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SHOW 31

## **The Fiction of Property I**

Louise Fishman | Gerald Jackson | Harriet Korman | Jonathan Lasker | David Reed | Gary Stephan | Michael Venezia | Jack Whitten

Curated by Bertold Mathes

### **Introduction by John Yau**

The exhibition is titled *The Fiction of Property I*, after a painting by Gary Stephan. That a “property” (or an attribute, place, or concept) is capable of producing a “fiction” (or an invention) is a belief shared by the eight abstract artists in this exhibition. Born between 1935 and 1948, they began working in the decades after the breakthroughs of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. However, rather than embracing any of the models of linear progress that had been formulated by Clement Greenberg, Donald Judd, and later Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and others, and aligning themselves with Color Field or “stain” painting Minimalism, Conceptual Art, or the “Death of Painting,” they rejected the stylistic practices and critical positions dominating the New York art world and its spheres of influence. Their decision to pursue an independent trajectory should be seen in a larger context. Although Greenberg and Judd were extremely antagonistic towards each other, both men favored the literal: they believed that paint was paint and galvanized steel was galvanized steel, and that art’s only way forward was to be true to its inherent material properties. There was no place for metaphor or fiction in art, particularly since they were European in origin.

Seen together, this group of independently minded artists constitute a rejection of the sanctioned styles and processes that dominated much of the American art world’s critical thinking, starting in the 1960s and continuing until the present. Historically

speaking, they went against the tide, often with little support. The strongest testimony to their perseverance is that none of them wavered from their commitment to abstract painting, nor did they ever work in a sanctioned style. They did not become “stain” painters or Minimalists in the 1960s and ’70s, nor did adjust their work to the rise of figuration and an emphasis on narrative content, beginning around 1980. More importantly, their work reminds us that independence, even if it leads to relative isolation, is an alternative to becoming a follower and member of a group.

This is one reason why their work resembles none of their contemporaries, and seems on the surface to share little with each other. Even when they are working with gesture, as David Reed and Louise Fishman do, it is evident that they conceived of it differently than an earlier generation. More importantly, they are not being nostalgic or trying to do something that had already been done. This was the dilemma all of these painters faced: how do you go forward while painting something that is your own. How do you establish your autonomy? Are the only ways the ones approved of by Greenberg or Judd, which is to say stain painting or Minimalism? The dialogues these artists established with the main features of Abstract Expressionism, which includes Pollock’s removal of the hand from painting, Kline’s gestural drawing in paint, Newman’s geometric division of the painting, and the use of new materials and processes, are some of the starting points by which we might recognize how these artists achieved independence.

The other important connection they share is their rejection of pure painting (as defined by Greenberg) and pure form (as defined by Judd). They pursued an impure beauty, something invented, rather than proscribed. They rejected the clean or reductive elegance associated with Color Field painting and Minimalism in favor of something impure.

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*Untitled (Skid Paintings, 1987)* a work by Gerald Jackson (born in 1936) is an example of what I mean by impure beauty. In an interview with Stanley Whitney (*BOMB*, January 19, 2006), Jackson talked about why he used wood pallets (or skids) in his work:

They [Johns, Rauschenberg, and Pollock] had things they could put their strength to, and add their strength to. I didn't have those things. So that's why skids, which had power and were forms in themselves, allowed me to do the same thing that they were doing. Except that I didn't have the history that I could depend on, you know. At that time Black people didn't have a history in a way. I mean, the history was slavery. But slavery is not a good power image to work from, so I just kicked that out. Whereas Johns and Rauschenberg did have their [history], which they could then say, "This is what we're rebelling against." Well, naturally I'm rebelling against the slave mentality because that was just a crippling mental state; you could never accomplish anything by being a slave. So that had to go. But what would I replace that with since I didn't have the European history to fall back on? So it would be like, "Well, what's got strength out there," and those skids fit in.

Earlier in the interview, Jackson identified what I think is a crucial point:

I think Clem Greenberg [created] this idea of going beyond.

