



## “Painting: Now and Forever, Part II”

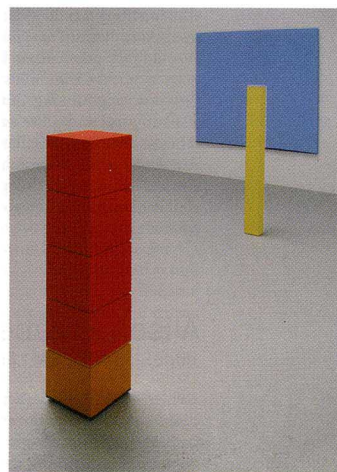
GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY/MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“*Du hast keine Chance. Nutze sie!*” You have no chance. Use it! So ran the title of an essay in this magazine in 1981, by Wolfgang Max Faust, quoting the then-young Neue Wilde painters of Berlin. To seize the chance you didn’t have, as if it actually *was* a chance—that was a viable motto for painting back then; for ten or fifteen years the form had been well on the dull side of the cutting edge, and though plenty of painters were working, the breaking news was elsewhere. In the context of the time, too, the slogan rhymed painting with punk, if not visually then intellectually. “You have no talent. Use it!”—Johnny Rotten could have shouted that at Sid Vicious, with a few curses thrown in. Scrappy, underdog, sharp, energized, urgent: This was the spirit of new painting then, as it rose like Dracula from the undead.

What we get nearly thirty years later is “Painting: Now and Forever, Part II.” Leaving aside the silliness of “Now and Forever, Part

II”—resonant, I guess accidentally, of Mel Brooks or Monty Python—the phrase implies a subject in need of celebration, a defensive flag-waving on behalf of an embattled or overlooked marginality. But perhaps I just want to think of it that way, since another reading is crassly triumphalist. And in fact: Though the media that once seemed about to displace painting have indeed established themselves undeniably, with photography, video, etc.—and even some of the varied descendants of Conceptual art, once loudly anti-market—doing better than fine not just critically and financially but in terms of public acceptance, right now they don’t threaten painting one bit. Right now, to design a show around the principle of “Painting: Now and Forever” seems like blowing your trumpet in the middle of a marching band.

And yet: This summer, there that show was. It was styled as an anniversary reincarnation of an exhibition organized ten years ago by the Matthew Marks Gallery and the now-closed Pat Hearn Gallery, with Greene Naftali Gallery stepping up in place of the latter. Even that first time around, in 1998, the world was not in need of a show called “Painting: Now and Forever”; painting then had plenty of chances it could use. And since the selection of both the first show and the recent one, as the galleries have proudly asserted, was “highly subjective,” neither could really be taken as a survey of painting now, or a speculation on what might carry it in the future. In including Mary Heilmann, formerly of the Hearn gallery, both shows did refer to a time when to become a painter really was a nervy, stubborn decision, and so to painting’s persistence. But if that was the point, an artist like Elizabeth Murray, say—present in “Part I” but not in “Part II”—would have done just as well.



View of “Painting: Now and Forever, Part II,” 2008. From left: Anne Truitt, *Primrose*, 1962/1972; Anne Truitt, *Harvest Shade*, 1996; Anne Truitt, *Memory*, 1981. Matthew Marks Gallery.

Murray, though, would have seemed out of place at Matthew Marks, which phrased painting rather oddly as almost entirely abstract, cool, and conceptually informed. Only Martin Kippenberger, and perhaps Lily van der Stokker’s *Complain Mountain* of 2008—its speech bubbles (HUGE FIGHT NEVER REPAIRED) suggesting a less verbally dense Sean Landers—paid lip service to painting’s narrative and descriptive possibilities, and that at some remove. I enjoyed walking through these rooms. A number of works talked to each other across the big central space, Wojciech Fangor’s *Op* sunburst from 1964, for example, versifying with Jack Goldstein’s rather differently conceived lake of red and blue from 1987, and Katharina Fritsch’s *Bild mit Spiegel* (Picture with Mirror, 1998), a painting/object in the vein of Allan McCollum, throwing the whole show back at itself. Highlights, though, were the chapel-like rooms to the sides, which Heilmann, Wade Guyton, and Anne Truitt had respectively to themselves, for unified suites of works that sang together, particularly those of Guyton and Truitt. I also relished Karen Kilimnik’s *the snow Queen causing a blizzard in Siberia*, 2008, a scruffily painted white monochrome scattered with glitter.

The Greene Naftali choices were more various and unpredictable, ranging from a pair of elaborately modest Paul Theks through the usual-suspect masterliness of Ellsworth Kelly to the clotted Mona Lisas of Gelitin. Though Poul Gernes’s opening targetlike abstractions suggested a rerun of the Marks show, representational painting generally got more play here, and there was more of a sense of the range of what painting can do—and if the result was a less unified, more hodge-podge installation, *tant pis*. As at Marks, the show had real pleasures; I would pick out William Leavitt’s *Manta Ray* of 1981 and its pairing with another of Kilimnik’s quasi-abstractions, this one dark blue. Also the surprising *Moving Circus* of 2008, by Kai Althoff and Erin Allen, a semifigural and quite engrossing collage of tempera and dangling fabrics, like Sigmar Polke gone shabby chic. But the absence of any real thesis or argument that I could find left me running on empty. For a pair of shows celebrating the eternal energy of painting, it was all so well behaved; I wanted to hear Sid Vicious coming in, on the bass he couldn’t play, yet did.

—David Frankel