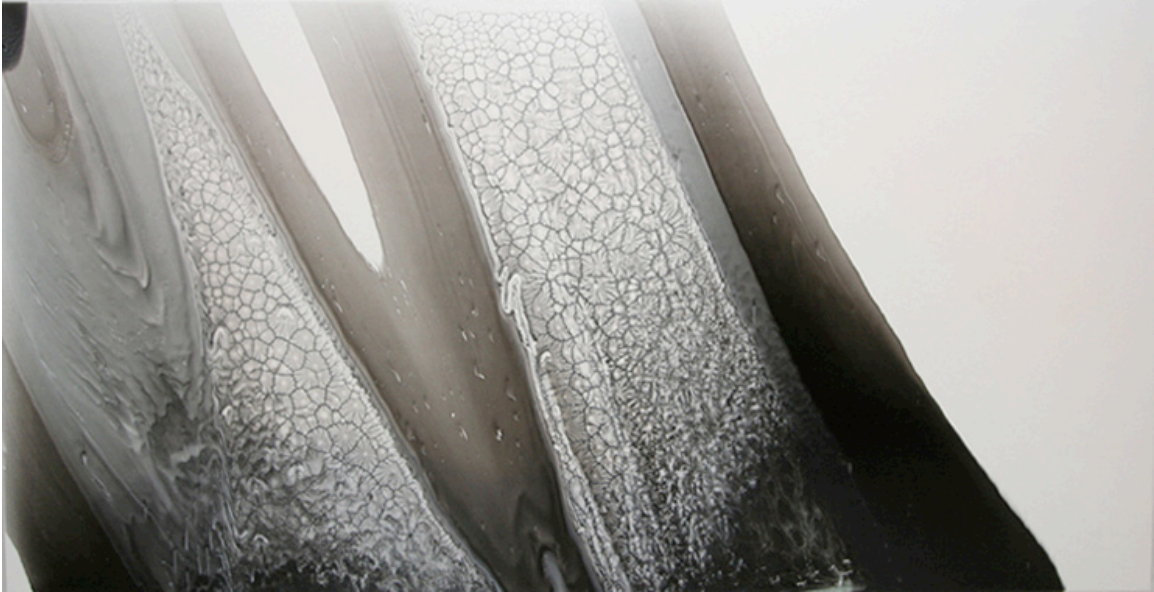


Going With The Flow

By Peter Frank



Fluidity and gesture are two tropes of American abstract art. The kind of painting first heralded outside as well as inside America's borders as distinctly "American" married Surrealist automatism to expressionist emotion, and such Abstract Expressionism valorized both an expansive sense of the artist's hand and the material integrity of the substances with which the artist worked. The subsequent formalization of this twinned "truth"—truth-to-self, and truth-to-medium—emphasized a physical interaction between paint and painter, a process in which stain, clot, and flow were the vocabulary provided painter by paint. The color-field abstraction produced by Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and other post-Abstract Expressionist painters associated with critic Clement Greenberg as far back as fifty years ago relied on the flow of thinned pigment across and into the canvas.

Much water, not to mention paint, has flowed under the bridge since then. But, with the re-emergence of abstract painting and modernist practice in general, artists are again exploiting the tendency of (thinned) paint to seep and gush, to pool and surge. More precisely, younger artists are joining older ones in exploiting this tendency. We see a growing number of artists thus going with the flow, as it were. Notably, many of them work in and around Los Angeles, not heretofore a hotbed of gestural abstraction.

But, if we regard flow painting (to attach a convenient label) as a kind of process art, as an examination of what materials and substances do when placed in the

context of visual experimentation, such painting falls right in with southern California's postwar tradition of finish/fetish, material abstraction, and other investigations into what stuff does.

It also falls in with another pan-Californian tradition, of looking towards Asia for models of spirit as well as form. The equilibrium that flow painting maintains, between the hand of the artist and the nature of the media employed—and especially the balance that must be established between what is intended and what is achieved—finds its most vivid model in the Eastern comprehension of the flow of energy (or energies). Such harmonization of opposed forces results neither from control over these forces, nor surrender to them, but rather from immersion in them. In the case of painting, the artist is immersed in both what he or she wants to achieve on the canvas and what the materials want.