By defining what an artist had to do to go beyond Pollock, Greenberg and Judd tacitly proposed that everyone shared the same history of painting starting with the Renaissance.

Jackson rightly felt that this history was not his and that he could start elsewhere. Also, Greenberg and Judd regarded one's personal history as being irrelevant to the work you made, which at the very least ignores ethnic and sexual identity and the part they can play in art making. Their emphasis on the formal can be read as a reaction to Harold Rosenberg's essay, "The American Action Painters" (1952), where he defined painting as an "event," and to an observation he made in an essay on Jackson Pollock (1958):

Action Painting has to do with self-creation or self-definition or self-transcendence; but this dissociates it from self-expression, which assumes the acceptance of the ego as it is, with its wound and its magic.

By distinguishing between self-creation and self-expression, as well refusing to define what an artist must do to get beyond Pollock, Rosenberg does not define radical painting solely by its formal attributes or its stylistic processes. By proposing that one can create or transcend the self, Rosenberg is suggesting that the individual can go

beyond the limitations of one's circumstances, and one does not need to become self-expressive or ego driven. Jackson's use of the skids overlaps with his desire to define a self, which is free from his history.

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Jack Whitten, who was born in Besemer, Alabama, in 1939 (he died in 2018), grew up during the Jim Crow era when rigid segregation was in effect. In an interview with Robert Storr that appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail* (September 2007),<sup>1</sup> Whitten talked about the work he did in the turbulent 1960s, during the Vietnam War and civil rights movement:

At that time, I was doing the best I could to contain the kind of imagery I was seeing. It wasn't an intellectual situation, but rather, it was an emotional necessity. As a matter of fact, they're my autobiographical paintings. I mean, I was going through a serious crisis in my life. But then everybody was. The whole race issue forced me to pick myself apart subconsciously until I met people like LeRoi Jones, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence who had found other solutions for their creative lives.

In the early 1970s, after reevaluating his own history, Whitten became a process painter who invented different ways to start and complete a painting. A relentless experimenter, he developed various homemade and repurposed devices to pull acrylic paint across the painting's surface during the 1970s. In *Delacroix Palette* (1974), there is a feeling of looking at something that is blurred: a frozen motion. Is the painting an image coming into being or dissolving? *Delacroix Palette* is about gesture, change, and excavation, but it is not a gestural painting. By the 1980s, Whitten had changed again and began making paintings out of mosaic-like pieces of hardened acrylic paint.

In an interview with Kenneth Goldsmith that appeared in *BOMB* (Summer 1994),<sup>2</sup> Whitten tacitly suggests that history is made up of separate legacies when he talked about the importance that George Washington Carver, a prominent Black scientist, held for him:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://brooklynrail.org/2007/9/art/whitten>

<sup>2</sup> <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/jack-whitten>

I'm convinced today that a lot of my attitudes toward painting and making, and experimentation came from George Washington Carver. He made his own pigments, his own paints, from his inventions with peanuts. The obsession with invention and discovery impressed me.

Like Carver, Whitten experimented with different materials. In addition to hardened acrylic paint chips, he also used Styrofoam, hair, eggshells, molasses, copper, and coal ash in his works.

By beginning this essay with two Black artists, I want to recognize that not everyone agreed that art history originated in Western Europe in the 13th and 14th century and followed a narrative that was driven by a desire for pure painting or form. Equally important is that Jackson's and Whitten's paintings do not resemble each other. The difference is more important than the similarity.

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Like Whitten, Michael Venezia (born in 1936), the oldest artist of this group, is a relentless experimenter of processes and paint. He has used spray paint, as he does in the moody square, *Untitled* (1971) to suggest light (paint) wanly cast into a black abstract field. The tension between the spray-painted forms jutting into the black field from the painting's right and left side, and the faint traces of mist extending from the forms into the painting suggest that they are contained by the painting's physical boundaries. More importantly, by using a different method of applying the paint, Venezia suggests that for all the freedom that Pollock achieved, he was also limited by his technique. Inspired by Pollock's rethinking of ways to get paint onto a canvas, rather than by his signature method of pouring paint, Venezia has used a wide range of ways to apply paint. In addition to using spray paint, Venezia has utilized a brush and a palette knife to apply paint to narrow wooden blocks, always with a unique perceptual experience being the goal.

