

HYPERALLERGIC

May 12, 2018
By Tom Micchelli

The Spirit of Painting in an Altered World

Revisiting a painting show that “changed the art world, for better or worse.”

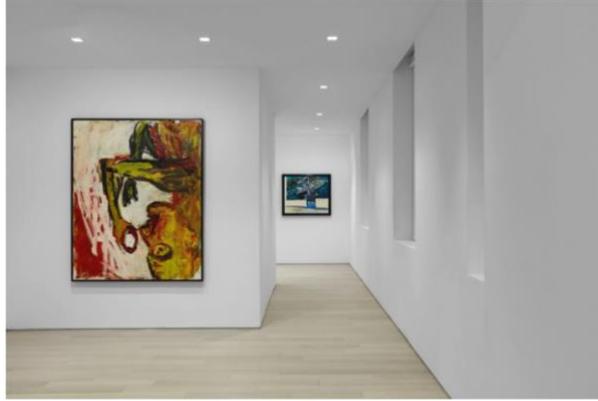


Julian Schnabel, “Winter (or Rose Garden That Jacqueline Built When She Was a Little Girl)” (1982), oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 108 x 84 x 23 1/2 inches, courtesy of the artist © Julian Schnabel (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

“A faint, beautiful memory” is how curator Norman Rosenthal described *A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018*, the current show at Almine Rech Gallery on the Upper East Side. What he’s remembering, as spelled out in the exhibition’s title, is the seminal survey, *A New Spirit in Painting*, which opened, barely, at the Royal Academy of Arts in London on January 15, 1981.

As he explained in our brief conversation on the afternoon of the Almine Rech opening, there was such internal opposition to the show at the Academy (from “progressive” rather than traditional painters) that a couple of artists nearly pulled their work at the last minute, pushing the entire enterprise to the brink of collapse. In the end, reason prevailed, the show went on, and the rest, more or less, is history.

By now, a couple of generations of artists have come of age in a thoroughly postmodern world, and so the heresy embodied in *A New Spirit in Painting*, curated by Rosenthal along with Christos M. Joachimides and Nicholas Serota, hardly registers. But it was among the first cracks in the formalist wall, precipitating a rapid expansion of inclusive, maximal art-making. Looking back over his long career, Rosenthal considers *A New Spirit in Painting* to be his most important exhibition because “it changed the art world” — adding, after a beat, “for better or worse.”



"A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018" at Almine Rech Gallery: installation view with Georg Baselitz, "Orange Eater" (1982) and Malcolm Morley, "Little Corner of Plane-Ship Catastrophe and Central Park" (1976), (photo: Matt Kroening, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery)

The original show, from a 21st century perspective, can look like a dinosaur, most pointedly for its complete lack of women and artists of color. Its importance lies in the upheaval it caused in the New York-centric art world, which, though nominally international, was so aesthetically constricted — "with no sense of Europe," as Rosenthal asserted — that any deviation from convention engendered an outsized response. Simply including the paintings of Frank Auerbach and the barely known Anselm Kiefer, let alone Pablo Picasso in his eccentric late period, alongside the work of such New York stalwarts as Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol echoed like a thunderclap.

The preface to the catalogue of the original show, authored by the three curators, states:

'A New Spirit in Painting' is an exhibition of the work of thirty-eight painters. The choice is not arbitrary, but represents a critical stance. [...] The current orthodoxies about painting were defined as long ago as the nineteen fifties by American critics and achieved almost universal acceptance during the following decades. These orthodoxies, which had some but by no means complete validity, aggressively proclaimed the work that was produced in and around New York to be virtually the only universally acceptable art — anything else was at best provincial.

In his catalogue essay, Joachimides describes the situation in even starker terms:

Since painting was, and in many circles still is, regarded an absolute anachronism, the work that has been done by a number of major artists over the past two decades might best be understood as a partisan art, an underground battle against the official norm.

