths about art have been as persistent or as annoying as the so-called death of painting. Unless, of course, it is the belief that abstract and representational painting are oil and water, never to meet as one.

The two notions are related. The Modernist insistence on the separation of representation and abstraction robbed painting of essential vitality. Both notions have their well-known advocates. And both, in my mind seem, well, very 20th century.

Pictorial communication — signs, symbols, images and colors on a flat surface — is one of the oldest and richest of human inventions, like writing or music. It started on rocks and the surfaces of clay pots and in the woven threads of textiles, then moved to walls, wood panels, copper and canvas. It now includes plasma screens, Photoshop and graphic novels. Even so, paint on a portable surface remains one of the most efficient and intimate means of self-expression.

As for representation and abstraction, historically and perceptually they have usually been inseparable. Paintings — like all art — tend to get and hold our attention through their abstract, or formal, energy. But even abstract paintings have representational qualities; the human brain cannot help but impart meaning to form.

There have been moments of dazzling balance between the representational and the abstract — for example, Byzantine mosaics; pre-Columbian and American Indian textiles and ceramics; Japanese screens; Mughal painting; and post-Impressionism.

Painting may be in a similar place right now, fomented mostly, but not always, by young painters who have emerged in the last decade. They feel freer to paint what they want than at any time since the 1930s, or maybe even the 1890s, when post-Impressionism was at its height.

In the late 19th century painting was being radically changed by a series of artistic explosions — the newly abstracted figuration of post-Impressionists from van Gogh to Ensor; the extremes of color favored by the Fauves, like the young Matisse, and German Expressionists, like Kirchner; the shattering of representational form by Cubism and Futurism; and finally the flowering of abstraction itself in the work of Malevich and Mondrian.

By the 1970s, thanks largely to formalist critics like Clement Greenberg and Donald Judd, painting had been flattened and emptied of figures, subject matter and illusionistic space. It was also superseded, it seemed, by the explosion of post-Minimalism's multiple mediums. But a kind of figure envy ensued: How could painters look at the figures in much of the video, body and performance art and not think, "I want a piece of that"? By the '80s painting was creeping back, largely because painters like Sigmar Polke, David Salle and Julian Schnabel started pitting representation against abstraction, albeit self-consciously and often ironically.

But with each generation of painters, the authority of Greenberg and Judd pales while the history of the pictorial expands, revealing new possibilities for scholars, curators and artists alike. It seems noteworthy that Robert Rosenblum's startling "1900: Art at the Crossroads," a

revisionist juxtaposition of modernist and academic painting, opened at the Guggenheim Museum exactly 10 years ago this fall.

Yet old habits die hard. No less a personage than Klaus Biesenbach, the Museum of Modern Art's new chief curator at large, recently told *The Art Newspaper* that he preferred the phrase "contemporary practice" to "contemporary art" in order to include fashion, film, design and more. That doesn't bode well for a phrase like "contemporary painting."

But what really is questionable, and passé, is the implied ranking of art mediums and the leaving of some of them for dead. None of them ever really, ultimately have much of a monopoly on quality. And something else greatly reduces the chances of the death of painting: too many people — most obviously women — are just beginning to make their mark with the medium and are becoming active in its public dialogue.

What follows is a sampling of the post-abstract representational painters who have emerged since 2000.

View the slide show here: [http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2010/03/25/arts/20100328-painting-slideshow\\_index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2010/03/25/arts/20100328-painting-slideshow_index.html)



Freaky Figuration: Egged on by various amalgams of psychedelic and outsider art, Surrealism and Neo-Expressionism — not to mention Philip Guston, Dana Schutz, Martin Kippenberger and Thomas Trosch and Katherine Bernhardt — many painters are veering from the hallucinatory to the naïve and back again. In Michael Williams's "Loddie" (2007), it is a dachshund, not Alice in Wonderland, that gets very big. "Loddie" by Michael Williams.