Venezia's interest in process and formats inspired him to make decisions that still feel radical. While living in London in the mid-1960s, he developed his stripe paintings, which derived their compositions from airmail envelopes. He made paintings that were smaller than the surface they were on—a notion he got from looking at Japanese

scroll painting. After returning to New York, he worked with spray paint on paper, prefiguring a process that would be popularized ten years later. While Venezia's formats and processes have often been characterized as idiosyncratic, it seems to me that this term has been used to marginalize his work.

Speaking about his use of spray paint in an interview with Philipp Hindahl in *Mousse Magazine* (May 5, 2019), Venezia had this to say about his use of spray paint:

I chose the spray because I was interested in dealing with processes whereby you reduce the amount of gestural, painterly, brush-like procedures.

Later in the interview, Hindahl points out:

In a hand-written letter from 1970, Venezia outlined the process of his spray paintings. The first page shows a sketch. A square represents the canvas, a spray can spits the paint. The instruction reads: "Spray metal powders into air before wall." Venezia explains: "It's about paint leaving the source, ok?"

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Louise Fishman (1939–2021) is part of the generation that includes Jackson, Whitten and Venezia. Like Jackson and Whitten, Fishman recognized that art history's legacy was one of exclusion. In 1970, when painting had been declared dead and the gay liberation movement and feminism were beginning to gain steam, Fishman decided to stop painting grids and engage with art-making practices that were identified with women. Neither quite sculpture nor painting, these works required cutting, tearing, wrapping, sewing, and stitching.

The larger question that Fishman and other women of her generation were asking was how do you become a painter when painting has been officially declared dead? How do you become a painter when you have always been placed in the position of coming after someone or something else? Here, we might begin considering why Fishman was determined to keep the hand in painting. What does it mean to withdraw the hand from painting, as, say, Andy Warhol did in the early 1960s, when the active presence of a woman's hand in painting has seldom, if ever, been recognized?

Aware that history is a contested field of told and untold narratives, many of which Greenberg and others ignored, Fishman understands painting to be a tradition that one continues by making it up as one goes along. Certainly since 1970 she has done just that, leading to her reinvention of gestural painting. By doing so, Fishman challenges us to rethink many of the presumptions that have been made about the history of both Abstract Expressionism and the linear progress of abstract painting. Her independence is exemplary of the women artists of her generation who wanted to find their own way in a medium that many art world authorities had declared officially dead by the time they had arrived on the scene.

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Contrary to the belief that painting was dead in the 1970s, there were many painters pushing it forward in different ways. When Fishman was being inspired by feminism and gay liberation and Whitten was inventing what he called a “developer” to make his paintings, David Reed (born in 1946) started examining the brushstroke and its capacity for meaning in a series of vertical paintings in 1974. In these works, which were made up of separate panels, he would make a white paint stroke against a wet black ground in one panel, and repeat it in the next one. Joined together, the panels acknowledged gravity and the effect of time, as the white brushstrokes dispersed into the black, as well moved down the surface. By acknowledging gravity, Reed pushed back against the idea of timeless presence and the defiance of gravity that can be seen as one influential aspect of Pollock’s poured paintings.

Since 1980, Reed has been expanding upon and reconceiving of his earlier, brushstroke paintings. To fuss over whether his work are ironic representations of the brushstroke (after Roy Lichtenstein) or an extension of color-field techniques (after Jules Olitski) is to fail to see that they have achieved a specific identity that is unlike anything else. They are brushstrokes and images of brushstrokes; they are visceral and apparitional. They are opaque and semi-transparent. They are solid and film-like. They can change color in mid-flight, as if it has entered a different zone, which it has.