Within such an antagonistic context, the success of *A New Spirit in Painting*, as Rosenthal recounted in our conversation, "opened the door [and] widened the platform."

The men selected for the '81 show were classified by age: the "principle group," to quote the preface once again, was made up of "the generation which came to the attention of the world of painting largely during the sixties." These would be artists as diverse in approach as Ryman, Stella, Warhol, and Gerhard Richter, as well as members of the *malerisch* London School — Auerbach, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, R.B. Kitaj, and Francis Bacon, though the latter was considered one of "six older painters," along with Balthus, Philip Guston, Jean Hélion, Willem de Kooning, and Matta.

The youngest — and largely unknown — contingent included Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, Sandro Chia, Rainer Fetting, Markus Lüpertz, Malcolm Morley, Mimmo Paladino, A.R. Penck, Sigmar Polke, Julian Schnabel, and, incongruously for such image-laden company, Brice Marden at his most Minimalist.



Georg Baselitz, "Borcke" (1986), oil on canvas, 63 3/4 x 51 1/4 inches, courtesy of the artist, © Georg Baselitz (photo: Matt Kroening, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery)

Presiding like Dionysus over all three generations was the wildly baroque late Picasso, who had died just eight years earlier, leaving his legacy to those who would follow their own lights, even into the critical shadows if necessary.

Joachimides writes:

Picasso, of course, was considered an anachronistic figure from history, who had achieved a great invention in the distant past, namely cubism, thereafter producing work of little innovative consequence. In other words he did not develop in a linear way that many influential critics had made the yardstick of "importance" in art. The reexamination of Picasso's whole oeuvre and its importance for the art of our century has only recently begun.

The original *New Spirit in Painting* enjoyed the unique position of promulgating a forward-looking agenda by embracing elements that were decidedly retro, implicitly asserting that contemporary art, like Picasso, does not "develop in a linear way," and that innovation and "importance" are relative — notions that have since become the postmodern credo. If this is now the air we breathe, is there a need to revisit the source, especially given Rosenthal's belief, expressed during our conversation, that "exhibitions are beautiful because they are ephemeral"?

For the most part, yes. For one, like the recent popular acceptance of gay marriage, the reiteration of this show is a measure of how far we've come. An exhibition that once "opened the door" to European art now feels restrictive vis-à-vis the global curatorial shift that has been a priority since the turn of the millennium. More narrowly, the new version also provides Rosenthal with an opportunity to offer an "apology," as he termed it, by admitting two women, Susan Rothenberg and Maria Lassnig, into the *New Spirit* boys' club.



Maria Lassnig, "Innerhalb und außerhalb der Leinwand I" (1984/85), oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 inches (framed), © Maria Lassnig Foundation (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

With a roster of 13 artists (fewer than a third of the original number), it goes without saying that an 11-2 sexual imbalance is still glaring, and that the racial exclusiveness remains completely unaddressed. I suppose an argument can be made that the lineup can be altered only so much without changing the complexion, no pun intended, of the show, and yet a European male, Francesco Clemente, and an American male, David Salle, both included here, were not in the '81 version either. Clemente, Salle, and Rothenberg had instead appeared in Joachimides and Rosenthal's follow-up exhibition, *Zeitgeist*, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (October 16, 1982-January 16, 1983), in which Rothenberg was the only woman out of 45 participants.

The repackaging of *New Spirit* comes in two parcels: the current roundup in New York, featuring work made around the same time as the Royal Academy show, and an upcoming one at Almine Rech's London outpost, opening in October, in which the surviving members of the same group will show paintings completed after 2000.

All this is to say that *A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018*, which fills one large, handsome room and two ancillary spaces, should not be seen, by a long shot, as the kind of corrective undertaken by the Museum of Modern Art in the reinstallation of its permanent collection. Rather, it should be seen as an occasion to indulge in the acuity of Rosenthal's eye, which is so fresh and discerning that it makes 40-year-old work feel necessary and new.



