

Surface of a Sphere

curated by Daniel Gerwin

July 13 - August 25, 2018

Opening Reception: Friday, July 13th, 6-8pm

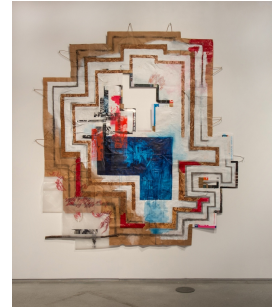
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Tomashi Jackson
Still Remains
2018

Charcoal, gouache and Georgia red clay on postal congressional brown paper bags
87 by 83.5 inches

The 1960s saw an explosion of art reimagining the relationship of space to the object, turning void into matter to be shaped as previous generations worked with stone, metal, and pigment. In that decade, artists began to abandon the self-contained rectangle in favor of shaped paintings that definitively announced themselves as objects engaged with their surrounding environment, often with sculptural qualities. *Surface of a Sphere* considers how far contemporary artists have traveled since modernism's exploration of space and objecthood, revisiting and extending the legacy of shaped painting while generating new possibilities. The artists included are from the East and West Coasts as well as North Carolina and Berlin, and the exhibition will travel to the Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York City in 2019.

Among today's painters who eschew the rectangle, there is a tendency toward complexity, fragmentation, and irregularity, rather than the clear geometries and solid hues preferred by Ellsworth Kelly, or the flat stripes and shapes of Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons or his Protractor Series. This shift constitutes a move away from modernist orthodoxies such as purity and idealism toward the idiosyncrasies of postmodernism, as well as an argument that real life is best embodied by art that is untidy, even awkward.

Rejecting the 20th century conception of an object that represents only itself, today's shaped painters use formal strategies to inject signification directly into their work. Contemporary shaped painting owes more to artists such as Elizabeth Murray and Joe Overstreet than to minimalists and geometric abstraction. While previous generations typically wrapped canvas over a form in order to paint it, artists now work on all manner of surfaces, developing eccentric structures with disparate elements, materials, and off-kilter arrangements. This emphasis on heterogeneity feels particularly important in a political moment when the push for oligarchic hegemony is stronger than ever, and resistance is arising through diverse coalitions.

Some of the included artists are concerned primarily with interactions of form and color in space, including Fabienne Lassere, whose paintings extend from the wall like diaphanous insect wings, and Martha Clippinger, whose painted assemblies of found wood are joyful inventions in vivid hues that draw upon game boards as well as Southern and Mexican folk art. Cordy Ryman creates brightly colored wooden elements that he combines and arranges to alter the energies of the architectural environment. David Lloyd's works, with their textured marks and collaged passages, reflect his investment in the big relationships of shape, chroma, and surface. Rachel Eulena Williams's painted constructions, at once coarse and fluid, fully exploit the capacity of interrelated shapes to embody active movement. All these artists share a common language of clunky and at times abject material, transfigured into unfamiliar beauty. The artworks posit a world in which value is found not in the refinement of sleek design and expensive materials, but rather in our own aging faces, surprising discoveries of color, and the rhythms of people rippling along the sidewalk.

Other artists assembled here use the context of abstraction to conjure broad representational functions. Nick Kramer's cast aluminum pieces are ecological paeans, painted in camouflage pattern and including cast clam shells, they were completed over more than a five year period, a rate of development aligned with the natural world. Becca Lowry's polychrome wooden wall works are oddly organic, suggesting skeletons of fantastical creatures, as though assimilating the powers of other organisms to become protective talismans. Justine Hill's paintings are developed through shapes and marks reacting to each other through successive iterations, yet the finished works have biomorphic qualities, distinct personality traits, and seem capable of movement, while also suggesting graffiti tags or displaced letters of an unknown alphabet.

Material and symbolic strategies can explicitly articulate the political, often through the personal. Loren Britton's paper pulp wall reliefs extend the language of Queer Abstraction, steeped in political concerns through their materials (pulp made from used papers and documents donated by friends, emphasizing collectivity) and their subject matter, each piece being a tender response to a personal ad in *Transvestia*, a transgender lifestyle magazine that began in 1960. Daniel Gerwin's paintings on wood arise from his experiences parenting two young children, each work driven by specific aspects of family life. His use of trompe l'oeil wood grain evokes hardwood floors, tabletops, and other furniture, situating his images in the psychic space of domesticity. This emphasis on children and home rejects old models of masculinity, particularly as they relate to the archetype of the egomaniacal male artist. Tomashi Jackson's *Still Remains* includes postal election flyers and Georgia red clay, instantly summoning the long history of Jim Crow in the South and the efforts to overturn it. The contours of the piece recall an electoral district with borders distorted by gerrymandering, a contemporary practice of targeted disenfranchisement.

The show's title, *Surface of a Sphere*, refers to the fact that although the earth's surface is a non-Euclidean space, on a sufficiently local level Euclidean geometry is functional. The seemingly paradoxical coexistence of these two mathematical systems evokes the relationship between shaped and rectilinear paintings, art history and the contemporary moment, as well as the multiplicity of perceptions and perspectives that constitute contemporary life. Our political moment makes it especially important to reject false binaries and reconcile apparently contradictory thoughts. In this exhibition, artists use linguistic, material, and symbolic means to demonstrate that abstraction is not a withdrawal from the world but rather its keen embrace. Abstraction's open imaginative field becomes a portal through which to explore new conceptions of self and our relationships to each other and our environment. Within this context, newer and greater freedoms may be posited.