Typically, Reed's narrow paintings are either decidedly vertical or decidedly horizontal in format. When they are vertical, they suggest that they might be a slice of something larger, which we cannot see in our mind's eye. The insistently frontal composition of the vertical #592 (2007–2009) consists of different kinds of brushstrokes, which keep changing as our attention moves either down from the painting's top edge or up from the bottom edge. The brushstrokes convey interrupted gestures, photographic emulsions, liquid drapery, loaded and dripping brushstrokes, photographic close-ups, and baroque forms. A layered, spatial realm, a film-like transparency and a physical surface, all done in rich optical color, transparent and visceral passages of paint, suggest that overall unity in abstract painting is no longer necessary, and that the old ways of putting together a painting are no required.

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Born in 1948, and the youngest artist in this exhibition, Jonathan Lasker is concerned with the syntax of abstract painting, the order in which things are placed. Employing a vocabulary consisting of biomorphic forms, gestural bands of roughly applied paint, solid and linear geometric structures, abstract patterns, and hints of interiors and landscape, he initially developed each composition through a simple process of addition. The accumulation of distinct shapes and linear marks became the painting.

His works can be read as signs for both the act of painting and the act of reading a painting, and his step-by-step procedure as a means of evaluating all the possibilities as he proceeds. Autonomy and interaction are maintained throughout each composition with a remarkable consistency. In Lasker's case, self-consciousness did not lead to parody or appropriation, which were commonplace procedures in the 1980s and the "return of painting." Rather than making oversized (or "heroic" paintings) or parodying painting through appropriation, Lasker focused on how a painting is made of parts which are joined together to make something fresh.

In an interview that I conducted with Lasker in the *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2007), the following exchange took place:

**Yau:** The other thing I wanted to bring up –I have to read the painting both tactilely and visually, and you always seem to be bringing these two



different ways of experiencing the world into one painting, without saying one is more important than the other; that somehow painting isn't just ocular, it's also a physical interaction that we have, so we become conscious of the surface. Part of the meaning of a painting is that we interact with the world both sensually and visually; it's not one or the other.

**Lasker:** Right. It is both, but it also both reiterates and contradicts certain things that have become known about painting that had rather firmly established themselves when I began making paintings, sort of the beginning of this body of work, really about 30 years ago, just after minimalism had, to my mind, emptied out the picture plane. After minimalism, you reached a cul-de-sac, where the painters who proceeded after minimalism felt that they could no longer make a painting because how do you make an image after it's been exposed as illusionism. Where do you go from there? These paintings got started not so much as a commentary on abstract expressionism or styles of modernism but as a kind of answer to minimalism. I thought how could you make a painting which could be viewed literally yet at the same time could imply metaphor, image, pictorialism, etc, the components of narrative yet without giving a narrative.

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Born in 1947, the trajectory of Harriet Korman's career establishes a benchmark for abstract painting, particularly as it has unfolded in New York between 1972 (when her work was included in the Whitney Annual) and the present. Over a span of half-century, during which she witnessed the rise and fall of various styles and heard mantra claiming the death of painting, Korman has remained true to her own initial preoccupations regarding painting. In striking contrast to many of her peers, she has never developed a signature style, nor has she ever introduced imagery into her work. There is no light, shadow, illusionism, or space in her paintings. They are human scaled (none are larger than nine feet, as far as I know), completely flat, and chromatically vibrant. Despite all the options that Korman has refused to take in her work, her paintings are always vivid and unpredictable.

Korman is formally rigorous abstract painter. Every mark and color that she applies reinforces the fact that a painting is a two-dimensional surface. By stripping down the paintings to the irreducible elements of line and color, but never settling for a fashionable format, such as a grid or pool of poured paint to deliver them, she attains a singular position as one of New York's purest abstract painters, remarkably without a brand. Along with eschewing the grid and other pre-established abstract formats, Korman also rejected the legacy of biomorphism, as well as hard-edged shapes, monochrome, and gestural overdrawing. As a reductive artist working without an agenda or signature style, she has defined a position in the dialogue about abstract painting that is unmistakably hers.

