

Lane Relyea

# VIRTUALLY FORMAL

The f-word is getting tossed around again. "Formalism is back and better than ever," gushed David Rimanelli in these pages a few months ago. The recent encore performance by the Bennington Bunch (Olitski, Noland, et al.) at Emmerich in New York, to which Rimanelli was responding, proved that, yes, Color Field painting can still thrill audiences young and old. But the phenomenon extends much further: galleries, particularly those in Los Angeles, have been mounting more than a few exhibitions by newcomers who also traffic in precisely defined shapes and high-keyed, immaculate colors. Numerous group shows, most notably "Color Me Mine" at LACE, have featured quasi- to fully abstract paintings (with the influence of Laura Owens rippling through much of the canvas displayed, even though Owens herself hasn't exhibited on the West Coast for a few years). In terms of recent solo outings, the best were by Kevin Appel, Ingrid Calame, and Monique Prieto.

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MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

These three painters, like their '60s precursors, reap benefits from a relatively impersonal technique that, by demoting brush-work, shifts priority to such raw pictorial resources as hue and form. Paint takes center stage, yet the question arises, as it did in the '60s, over paint's status, over whether it's offered up as hard fact or phantasm. Materiality is once more made conspicuous if only through its evisceration. Calame, Appel, and Prieto assimilate within continuous fields fiat, opaque colors alongside vaporous tints and radioactive neons, organic shades next to inorganic ones. Colors are laid down straightforwardly, without modulation, yet are always assigned to discrete areas; they never mix physically. Bodiliness is both suggested and withheld in other ways: Calame relies on paint spills marring her studio floor as source material for her work's hyperintricate shapes; Prieto's color forms sit and sag atop one another as if weighted and gravity-bound. Appel's paintings, based on cropped views of color-coordinated '50s-style interiors, are the most devoutly planar and geometric, and yet their references to domesticity, thus to creature comforts and animal needs, make pointed the absence of any trace of flesh-and-blood inflection (picturing illusionistic depth obviously distinguishes his work). Furthermore, all three painters deal with the relation of parts rather than with open, whole fields, which is one way to measure the distance between their work and that of formalism's heyday.

And yet a formalist reading of this new work still seems attractive, if only because formalism itself now seems more capable of disclosing than burying artworks. Perhaps that's because the ideological heat that once soldered the term to a complex of specific names and uses has finally turned lukewarm. The opportunity exists to pry some semantic space between the word and its designations. What, after all, is being referred to - a dated style of art and discredited mode of criticism, or an open-ended, ongoing project? Who are its patron saints, Fry and Greenberg or Jakobson and Barthes? And what exactly is meant by form? Is it the site of matter's resistance or the place of its transformation, where the signifier declares its opacity or dazzles with its effects? Whatever the answers,

a further problem remains over how to back them up, over which artworks can be counted on to serve which arguments.

Take Morris Louis. Compared to Pollock and his drip technique, "in some ways Louis was even closer to matter in his use of the container itself to pour the fluid." Or so argued Robert Morris in "Anti Form," a 1968 Artforum article that Rosalind Krauss praises in *The Optical Unconscious* as confirming her own opinions about the relative status of drips and pours. Yet in Krauss' version, Louis gets charged with being "antimatter"; he "righted" Pollock's paintings" and restored their illusionism, made paint mimic flames and veils - supposedly because his acrylics don't splat and pool as if dumped his acrylics don't splat and pool as if dumped on the ground but instead dribble and stream across a surface tipped at an angle. So transformed do Louis' materials appear that, at least according to Annette Michelson (writing in *Art International* in 1965), his work more closely approximates the effects of cinema than those of traditional painting.

At stake in such an argument are the meanings that surround and pervade - get expressed by rather than through - making and materials, that reveal media and techniques to be not neutral vehicles but themselves generative and implicated. Bringing such meanings to the fore has required muffling the prowess and intentionality of the artist's hand, necessitating instead the impersonality of overturned cans and paint-covered sticks, thus enacting something like Barthes' "death of the author" or, to reach back to the nineteenth-century roots of formalism, Mallarme's "elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields place to the words" (the latter quoted by Michael Fried in his 1963 *Arts Magazine* analysis of Louis' work, work that he too compares to movies).

