

**Three Strong Painters, Artscape 2002, Maryland Institute College of Art
Curated and Written by John Yao**

Both the title of the exhibition and the epigraph come of course from the highly provocative and influential literary theorist and critic Harold Bloom. It was Bloom, who, in the *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* made a clear distinction between strong or major poets and weaker ones. According to Bloom, “weaker poets idealize; figurers of capable imagination appropriate for themselves.” Thus, weaker artists focus on a single figure, while stronger artists appropriate from various and contradictory sources. They do not drink from one well or river, but from wherever they can. Miriam Cabessa, Amanda Church, and Lisa Stefanelli are strong artists. While this might initially seem like a bald assertion, particularly because none of these artists is well-known, it is quite apparent from their recent work that they more than hold their own against their precursors, among who I would name Jackson Pollock and Nicholas Krushenick.

Pollock and Krushenick initiated two very different trajectories in abstract art, each which has proven useful to the current generation of abstract artists. Pollock emphasized the nature of his materials, paint’s liquidity being one of them. He shifted painting from the realm of depiction to a performative action which the painting itself registers. Krushenick developed a flat, hard-edged style to arrive at brightly colored, viscerally intense, abstract images and patterns. Krushenick’s views are both wide angled and close-up at the same time. The resulting vertigo is comparable to what happens when we look at Pollock’s floating, twisting skeins of paint. We are confronted by a destabilized, mysterious, self-contained world. Of course, Pollock and Krushenick didn’t come out of nowhere; they were dealing with the strong painters of an earlier generation, among them Picasso and Miro.

Miriam Cabessa works in two distinct ways, neither of which involves using a brush. In the paintings I have selected for this exhibition, she presses her hands and fingers into a still wet, largely monochromatic ground of over-painting. The highly choreographed movements her hands make across the painting’s dense, usually dark surface mirror each other in a succession of abraded movements, or starting and stopping. Cabessa’s actions can be said to caress as well as erase part of the surface. The result is a ghostly symmetrical form, a bodily structure which seems to be both unfolding and folding, opening and closing.

Like time-elapsed photography, Cabessa’s paintings are a slowed down record of gesture, an imprint of the distinct phases of the movement her hands made. In her performative process, Cabessa shared something with Pollock. However, in contrast to Pollock’s often additive compositions, Cabessa’s composition is a record of a single, sustained and segmented gesture, a discrete performance. At the same time, Cabessa’s paintings are in effect highly sophisticated form of finger painting, which is perhaps our earliest encounter with painting. By connecting Pollock, who some people believe initiated the demise of painting, with finger painting, our earliest painting activity; Cabessa subverts the notion that history is linear. Art is generated out of beginnings and endings and everything in between. The future cannot be predicted by the Nostradamuses of the art world.

In the resulting symmetrical form, it’s as if Cabessa has transformed Georgia O’Keefe’s flowers into an apparition. We are no longer looking at an oversized flower, but at something at once familiar and utterly other. To name Cabessa’s images is to colonize what refuses to be both contained and stabilized by language. Cabessa understands that this is one of the painting’s abiding strengths; it can transport us to the limits of language, this making us aware of limits of our own sense of world. Paintings can provoke discourse without being discursive, it can resist society’s tendency toward reductiveness and the naming of the self and others...

As with both Cabessa and Stefanelli, a weirdly elegant current of repression runs through Church’s work. This is perhaps the truest legacy of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. It doesn’t lead to further liberation. Rather, these three strong artists understand that not only is liberation an illusion, but also that both pop art’s and minimalism’s avowed sense of the visible are also illusions. It was never all there to see, as Andy Warhol and Frank Stella said. Rather, it is all there to be revealed, to be brought out into the open. This is what these artists have in common. Their strength is that they have refused to idealize the past, its glories of art. In the face of a long history, these artists are unafraid to embrace a wide spectrum of sources, ranging from finger paintings to figure skating and those first efforts we make in shaping lumps of clay. They are strong because they are open-eyed and demonic, interested in flawless execution and the irreparably damaged.