

Short Distance to Now. New York Painting from 1967-1975
The Kienzle & Gmeiner Gallery, Berlin
29.6-26.9.2007

8 YEARS

Contrary to what you might have assumed, given the “New York Painting” rider on gallery publicity, this is a knockout. “Short Distance to Now” offers an insightful vantage point over an era hitherto forgotten by art historians. It is the epoch in which the form traditionally considered the apex of art, painting, was to yield its position to conceptual and critical approaches towards autonomy and the “work of art.” According to received opinion, painting had vanished from the list of advanced procedures.

The show at the Kienzle & Gmeiner Gallery is an alternative take on the matter. Its exhibits are exclusively the work of painters born between 1930 and 1945 whose techniques and manner of working are informed by process-oriented and performative conceptualist practices. This is a particularly important viewpoint inasmuch as it provides a counterpoint to the downright abandoning of painting by hardcore conceptualist artists such as Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner, and also by the likes of John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, Adrian Piper and Robert Smithson. But of course, painting was never “gone”; as the collected works illustrate, it could be employed in a highly progressive way to stunning effect. And whilst so doing, might even, on the face of it, be banally “picturesque,” as in the sprayed works of Dan Christensen (born 1942) or Michael Venezia (born 1935).

Venezia’s “Untitled”, a massively elongated black rectangle with silver sprayed radii at its edges, looks like a subtle answer in graphic form to Lawrence Weiner’s famous “Two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard spray aerosol can” (1967). Christensen, on the other hand, breaks with modernism’s rigid proscription of illusion in abstract painting. His “Conjugate” (1967) is deeply involved with drugs and performance, seriality and virtuosity as he tenderly colours the canvas with fluid and flowing wave-like ornamentation. Lynda Benglis, Louise Fishman and Howardena Pindell work with knots and enmeshment both actually and metaphorically. Whilst Benglis (born 1941) literally departs from painting in producing a twisted and knotted object that has been soaked in paint and sprinkled with glitter, Fishman and Pindell appear to remain true to the modernist convention of grids and the traditional panel. Fishman (1939) then, however, leaves strings and knots poking forth from the thick, olive-green layers of paint in her pover *Combine Paintings*. The somewhat studied preliminary drawing of Pindell, (born 1943,) however, refers to her most radical work, pieces in which the grid motif takes on a physical quality in such forms as chains sewn into strips of material.

Beside artistic concerns, socio-political concerns and social engagement are as prominent a part of the programme as they are among the more conceptionally oriented artist-colleagues. This engagement is in part quite apparent in contextual terms in the works themselves, their respective materials and processes. A discovery worth mentioning not merely in this context is the little-known Afro-American Gerald Jackson (“Bowery Melody” 1974, a trash arrangement from, let us say, found material attached to a stretcher frame), Joe Overstreet (“St. Expedite” 1972, a spectacular shaped painting in red and green on sail canvas) and Jack Whitten (“Delacroix’s Palette”, 1974 – enormous layers of colour spread with a board across the canvas in one take).

It is not, however, for its obscure discoveries that we need praise "Short Distance to Now"; it is the historical and social context which the show outlines, one which illustrates that abstract painting is indeed capable of representing more than itself alone.