That media get defined in relation to one another is an idea that goes way back (as far back as *ut pictura poesis*). Film, however, no longer seems to bear as much impact as it once did on the way many painters conceive of their medium. Today a smaller, easel-size format is often favored, which suggests that, rather than the big screen, what these artists respond to are the challenges of the computer terminal. Computers are said to hold out the prospect of erasing any difference between media by reducing them all to a common base in dematerialized, digital information. If indeed earlier formalists sought

to "dematerialize" painting, their aim was to consolidate rather than disperse their medium's identity, to make coincidental pictorial means and ends; poured paint and stained canvas were seen to fuse visual effect with its production, image with material. The operations of a computer, on the other hand, replace the presence of materials with pattern recognition, with code transactions and magnetic polarity switchings that transpire in no time and without regard to distance. They have no visual qualities, no physicality to stage, and no temporality to narrate. Where such operations do surface into visibility is the computer monitor, which concocts a visual aspect for that which has no form, putting a user-friendly face on a ubiquitous and invisible technology.

This perhaps accounts for the somewhat sinister air that pervades Kevin Appel's ultra-moderne showcases, giving teeth to their otherwise dated better-living-through-plastics aesthetic. His spacious ranch-style interiors, appointed in soothing harmonies of mostly blues and beiges, have a familiar, even solicitous quality, and they are openly, generously displayed, viewed with minimum obstruction and not so much as a hint of shadow, at a distance in some paintings and up close in others. And yet this clinically uniform lighting and telescoping of viewpoint begins to suggest more the manipulation of a computer-generated model than the picturing of an actual home. No furniture clutters Appel's most recent work, nor are there floors or ceilings, only walls identified by spotless and depthless planes of color cutting razorlike across brilliant white grounds. Even speaking of grounds seems misleading, since the paintings themselves come across as so materially inscrutable. Appel backs each canvas with wood to attain an impeccably hard and smooth surface, and his paint bears no sign of its own application. The result is an impenetrable, synthetic-looking blank slate, the better to make the architecture mapped on it appear literally ungrounded. One of the most stunning as well as ominous aspects of Appel's paintings is their subtle sense of infinite regress, how they seem tailored to hang in the very homes they themselves tailor, destined to settle within a seamless domestic array of faux surfaces, imitation materials, and plastic accessories - including, of course, the computer itself. A computer in every home, every home linked and interfaced with the computer.

backed by an awesome capacity far outstripping the human limits that his architecture, not to mention the paintings themselves, are supposed to accommodate. (Besides back issues of *House and Garden*, Appel has drawn inspiration from old Kyoto palaces, thus emphasizing the Japanese influence on not only the aesthetic of Frank Lloyd Wright but the current electronics industry.)

In a few of Appel's smaller works, variations of a single hue are played swatchbook-style, although their differences in tone are often so finely subdivided they verge on imperceptibility. Here color mixing is carried out with numerical precision. Ingrid Calame, too, employs a palette so extensive it appears distilled with the aid of a microprocessor (the growing presence of video and computer imagery has nearly erased the line between industrial and nonindustrial colors, something Gary Hume, among others, has exploited). Calame shares with Appel a kind of techno-classicism; her images are also bathed in a universal, clarifying light that accentuates the accuracy of her line and layout. But rather than Appel's more old-fashioned geometry, Calame's art suggests fractals, especially their capacity to model anything from ferns to galaxies. Likewise, her paintings nod in the direction of Pollock, whose spillscapes have drawn comparison to microscopic as well as aerial photography. Pollock titled his work with references to both the dark corners of the unconscious and the expansiveness of the cosmos, whereas Calame comes up with onomatopoeias - sspss . . . UM biddle Bop, 1998, for example - that sound like the natural blurtings of bodies and substances as well as the acronyms of computer languages and file names.

