


CAVE PAINTING A CONVERSATION WITH BOB NICKAS

By Piper Marshall  June 21, 2009 10:54pm



On view at PSM Gallery in Berlin through July 18th, “Cave Painting” is the curatorial effort of New York-based writer and critic Bob Nickas. The project, which began with a series of studio visits in London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles and Berlin, coincides with the publication of Nickas’s book, *Painting Abstraction*. Most of the artists in the exhibition — including Tomma Abts, Verne Dawson, Katharina Grosse, Amy Sillman, and Jules de Balincourt — are also featured in the book, which will be released by Phaidon Press in September. Curator and critic Piper Marshall met with Nickas to discuss the exhibition, which remains on view through July 18th.

PIPER MARSHALL: Your most recent exhibition at PSM Gallery, in Berlin, is called “Cave Painting.” The title announces the show itself as something a bit passé or antiquated. How did this idea come about?

BOB NICKAS: Like many artists, I view art as problem solving. When Sabina Schmidt from PSM Gallery invited me to do a group show she expressed some frustration with the kinds of shows she had been seeing in Berlin – dry, intellectual affairs that lack a visual dynamic. She wanted a lively show, one which would react against this phenomenon. I had just finished writing a book for Phaidon about abstract painting, for which I had made many studio visits, including quite a few in Berlin. I visited some artists whose work I was already familiar with but hadn’t met, like Katharina Grosse and Thomas Scheibitz, and others who I knew little or nothing about, such as Bernd Ribbeck and Anja Schworer. The show was a follow-up to those meetings and a prelude to the book, and almost all of the artists in the show are in the book.

PM: And the title plays with the tension between intellectual versus de-skilled works?

BN: The title isn’t really descriptive of the exhibition’s content. The title suggests primitive or expressionistic work, but these kinds of paintings are actually very few. The title was meant to

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set up an audience that might anticipate, and to some extent dismiss, the premise before seeing the show. I even designed the invitation card to look “dirty,” as if it had been dug up from under the ground, which the printers loved – the exact opposite of the shiny, clean card most galleires send out.

PM: You did include a figurative element in the show, even though the exhibition is comprised of abstract works.

BN: I commissioned a mannequin piece from John Miller, who ended up collaborating on it with Richard Hoeck. I asked specifically for a child mannequin, so that it would seem doubly strange, figurative but diminutive. The visitor to an exhibition is always the wild card, the one thing outside of your grasp. For example, there will always be someone who stands in front of an abstract painting and insists: “My kid could do that!” Over the course of the five or so weeks of the show, the mannequin will be being moved around the gallery to view all the paintings. John and Richard dressed the mannequin to look like a cross between David Allen Coe, the legendary renegade country singer, and “feral child” from the Mad Max movie, and in addition to a skull and snake tattoo on his arm, on his chest they painted a hunting scene from the caves in Altamira, Spain.

PM: Again, you riff off the show’s titled by playing up that sense of naivete. You’re always up to something — there is always a sleight of hand in your curatorial approach.

BN: I would hope that the presence of the mannequin helps viewers to understand that this is not just another painting show. I needed to animate the exhibition in an unexpected way, so along with the mannequin there are sculptural works that address painting but are not paintings — or even painted — themselves. Katherine Grosse’s sculpture is a good example of an object that is clearly painted and yet has the presence of a large toxic piece of coral, and the printed plank piece by Wade Guyton, in this context at least, brings together a “walking stick” of Andre Cadere and a shamanistic object/weapon. Kelley Walker’s “brick wall” paintings are in actuality silkscreened and collaged, yet occupy the space of painting. And although a drawing by Tomma Abts is included, you can see how she considers and arrives at an image in her paintings.

PM: There is also way in which the paintings themselves operate – These paintings try to address and solve many problems — many are disruptive and noisy, which lets the viewer know they are not only painted. Like the Armleder piece, for instance.

BN: His painting, Capri, embedded with shells and starfish, is a kind of psychedelic site, as if an archaeologist had been in the process of unearthing fossils in a desert that was once

submerged. The “noise,” as you put it, in Nathan Hylden’s painting, created by the overlaying and spraying of a template, is almost seismic.

PM: You also include two pieces by one artist, Richard Aldrich, that are intentionally different.

BN: Not just different, but seemingly contradictory. The untitled painting has an irregular, angled stretcher, as well as a block of wood that pushes the canvas out at the bottom, and so the surface and edges are disrupted. But seen against the other painting, *Two Dancers*, which has a very primitive vibe, the untitled painting projects an image of order. Of course, in the space between the two paintings you understand that they are both rational and irrational in their own ways.

PM: For me, the exhibition unfolds as a constant game. The series of approaches to painting forms a rhythm that moves the exhibition almost unexpectedly. Some of the works seem like hard edge painting, like the piece by Philippe Decrazaut. Then you’re confronted with the organic, such as the works by Jacob Kassay, and sometimes with the grotesque, as we see in the paintings of Daniel Hesidence and harline Von Heyl.

BN: I wanted the show to reflect many different types of picture-making. Despite what you might think as you go around to galleries or biennials, as you flip through magazines or Google an artist’s name, every type of painting is made at any given time. But if you don’t know something is out there, it might as well not even exist. And we know about the so-called “death of painting,” but no one ever talks about the death of video, the death of photography, or the death of ceramics for that matter. And why not? Because it would be ludicrous and we would sound like fools.

PM: That reminds me of a text by Achim Hochdörfer that I recently read. He claims that painting failed the popular “theories” in the ’70s, so theorists and historians shifted towards sculpture. It’s strange, with how self-reflexive we are, that we forget about this element, and that institutions — magazines or universities — help influence and guide these shifts in focus in a given time period.

BN: There’s a great quote from Ad Reinhardt, something to the effect that writing about art is difficult, but writing about abstract art is the most difficult of all.

[Cave Painting remains on view at PSM Gallery, Strassburger Strasse 6-8, Berlin, through July 18th 2009. All images courtesy the artists and PSM Gallery/ Sabine Schmidt.]