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Abstract Critical, July 2014

Gesture in painting has to be authentic to be any good (it goes without saying that all painting has to be authentic to be good) and that means felt by the artist, and this feeling conveyed to the viewer. And, to be authentic, it must come from inmost sources, whatever the depth.

The most recent overtly gestural painting in our history, Abstract Expressionism, did not “die”, as many think – it withered, or more accurately, was strangled, by superficiality: a superabundance of empty and meaningless moves on canvas swamped the art consciousness of the time, the result of incomplete understanding, superficial interpretation and lack of feeling: the real, deep, crude and unmanageable overtaken by the banal. This proved, really, how difficult it was to make this kind of art, not how unsubstantial its source was.

Other trends in art intervened, but human feeling does not go away: what we are seeing now in contemporary painting (and in the very little actual sculpture now being made) is often the result of feeling struggling to higher visibility again, confounding those who predicted all painting’s demise, and AbEx’s total death in particular. Some artists, like Amy Sillman, are tentative in their approach, while others, such as Ben Dowell, reveal how difficult the authentic is to achieve (real feeling is not always accessible feeling).

The significant problem we are facing is the want of real emotional understanding: we are not versed in this in society, and not schooled in its precepts in art; sadly, nothing much today prepares us to perceive in depth – except, perhaps, at moments of true horror in life, when we face the inexplicable and the unfathomable – in art not at all.

Perhaps those at the margins of society, and art practice as we know it today, have a lot to teach us; perhaps people in the Thirties and Forties were more used to want, to immediate and long-range threats, to despair and heartache, to overpowering joy at merely surviving (as many refugees did); and perhaps, today our society needs a real and widespread understanding of heartache, of joy, and of want, in order to learn to understand again.

Art had nowhere else to go, really, to be authentic in the 1930s and ‘40s than to abstraction and expressionism: in painting, the paths of Realism (as in Reginald Marsh) and Neo-Plasticism on close examination petered out, for want of strength.

At that time a magical confluence of creativity emerged from disparate sources – Mexican, European, American – to produce new, and unprecedented, art, such as Jackson Pollock's.

We can't have the same confluence again, but maybe present-day conditions can bring about deeper understanding: in art, we have had the benefit of the crucibles of other movements, conditions in society are unstable, and, in painting, and in some sculpture, the search for authenticity seems to be on.

So the present is messy, but promising; our education remains to be deepened. As artists, this is our terrain – we have an obligation to lead.

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