Such is the difference in the extremes Calame tries to span. At one end is utter randomness, the lack of any continuity underlying either her color choices, which never optically mix or unify, or her drip-shapes, which have no overriding sense of sinuous elegance or gestural flow - some are voluptuous, others seeping and febrile, still others chipped and brittle-looking. Yet such chaos is itself contradicted by the precision with which it's rendered. Calame inundates her work with detail, with all the intricacies and irregularities resulting from her careful tracing of the real and its muck; but even more pervasive is the overwhelming sense of control her vigilant documentation requires, and through which the real is produced as effect. Against the balletic gestures of the body associated with Pollock's work, Calame contrasts the tight delineating and discriminating of the cartographer and archivist.

Pollock produced line as an outgrowth of paint's formless and weighted viscosity; Calame turns this procedure on its head. Materials are hinted at by the silhouettes that replace them, each shape differentiated and identified by being assigned a distinct color chosen from her overextended spectrum. In any given painting she'll combine jarringly disparate hues alongside shades or tints so close in value they're hard to make out. These bounded and color-coded

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In the technological crusade toward ever more mobile and integrated systems (of which suburban living is itself a historical by-product), the computer takes over where the easily programmable shape-shifting of plastic leaves off. When it comes to matters of production and distribution, the chameleon nature of plastic offers little resistance or "noise"; yet even so pliant a material as plastic can't beat the malleability of that which is material-less, like data. Denying materials, Appel conveys instead the manipulation of modalities, of seemingly infinite possibilities in the calibrating and plotting of intensities and effects; his brand of virtual design seems

territories overlap in seemingly boundless succession, as well as trail off laterally beyond the four edges of the frame. Each work gives the impression of a partial view onto something overwhelming and endless - not a glimpse of awesome and ruinous Nature so much as Calame's endless tracking, recording, and cataloging of it. What she conjures is the sublime limitlessness of data input, storage, and retrieval.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Calame feels compelled by anything other than pictorial issues; her work is not some form of sci-fi storytelling that enlists the computer as a Master-of-the-Universe protagonist or villain (this distinguishes her from someone like Matthew Ritchie, to whom she's been compared). What matters most is how developing technologies jolt and loosen painterly

attitudes toward color and form, as well as the very space of painting itself - the space it physically shares with its viewer as well as the space it pictures, the space of both its body and message. Like those of the human body, but unlike what shows up on a computer terminal, painting's messages are formulated and inscribed on a durable substance. No matter how much information fills a computer screen, it can all be changed or erased with a single keystroke; on a canvas, changes aren't so easily made and always leave a trace (ditto with people and their gestures and expressions - old habits die hard). The space of the monitor is neither physical nor illusionistic, neither like a body nor an envelope; it's instead an interstitial space, always between, relaying input and feedback, command and performance, facilitating the call and response of communication.

This kind of space has come to dominate experience. But given the relative physicality of picturing in wet pigment rather than pixels, that experience is made less ideational and more bodily when reconvened within the conventions of painting. Or at least the body's displacement becomes more conspicuous. Tactile associations persist - Appel's perspectival views and Calame's diagrammed spills are impossible to read as purely abstract, dematerialized schema; the desire to inspect the works' surfaces as well as imaginatively project oneself beyond them is as much aroused as confounded. Monique Prieto's work differs in that it labors the least to create spatial illusion - there are no receding planes, nor do any of her shapes ever overlap. Her blobs, stumps, and stalks are lined up in horizontal rows or, more often, stacked in limp piles. Always, though, the rows and stacks stand atop a baseline provided by the bottom edge of the stretched canvas. From this decision issue surprisingly powerful repercussions; it pressurizes each picture, introduces gravity, literally grounds floating, immaterial hue in what seems like graspable body weight. Anchoring color in material heft is something Prieto shares with Polly Apfelbaum, as well as with the young Ellsworth Kelly, who in the '50s often treated colors the way a mason treats bricks (an architectural approach - call it chromatic carpentry - is also taken up by Heidi Kidon, a young LA painter who mounted the most impressive work in the "Color Me Mine" show, and whose palette includes such things as red duct tape). Prieto, too, is able to bulk-up her hues without introducing any shadows, without any modeling that would necessarily undercut the purity and impact of her bright and tart coloring. She finds other ways to instill a sense of tactility in her colors, including basing their range on its ultimate harmony with the orange-white canvas weave she leaves bare expanses of in each painting.

