



## Late Style: Four Bay Area Abstractionists

Starting in the 1970s, several Bay Area artists who had engaged representation turned to abstraction, rejecting Greenbergian models while looking back to early non-objective sources.

**By Mark Van Proyen**

In the spring of 1975, Philip Linhares organized a stunning exhibition of then-recent abstract paintings by Elmer Bischoff at the San Francisco Art Institute. Since 1972, Bischoff had been working on these paintings, which used colorful skeins of acrylic paint to articulate complex multi-layered compositions that were teeming with interconnecting shapes and abrupt surprises, so much so that they defied the prevailing etiquettes of pictorial coherence that had earmarked painting in Northern California during the previous two decades. This last point is particularly remarkable, in that Bischoff's previous body of figurative work had set the standard for those etiquettes during the previous 15 years, that being the time after David Park passed away in 1960. But even though Bischoff's previous figurative work was widely respected and even more widely imitated during those years, he himself had grown impatient with the figures and landscapes that had brought him such widespread acclaim. So, at the age of 59, when a lesser artist would have been tempted to rest on his hard-earned

laurels, Bischoff ventured into new territory that was audaciously far ahead of what other abstract painters were doing at the time, either in the Bay Area, or anywhere else. If the same group of paintings were exhibited today, they would fit right in with the current trend for so-called "provisional painting."

The critical reception for that exhibition was lukewarm, but in some circles there was panic. At the very moment when the Oakland Museum's "Period of Exploration" exhibition of the work of 1950s-era Bay Area Abstract Expressionists had gained national attention, Bischoff seemed to be defecting from the tribe in favor of a more

ABOVE:  
"BUILDINGS," 1969  
**Elmer Bischoff**  
OIL ON CANVAS, 20" x 24"

PHOTO: COURTESY HACKETT | MILL, SAN FRANCISCO

timely and decisively cosmopolitan approach to abstract painting. He wasn't the first to do so. A decade earlier, Richard Diebenkorn pulled up his Bay Area stakes and headed south to Santa Monica, abandoning his well known figurative work to initiate the creation of his masterful *Ocean Park* series (highlighted this spring at the Orange County Museum of Art). Even earlier (in 1964) *Artforum* magazine decamped from San Francisco for greener Southern California pastures, and it is worth remembering that Clement Greenberg's landmark "Post Painterly Abstraction" exhibition was held at the Los Angeles County Museum that same year. *Artforum's* departure made many artists in Northern California feel bereft, especially since it had previously done so much to highlight what had been going on in the region to an international audience. Greenberg's famous exhibition was an influential international success, as the artists that it included (such as Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Josef Albers and Ellsworth Kelly, among many others) all put paid to his doctrine of pictorial flatness, graphic chromaticism and the necessary at-onceness of visual pleasure. It quickly became the model for an academized formalism that was distributed through colleges and universities, thereby confirming its inevitable status as target for the next generation's scorn.

But Greenberg's ideas never caught on in the Bay Area, meaning that when they fell out of favor in other locales, no one in Northern California was upset, surprised or even concerned. In fact, Bay Area art had been self-consciously going in the opposite direction of the Greenbergian academy well before it ever became an academy; witness the studied idiosyncrasy of those artists that were included in Peter Selz's 1967 "Funk" exhibition held at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. Here, I refer to the work of William T. Wiley, Robert Hudson and Joan Brown, among many others, and I also refer to their penchant for turning Greenbergian mandates inside out: if Greenberg called for flatness, then the Funk artists responded with multi-spatial illusionistic vistas that used every visual trick that could be found in any book, including the much-despised narrative pictorialism. If Greenbergian abstraction aspired to the high seriousness of high culture, then the Funk artists sought out all things lowbrow, and made imaginative mischief with them in ways that were later taken up by the artists featured in Paul Schimmel's "Helter Skelter" exhibition of 1992. And if many of the artists associated with "Post-Painterly Abstraction" became financially successful owing to the acceptability of their work for corporate collection, then the "Funk" artists sustained their practices in a state of dedicated anti-corporate poverty, at least for a while. Yet, by 1975 their dedication to poverty was clearly at an end, as their work had also become highly prized by museums and collectors. It was time to move on.

