

# Living History

Dan Keane on the new American Abstract Artists' show in Newburgh

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A knot of Newburgh art patrons stood at the top of the gallery stairs, comparing notes on the old homes they'd recently bought in the handsome Hudson Valley town. "My house, Thomas Edison lived in. Temporarily. I mean, just for a year or so," a tall fellow in khaki shorts announced. He'd done the research, he explained, as his boast tailed gently off into a bemused smile. "My house was built in 1836. There's early history, there's Edison, and then there's me."

"Optical Simulations," a massive show at Newburgh's Yellow Bird Gallery, grapples with a similarly hefty history. A production of the American Abstract Artists, the show features 69 artists spread over two floors and 13,000 feet of gallery space. Despite its ambitious scope, the show is never far from the long shadows of abstraction's own Edisons, and often echoes the Newburgh newcomer's dilemma: There's early history, there's Rothko, and then there's me.

Founded in 1936, the AAA collective has over the years has counted among its members such abstraction pioneers as

Josef Albers, Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Piet Mondrian and Ad Reinhardt. Though its ranks have waxed and waned over the years, the group now counts some 87 members, enough that AAA member shows such as "Simulations," once open to any work from any member artist, are now being gently curated in part out of simply logistical concerns.

It seems a minor miracle that a group formed to sharpen American art's cutting-edge seven decades ago is still alive and thriving today. One reason for their survival appears to be a shift in focus. While AAA was born at the once narrow front wedge of contemporary art, in today's wide-open, anything-goes contemporary scene, the collective now sees itself more as keepers of the flame, guardians of a kind of abstraction orthodoxy. As several folks seemed keen to point out during the "Simulations" opening, abstract art has now been around a full century. Nevertheless, the group's website indulges in a wistful past-tense admission that (italics added) "AAA's annual exhibition was the focus for the energies of the emerging American avant-garde."

Siri Berg, installation view. Courtesy of artist.

Brooklyn artist Don Voisine, who took over as president last April, is proud of the group's heritage. "It's a great tie to living history," he says. Voisine has thus far spent his tenure rallying the troops, setting up a new website and planning new full-color edition of the AAA journal. Asked about the direction the AAA might take in the future, he defers to the perspective of Matthew Deleget, at 33 both one of the collective's youngest artists and younger than all but a handful of opening attendees. "I see it expanding, broadening in its inclusions of new media and new approaches," Deleget says. "I think there is still a whole lot of room for experimentation. Abstract painting is just 100 years old. I think it's just the beginning of the beginning."

One of the standouts in the show is Swedish artist, Siri Berg. Her 16 small pieces, each 14 inches square, are hung on the wall in a four-by-four grid like television pixels magnified to the size of floor tiles. In some squares, test-pattern bars roll in and out of the frames; in others, a thick, rhythmic paint application hums like broadcast static. Together, the squares read a bit like a memorial haiku to our fading memories of rabbit-eared TV sets.

Meanwhile, an almost monochromatic blue square included in the grid brings us right into the digital age. In contrast to the chunky paint of the television squares, the blue is perfectly smooth, as glassy and bright as the wide screen of a top-dollar laptop. The slight fade to a brighter shade at one edge of the panel only enhances computer-desktop effect. Berg reminds us that a digital signal is an irresistible end to abstract art's century-long arc: from shape and line and color we have arrived at the perfect mathematical beauty of ones and zeros.

In the top row of Berg's grid is *CPU Sleuth I*, a grey and white square to which the artist has fixed a CD next to a circle of magnetic film torn from the inside of one of those big old floppy disks. Like broadcast television, like the AAA itself, these



Creighton Michael, *Field 3405*. Photo by Emily Liebert.

disks were once the vanguard of their day; their novelty now long past, Berg asks us to value them for their form alone.

By trading in form alone, however, non-objective abstract painting often makes it all too easy for our eyes to spot the pioneers' famous profiles. To pick two examples among several hung at Yellow Bird: *Bill's July* by Julian Jackson is more or less a Mark Rothko laid out in sweet orange sherbet, while Vincent Longo's *Window Lattice: Shadow*, shades a Donald Judd print in peach and dusty green. The new clothes are fetching, but they drape over old, sacred bones, leaving one to wonder just how much room is left in abstraction's venerable but now rather crowded tent.

Ghosts aside, the wide array of brilliant colors make for a vivid, lively show. Curator Jennifer Connors had been preparing for the show since March, and she has managed to fill the cavernous gallery right up to the brim without spilling a drop. Bubbling near the top is Creighton Michael's *Field 3405*, a jumble of colors and dots and squiggles that provoked in at least one viewer some happy childhood associations. "It looks like cookie mix!" the woman beamed, turning to the stranger beside her. "Y'know how the center of the bowl gets all blended up but the edges never get mixed?"

Such humor is not universally shared at Yellow Bird. Other artists present favored a cold, cerebral style so cagey in choosing its lines that it risks not saying anything at all. Well-known critic and curator Robert Storr's grey-on-grey right angles, appropriately named *Untitled*, casts a dour gaze back across the floor at Michael's cookie mix. Sharon Brant's *Black and White #2*, *Theme #1*, an all-white canvas edged in black, unwittingly recalls the symbolically empty paintings at the heart of Yasmine Reza's hit play *ART* or the Thomas McGuane novel *Keep the Change*.

A few of the artists featured at Yellow Bird did push abstraction into new media, with mixed results. Manfred Mohr's digital video of abstract triangles and elastic black lines included some of the most interesting shapes in the entire show, but had trouble holding the attention of an audience that has spent much of the last decade staring at desktop screensavers. Much more successful was Daniel G. Hill's *Modern Grid III*, which used a technique described as "archival inkjet prints printed on 100% rag paper" to produce a haunting blur of orange light and purple shadow, a melancholic gaze through a dead factory window on a late winter afternoon.

It is this admission of a little blur and grime into AAA's often exacting aesthetics that produces the show's hidden prize. Drawn up in what just might be correction fluid, dust and a dull pencil, Eve Ascheim's *Aligned Light* paces with restless energy. The bent parallelogram sketched at its center is a secret plan to escape from the dirty-white-pinstripe bars; Ascheim's rub outs and scuff marks are the scars we expect such a breakout to leave. In contrast to the neatly tucked-in works that comprised most of "Optical Simulations," *Aligned Light* provides a welcome thrill of insubordination. While the rest of her history class takes diligent notes, Ascheim is hunched over her desk at the back of the room, defacing her homework assignment in White-Out, daring to forget Thomas Edison. □