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Prieto thus keeps her figures completely flat and frontal, their every inch in plain view, and yet still has them end up relating as much to the viewer's feet as to his or her eyes. Rather than push and pull within the viewer's line of sight, her incarnated, sluggish color forms rise and buckle in response to the downward tug of the earth. And this helps to explain why, despite the cartoonish expressivity of the poses they strike, Prieto's shapes come across as if seen partially from the side, more like mute substances than emphatic messages, more like bodies than faces. The principle behind their deployment across the canvas is simply "one thing after another," to quote from Donald Judd's contribution to the '60s debate over whether materials should be left inert or made message-like. Indeed, Prieto's blobs recall (in both their physique and their humor) the early soft sculpture of Oldenburg, a Judd favorite. But they're not static, either; turning

away from the viewer, they face - or rather lean on, rub against, and grope-each other, interacting kinesthetically, again privileging touch over vision.

This insistence on fleshy tactility may seem to distance and shelter Prieto's art from the dematerializing effects of computer technology, and yet the role of the computer is more primary in her paintings than in either Appel's or Calame's. Prieto works directly from color sketches executed on a Macintosh Painter program, drawing with her fingertips on the two-by-two-and-a-half-inch touchpad of her laptop. Hence the clumsiness of her forms; they extend and protrude in finger-pointing nudges or in the slow-rolling swipes of palm and wrist. Prowess and intentionality are thus stifled, as in Pollock's and Louis' work, although this time by hardware and software running interference between manual manipulation and visual result (Prieto has to look away from her hand to see the on-screen imagery it's producing). This forces on her a childlike lack of hand-eye coordination, obstructing what she visually preconceives and projects from what she's able to manually carry out. And yet, unlike painting with sticks and cans, what Prieto achieves through such a process is not exactly a heightened awareness of intervening materials, given the immaterial nature of her electronic medium. Or rather, what gets revealed and abstracted instead is the hand itself in all its materiality, its character as a brute and blind mechanism. No longer dictated by the eye, or by the conventions ingrained in utilizing brush and paint, it's as if Prieto's hand alone creates color and form out of its very activity of fidgeting, touching, and feeling.

It's too tempting not to force some final comparisons between her work and that of Morris Louis. Louis too tended to relate his images to gravity's up- and - down axis - especially in his "Veils" series, in which plumes of thinned acrylic either swing clown as if from a hinge along the top stretcher or stand, as do Prieto's shapes, on footlike puddles collecting along the bottom edge. Moreover, his color forms also seem to turn perpendicular to the line of sight; that is, they don't appear projected at or placed on top of the picture's surface, neither thrust at it with a brush nor dropped down onto it as in Pollock's case (whose splatters, for all their materiality, still appear to hover and float). Instead they make their way into the picture by traversing it, feeling their way across its surface, perhaps not at the snail's pace of Prieto's forms but rather skating or spreading in a manner that still recalls more the inspections of the hand than those of the eye. (That Louis' shapes are sometimes called tongues suggests another mode of inspection involving bodily contact.)

Also like Prieto's paintings, Louis' leave a lot of bare canvas showing. But if unprimed cotton duck reveals a fundamental fact about painting, it does so only by providing a basis for its comparison to other media - by leaving so much raw canvas exposed, both Prieto's and Louis' work begs comparison to color sketches, to

drawing. Sure enough, Michael Fried, besides remarking on the influence of movies on Louis, once described the painter's barest work, those in his "Unfurled" series, as exhibiting "the blankness ... of an enormous page." But more than just a page, Louis' paintings actually suggest an entire book; their dribbles of color, descending diagonally from either side of the canvas toward the bottom, re-create the physical action of pages creased into a spine, as if the paintings too fold at the center and tip backward slightly, just like a book on a reading stand or in one's lap. (Is this what Fried was thinking when he brought up Mallarme in relation to Louis?) Formalism has always been shot through with hybridity - it dreams of purebreds and ends up describing mutts. The difference between making and seeing painting then and now, between the metaphors and meanings available to it at any given time, has everything to do with the historical changes wrought on media in general and their interrelationships. It's the

difference between a movie screen and a computer terminal - or  
between a book and a Powerbook.

Lane Relyea is a writer based in Austin, Texas.