This short chronicle bears directly on how we might understand Bischoff's late abstractions, in that they simultaneously turned against the Greenbergian

"CYGNUS (LOOP SYSTEM No. 3)," 1975

**Jay DeFeo**

ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA WITH COLLAGE  
AND TAPE ON MASONITE, 96" x 96"

PHOTO: ©2012 THE JAY DEFEO TRUST/ARTISTS RIGHT SOCIETY/ARS,  
NEW YORK

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model in favor of compositional complexity while also distancing themselves from the irreverent silliness of the Funk artists. If anything, they harked back to much older pre-World War II models of abstract painting such as those found in the work of Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miró. But the important point is that they updated those models in a bold and sophisticated way. Their enervated surfaces were particularly remarkable, revealing a rich variety of shape and edge characteristics that were compounded by a variety of translucencies of acrylic paint—in fact, I know of no other painter who has ever extracted so much actual “painterliness” from the polymer medium. And their color was stunning, usually consisting of a conglomeration of brightly chromatic hues set against and within pale blue fields. They concealed as much as they revealed, thereby demanding slow and thoughtful looking on the part of the viewer. If anything, they looked like fantasies based on complex circuits of multi-layered visual information, and they seemed vividly alive to the Surrealist dictum stating that the “visible is no longer reality and the

“CYGNUS (LOOP SYSTEM No. 3),” 1975, **Jay DeFeo**

ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA WITH COLLAGE AND TAPE ON MASONITE, 96" x 96"  
ESTATE NO. E1305

PHOTO: ©2012 THE JAY DEFEO TRUST/ARTISTS RIGHT SOCIETY/ARS, NEW YORK  
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unseen world no longer a dream.” In 1975, that dictum was just beginning to take hold in nearby Silicon Valley, the place that was soon to busy itself translating newly available microchips into radical vehicles for the technological reorganization of experience, and Bischoff’s late abstractions seem uncannily connected to this emergent specter of socio-technical transformation, insofar as their compositions seemed to recognize how multivalent schematic diagrams of networks could be given poetic and even iconic form.

One could go so far as to call Bischoff’s late abstract works instances of “abstract impressionism” or “*plein air* abstraction,” except that such designations would only emphasize one useful point while

missing another more important one. It is common for art historians to see the history of abstraction as coming from one of two early Modernist sources, those being Impressionism or Symbolism (or, in Donald Kuspit's more philosophically nuanced terms, paintings that emphasize "transcendental color" or "psycho-symbolic color"), and following this line of thought, Bischoff's late paintings clearly have more to do with the former rather than the later. But they also do something else that should represent a very important lesson for

stately in a slightly grim way, but not so grim so as to infer anything resembling sentimentality or self-pity. Many of these late works were recently exhibited in a stunning exhibition at the Hosfelt Gallery last fall, and no doubt many of them will be featured in the upcoming survey of DeFeo's work to take place at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this fall (organized by the Whitney Museum).

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younger abstract painters—they recognize that the true subject of any serious abstract painting is the position that it takes in relation to the known history of abstract painting. This is an important point, made all the more important by the 1990s vogue for Neo-Op abstraction, which, like its 1960s predecessors, assumed that it could escape the burden of self-conscious historical positioning by embracing a pseudo-populist special effects esthetic that anyone could pretend to understand.

If Bischoff's late abstractions announce themselves as emanating from the Impressionism side of the history of abstraction equation, than surely Jay DeFeo's late work can be said to hark back to those symbolist sources where visual images bespeak archetypal psychic depths. Today, most everyone knows that DeFeo was the artist who famously painted *The Rose* between 1958 and 1965. What is less well known is that after she painted that legendary painting, she spent another seven years in a state of artistically inactive psychic recovery. Gradually, she returned to work, doing small works on paper, photographs and collages, and by the late 1970s, she was well on her way to a new series of paintings that were crisp hybrids of geometric and gestural shape, pitch-perfect fusions of purposeful decision and lyrical reverie. These works divide the idea of pictorial dynamics into centrifugal and centripetal components, offering *tour de force* compositional balancing acts that coalesce at the halfway point between tautness and relaxation, never too brittle and never too evanescent.