"A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018" at Almine Rech Gallery: installation view with Rainer Fetting, "Selbst und Middendorf" (1979) and Francesco Clemente, "Self-Portrait at Villa Fersen" (1978), (photo: Matt Kroening, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery)

There is a shockingly good Julian Schnabel, “Winter (or Rose Garden That Jacqueline Built When She Was a Little Girl)” (1982), bristling with his trademark broken plates, but with a markedly built-out aggression that belies the pastoral sentiment of the title. Upon a field of parched and dirty bone-white, a blue-and-black-on-white portrait of a bearded man in a beret (Che?) rises to the center of the field from a mass of blood-red strokes. The Bondo-ed protuberances, which include sections of picture frames, a moose horn, and a dragon’s head resembling a Viking prow, blend in with the background color to a degree that somehow lends them the illusion of translucency, a transfixing contradiction to their inherent leadenness.



David Salle, “Bushels of Diamonds & Emeralds” (1980), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 124 inches, collection of Barbara Schwartz, courtesy of the artist, © David Salle (photo: Matt Kroening, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery)

Schnabel’s “Winter” dominates one of the ancillary rooms, despite exceptional paintings, one on each of the three remaining walls, by Rainer Fetting, Per Kirkeby, and Clemente, whose “Self-Portrait at Villa Fersen” (1978) — featuring the artist’s countenance contained within a perfect circle, which also encloses the inscription from the portico of the eponymous villa in Capri, “AMORI ET DOLORI SACRVM” (“a shrine to love and sorrow”) — is a remarkably stripped-down effort from an artist whose work often tends toward the overwrought.

The same can be said about Salle and Morley, from whom Rosenthal has chosen uncharacteristically plainspoken works, especially from Salle, who contributes a diptych comprising two monochromatic panels, one deep blue and the other amber, each adorned with a female nude rendered in gray acrylic washes. The objectification and borderline prurience typical of Salle’s paintings of women are almost, but not entirely, extinguished here, and the figure on the amber ground — a view from the back of a torso with arms raised — shares a sense of classicism with Jasper Johns’s “Skin” drawings, as unlikely as that might seem.

But Rosenthal’s skew toward classicism does not preclude reveling in the sensuousness and tactility of paint, whether juicy — Georg Baselitz’s Neo-Expressionist landmark “Orange Eater” (1982); Frank Auerbach’s grisaille oil-on-paper “Head of Shane Dunworth” (1986); Maria Lassnig’s viscerally Neo-Cubist “*Innerhalb und ausserhalb der Leinwand I*” (“Inside and outside the screen,” 1984/85) — or austere — Susan Rothenberg’s “August” (1976), one of the artist’s iconic horses, and A.R. Penck’s “*Skizze*” (“Sketch,” 1983), a freewheeling cluster of pictograms, both done in black-and-white.

Lassnig’s painting is unusually abstract, a patchwork of clashing colors adding up to a full-length figure of a female artist wielding a brush in front of a large, blank canvas. Its faceted planes relate directly to “*Etreinte*” (“Embrace,” 1971), Picasso’s depiction of mismatched lovers (huge man, tiny woman) on the same wall, while mirroring the explosive brushwork of the show’s other German-speaking artists — Baselitz, Fetting, Penck, and Markus Lüpertz.

The Lassnig is one of the most mesmerizing pictures in the exhibition, and it's appropriate that it is a portrait of an artist, since it so thoroughly embodies the power of paint matched by the power of the painter. While postmodernism rightfully dispensed with the critical requirement of hewing to a logical and often reductive program, it also opened the floodgates to arbitrariness and pastiche. By contrast, Lassnig's career can be viewed as a steady buildup of insight and experience, unleashed in one searing vision after another.

A New Spirit Then. A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018, Curated by Norman Rosenthal continues at Almine Rech Gallery (39 East 78th Street, 2nd Floor, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 9.



A.R. Penck, "Skizze" (1983), acrylic on canvas, 78 3/4 x 118 1/4 inches, © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn (photo: Matt Kroening, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery)