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Five Non-Figurative Artists on Abstraction

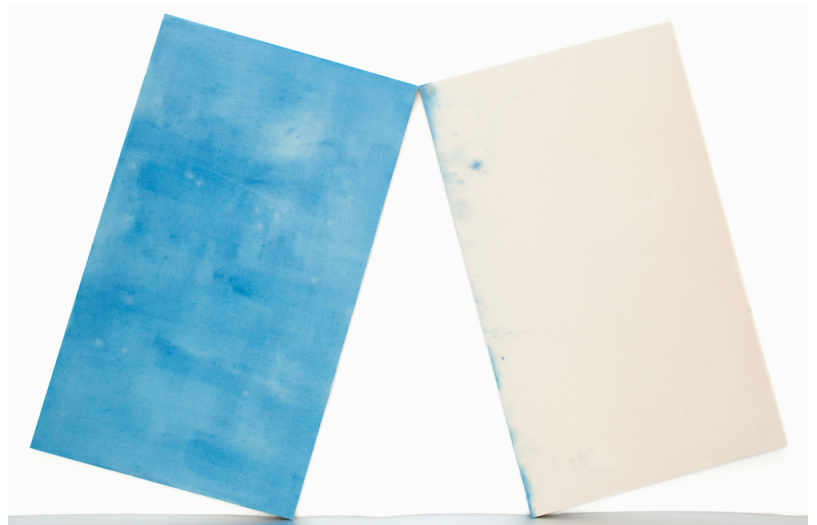
Matt Connors

Lives and works in New York, USA. In 2011 he had solo shows at Luttgenmeijer, Berlin, Germany; VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Germany. He will have a show with Marc Hundley at Herald St, London, UK, in April and a solo exhibition at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles, USA, in September.

CB Of the five artists I'm talking to as part of this article, you are perhaps the least uncomfortable with the label 'abstract painter'. Can you talk a little about that and where you identify the historical origins of your abstraction?

Matt Connors. You're right, although I don't particularly see my own work in a purely 'abstract' way. My work has always had specific origin points in the real world, but I have slowly made a kind of inward progression so that materials, processes, the studio and my own actions have all started to qualify for me as origin points in and of themselves, which can amount to pure invention in some ways. I'm certainly not making a window onto a picture but I do feel like I am creating and referencing very real physical and aesthetic presences, if that makes any sense.

The historical origins of my particular abstraction could be located in or around Abstract Expressionism – sharing its studio-based approach, interiority and personal gesture – but, in truth, I think this is the least interesting point of reference for my work. In as much as there is a kind of hovering connection to the real world, artists working in abstraction directly before and after AbEx – for instance, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Ryman, Paul Feeley or Kenneth Noland – seem much more like kindred spirits.



Matt Connors, *My Suitor*, 2011, acrylic on canvas in two parts, each 150 x 92 cm. Courtesy VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin; photograph: Nadja Giese

But really, work that has very little or nothing to do with an AbEx paradigm has been much more important to the development of my personal abstraction. Henri Matisse is a really foundational artist for me, as is late 1960s American and European conceptual art, certain Arte Povera artists, as well as French and German painting of the 1960s through to the '80s – Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, Martin Barre, Olivier Mosset, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, Martin Kippenberger, Imi Knoebel, Sigmar Polke – not to mention many non-art practices, such as design, writing and music ... I haven't ever really felt or even understood the need to situate myself in any lineage, other than a sort of elective affinities grouping, which is maybe a very contemporary luxury for an artist.

CB One thing that the 'elective affinities' model of thinking permits is constructing a dispersed, non-linear peer group across time and media. Can you say why you view this as a 'very contemporary luxury'?

MC Maybe it's not so contemporary, actually. I imagine if you were to go back and ask, artists and writers have most likely always been constructing these idealized peer groups: the French nouvelle vague excavating US film noir; the New York poets' obsession with Arthur Rimbaud and Ronald Firbank; David Hockney's fixation on Pablo Picasso. I think it's just something that artists do, an intrinsic part of making art.

Finding your peer group ideally would still include real-life peers, fellow artists working in the same time and place, with similar techniques and ideas. In the past, I think there were very particular and sometimes very serious stakes being played out in terms of exactly how one was situated, or situated oneself, in a very forward-moving chronological narrative, whereas now I think these coteries are obviously still being constructed, but sometimes more emphasis is placed on the fantasy football league aspect rather than the possibility of a living breathing school of artists, and a 'forward' movement is not taken for granted or even desired. Maybe it's been this slow redirection of artistic inquiry from strictly forward-moving into a kind of super-branched-out, questioning rather than asserting, forward- and backward-looking activity and thought process that foregrounds the research part of it.

There can sometimes be a sort of panic or rage about originality that can make contemporary artists stop this search for peers just short of their own present-day milieu, or which could give this research an ulterior motive of sussing out some absolutely 'of-the-moment' originality, which I think is a real bummer.

CB That said, are there artists you identify as peers?

MC I have filled my life with other artists whose work I really love. Some of them are actual friends and some I don't personally know but I admire their work. Witnessing people living their lives and then transforming that into their work is a really wild and very serious privilege, one that makes me constantly examine my own life and experience. I think there should be a non-pejorative word for nepotism that would mean something more like legitimate mutual appreciation.