What is striking about Korman's reductiveness is how restless she has been throughout her long and distinguished career, all while steadfastly working on rectangles. For the artist, the rectangular format of a painting is not a problem (as it was to Donald Judd, for example), but rather an endlessly challenging possibility, which is perhaps why she has never worked on a shaped canvas.

As she operates in this pared-down way Korman keeps reinventing the basic building blocks of a painting, which I see as the application of line and color on a flat surface. This is her unrivaled achievement, and it delivers a bracing challenge to other artists of her generation. Refusing embellishment and personal flourishes, she does something that is seemingly impossible: within the spartan means she devises for herself in each group of paintings, she is simultaneously rigorous and loose; color, line, structure, and improvisation meld seamlessly together in unexpected ways.

These are the enduring traits of Korman's greatness, which the art world has never fully addressed, preferring signature styles and fashionable superfluities. Living and working in an age when style and content are held in higher regard than substance, she has defined and explored a solitary path in which citation, parody, the readymade, irony, and subject matter have no place. She has pursued optical experiences without elevating one approach over another. She is that most unlikely of all combinations – an experimenting geometric painter interested in proportion, movement, and pressure. For her geometry is an organic and intuitive possibility rather than a set of rigid boundaries, a way of juxtaposing colors to attain an optical experience.

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As Gary Stephan's painting *The Fiction of Property* (1988) inspired the title for this exhibition, I thought I should end with his work and complete the circle. At the outset of this essay, I cited the breakthroughs of Pollock, Kline, Newman, and Rothko as inspiring some of the responses of the younger generation. As my list suggests, it was never just about Pollock and de Kooning, abstraction vs. figuration, as Greenberg and others seemed to suggest. It was never that simple, nor do I think that it ever was. Within this context, as well as the rise of Minimalism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art in the 1960s and '70s, Stephan is a geometric abstract artist who has found ways to expand its possibilities. In the four paintings, dated between 1970 and 2022 that are included in this exhibition, we get a sense of Stephan's commitment to geometry, as well as his constant challenges to orthodoxy.

Throughout his career, Gary Stephan (born in 1942) has repeatedly undermined assumptions regarding geometry's stability, as well as the bonding of symmetry and asymmetry that we see in the paintings of Piet Mondrian and Barnett Newman. Often these questions are posed by setting the literal and fictional in contention.

In the untitled "*Bild*" (1970), we see four overlapping boards mounted on the wall, framing a quadrilateral space. Stephan's framing of an empty space anticipates Robert Mangold's frame paintings, started in the early 1980s, as well as conveys preoccupations with painting as both a surface and a thing, a façade and a construction. Is the empty quadrilateral defined by the four overlapping boards as literal as the physical boards are? What about the addition of white paint on the vertical board on the right and the right-angled line on the green board that forms the bottom edge? For one thing, they extend the parameters of the empty space, as well as redefine it as a rectangle tilting to the left. What is the interaction between the empty space of quadrilateral and the partially painted and drawn rectangle? Is one more real than the other? These concerns points to a question he shares with an unlikely figure, the Surrealist painter Rene Magritte: What is the relationship between fiction and fact? What is the form that we see in the crepuscular light of *The Fiction of Property*? Is it a sculpture, a silhouette, or a flat thing? What is the curved landscape the form is resting on? What is this domain that Stephan has evoked?

What about the layers in *Phantom Limb* (2022), the most recent painting in the exhibition? The longer we look at the composition and shifts in tone, the more we become aware of the interaction of the lines and planes, the outer edges and interior form. With an astonishing visual economy, Stephan calls into question the relationship between seeing and knowing (or naming). This is what he shares with the other artists in this exhibition. All of them found ways to be inventive during a period when it was not thought possible. That these artists were inventive and pursued their own vision is to be seen in this show.