Photo: Canada, New York

The subject of Leidy Churchman's "Fellow" (2007) is rendered in a quasi-naïve fashion on a wood panel gridded off with hints of an Americana textile, looking wholesome but also somewhat androgynous. "Fellow" by Leidy Churchman.

Photo: Courtesy of Horton Gallery (Sunday L.E.S.), New York



While Jakub Julian Ziolkowski's untitled rendering of two monks, with the long earlobes characteristic of Buddha and distinctive headgear suggesting a religious order, almost amounts to carefully controlled automatism, looping and circling into an image. Bendix Harms's exaggerated post-Guston Expressionistic figuration could be here, along with works by Matthew Chambers, Brian Calvin and JonasWood. Untitled by Jakub Julian Ziolkowski.

Photo: Courtesy of Jakub Julian Ziolkowski and Hauser & Wirth

The Personal Is Political Is Painterly: Many of these categories are less a way to fix artists' locations than to indicate some undercurrents of post-abstract figuration and its widening source material. Dhruvi Acharya's "Bubble Bath" updates Rajput painting with riffs from cartooning, a certain darkness of mind and a focus on women (sometimes shown, as here, engaged in a stereotypical Western ritual); the bath looks anything but bubbly and matches a thought balloon that seems to be sweating blood. "Bubble Bath" by Dhruvi Acharya.

Photo: Courtesy of Kravets/Wehby Gallery, New York



The Los Angeles artist Henry Taylor paints directly from life, alternating between images of friends and family in the spirit of Alice Neel, and sports heroes, always playing reality against stereotype. "The Long Jump by Carl Lewis" by Henry Taylor.

Photo: Rental Gallery

Negar Ahkami, an Iranian-born artist living in New York, evokes Persian tile, textiles and painting in her scenes while depicting a figure who seems disturbed by the influences on Middle Eastern women of Western imports like plastic surgery, dieting and anorexia. "Trying to Pluck Her Eyebrows, She Blinded Herself" by Negar Ahkami.

Photo: Courtesy of Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, New York





Early Modernism Redux: With George Condo and Sean Landers among the precedents, some artists are revisiting European painting of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but less in the spirit of ironic slumming, à la the 1980s, and more in search of new, style-reviving vitality and saturated color, sometimes mixed with hints of late 20th century cartooning and attention to saturated color. Nicole Eisenman's recent show of new paintings displayed a strange Nabi-type return to post-Impressionism. Here **Frederick Hayes** resurrects the loaded brush and charged forms of Max Beckmann, subject of a recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Detail of "Urban Grid, Riffs on the Grid" by **Frederick Hayes**.

Photo: Number 35, New York

Christoph Ruckhäberle looks back to early Miró through the lens of Balthus. Untitled by Christoph Ruckhäberle.

Photo: Courtesy of Sutton Lane, London-Paris



Nina Chanel Abney rephrases some of the starchy simplicity of Marie Laurencin by way of "South Park." Other artists who could fit in this category include Khalif Kelly, Kyle Staver, Alison Katz and Volker Hueller. "Null and Void" by Nina Chanel Abney

Photo: Courtesy of Kravets/Wehby Gallery



Realism With Benefits: From Ingres to Sylvia Sleigh, Alex Katz, Chuck Close or the eccentric British painter Stanley Spencer, realism has always been subject to wonderful distortions of space, form or other intensifications. Recent examples include Alexi Worth's suave simplifications, croppings and foreshortenings. "Arrangement" by Alexi Worth.

Photo: Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York

And Ellen Altfest's hair-by-hair account of the male body. "The Butt" by Ellen Altfest.

Photo: Bill Orcutt, Courtesy of White Cube



And Raja Ram Sharma's traditional but oddly tilted, eerily abandoned scenes, which also reiterate that realism is not only a Western phenomenon. Other relative newcomers who might have been represented include Richard Baker, Josephine Halvorson, Karel Funk, Richard Wathen and Mickalane Thomas. "Pillows" by Raja Ram Sharma.

Photo: Victoria Munroe Fine Art