Such harmonization of natural properties and human intentions recurs frequently in American art after the 1950s, but less in painting than in other media or disciplines. Indeed, after the advent of color-field painting, most “painting,” from Rauschenberg to Rockburne, that embraced an aesthetic of accident was regarded less as painting than as “mixed media” or “process art.” Southern California painters such as Sam Francis or even Joe Goode, however, maintained a sense of fortuitous accident, a spirit of welcoming permission that regarded paint as an almost sentient factor. In such a Zen-inflected view, paint happens.

As the work of contemporary “flow painters” demonstrates, paint happens in many different ways. And it flows in many different ways, sometimes freezing the moment of application, sometimes playing with the nature of the medium's drift, sometimes carefully emulating the flow, amplifying its look and feel. As any surfer can tell you, there are many different kinds of waves you can catch. All, however, must be caught with attentive equanimity, the immersion described above in the qualities of material and equally in one's own expectations. That way, painting happens.

In 2005 I traced the flow-centric tendency in Los Angeles-area abstract painting in two separate exhibitions, one at the William Turner Gallery in Santa Monica and a subsequent one at the Riverside Art Museum. The exhibitions paired younger participants in the flow-centric tendency with older, better-known practitioners. In the gallery show, canvases by Sam Francis, Joe Goode, Ed Moses, and Charles Arnoldi hung next to paintings by Suzan Woodruff, Jennifer Wolf, Daniel Kaufman, Sheldon Figoten, and Andy Moses (Ed's son). At the Riverside Art Museum, this roster focused on living artists: thus dropping Francis and adding Philippa Blair, Linda King, and George Comer.

Interestingly, nearly all of the participants in both shows live or lived in and around Venice, California, joined in their investigations by other masters of the mellifluous such as Eva Roberts and Ann Thornycroft. But proximity to beaches

and canals is not the prerequisite for such aqua-aesthetic expression; Comer is based out in the Inland Empire, as is Kimber Berry, while Jimi Gleason works in Orange County, at some remove from the ocean.

As indicated, Los Angeles' flow painters (as, doubtless, those working and sharing ideas in other cities) let things loose in many different, highly distinctive manners. Berry's thick, gnarled, often marbled rivulets of brilliant color, smashing into one another in dense, clotted compositions, could not look more different from Wolf's expansive, highly tonal washes tinged with a metallic sheen. Wolf's process, motivated by her worldwide search for natural pigments, defines her methods and results; Berry's are directed by a desire to hyperstimulate optical response.

Kaufman's even denser, all-over paintings would seem impelled by the same interests, but in fact a crucial aspect of technical experimentation and discovery drives his work, which is in fact fabricated not of traditional pigments but of myriad melted crayons—day-care encaustic, if you will.

Conversely, an obliquely referential, even figural, element inflects the most “flow-ful” of Arnoldi's paintings, dominated as they are by dark, stony or tuber-like silhouettes. It inflects as well Goode's luminous monochrome fields, capturing as they do the shifting qualities of the atmosphere around us (most of them not greatly healthful). It is not enough simply to say that every flow painter, here and elsewhere, lets it flow in a different way. Flow painters here and now work with different goals in mind, and their results are thus markedly distinct from one another. What we see here is, in fact, the confluence of many different sensibilities.

Examining abstraction for its “flowness” reifies the formalist considerations advanced by Greenberg and his minions. But such considerations have always been valid and useful, alienating artists and audience only when advanced as ideal and exclusive. In the neo-modernist discourse of the early digital age, the quality of flow can be appreciated not for its ideological purity, but rather for its immediacy and sensuality. Like most contemporary tendencies, flow is not a movement but a state of mind. The movement is on the canvas itself: paint flows. But it's more than the effects of efflux: the fluidity of pigment, and thus of form, keeps painters, and their audience, in the greater flow. In the end, this is a manifestation not of progress, but of process.

Top:

Isolation #9 2007 Jennifer Wolf

Hand Ground Carbon, Eggshell, Manganite, Azurite and Clear Acrylic Medium on Wood Panel. 30x60 in.

Feb 2008 by peter frank