Insofar as color is concerned, these oil-on-canvas works use the minimal means of gray scale tonalism to gain a maximally nuanced effect that was accented and accentuated by judicious deployments of deep reds and creamy ochers. The net result was a group of paintings that are clear-eyed, sober and



"ASCENT (RED)," 1962  
Frank Lobdell

OIL ON CANVAS, 73" x 49"

SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART PURCHASE WITH FUNDS

CONTRIBUTED BY TOM AND POLLY BREDT

PHOTO: COURTESY SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART



"OUTLOOK," 1991

**Mike Henderson**

OIL ON CANVAS, 72" X 60"

PHOTO: COURTESY HAINES GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

As was the case with Jay DeFeo, Frank Lobdell also came to his late work after a period of prolonged psychic struggle. During the Vietnam War, and after it for a few years, Lobdell worked on a series of paintings and prints called *The Dance Series*, which were modeled on the famous medieval motif of the dance of death. But by the late 1970s, Lobdell had once again grown artistically restless, and was working with a new vocabulary of forms including labyrinths, chains and spirals set in ambiguous spaces that were neither flat nor spatial, but something in-between. In their use of a formal vocabulary that seemed related to Neolithic pictograms, these works also seemed to hark back to a symbolist esthetic, but as the new series progressed, color became more and more important, leading to vibrant, highly complex polychromatic picture surfaces.

The complex color of Lobdell's post-1983 paintings is truly stunning, as are their surfaces of thick oil paint. One attribute of these works that bears noting is their scale: although Lobdell did paint some large works as part of this series, the majority were mid-sized works that rarely exceeded 40 inches at their largest dimension. What makes this fact remarkable is that, even though most of Lobdell's late work are less than heroically scaled, they nonetheless feel like much larger paintings owing to their unpredictable jumps in their internal shape/pattern organization, always achieving a perfect balance between small pictorial incident and overarching compositional strategy. We see this again and again in the San Jose Museum of Art's survey exhibition that is aptly titled "Frank Lobdell: Wonderland" (on view until August 5).

In a prodigious series of oil-on-canvas paintings that began in about 1983, Mike Henderson also pursued an idiosyncratic revitalization of abstraction that can rightfully be said to give a more improvisatory, devil-may-care spin on some of the compositional strategies found in work that Bischoff, DeFeo and Lobdell were all doing at the same time. Henderson's color is intense and dynamic, and it occasionally sports metallic pigments set against thick slathering of a deep oily black paint. His painterly surfaces are the thickest of any of these four painters, and in many ways they are the most gestural—certainly, they make a special point of registering the many different rates of speed and pressure that a collection of brush strokes might have when they meet the canvas. These change-ups of brush stroke speed enliven the surfaces of Henderson's work, and remind the viewer of Kandinsky's famous correlation of the formal interplays of abstract painting with musical elements. Only in the case of Henderson's work, those elements reach back to the improvisations of Jazz rather than the classical orchestras that inhabited the background of Kandinsky's thinking. After all, in addition to being an accomplished painter, Henderson is also a world-renown blues musician, which clearly has something to do with the fact that his paintings sing with such unique conviction.

One thing that unites the work of all four of these artists is the idea that a painting needs to specifically resolve itself on its own surface, while at the same time resist anything that might seem like an easy or formulaic resolution. This seems to also be a theme in the recent work of several younger artists, such as Pamela Jordan and Michael Wingo in Southern California, or Kathleen Thompson in the North Bay, or Corinne Wasmuht in Berlin. In this emphasis, we might be seeing a turning away from work that is a physical afterthought of what can be visualized on a computer screen, or an imagistic afterthought about what popular media provides. What these artists have turned *toward* is work that emphasizes subtlety and sophistication in the organization of painterly experience. In so doing, they prove that painting still has to power to function as a philosophical model, just as it did when Bischoff, DeFeo, Lobdell and Henderson threw artistic caution to the winds of painterly risk.