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REVISTA DIGITAL

Pia Fries: The Limits of Expressionist Abstraction

By Jonathan Goodman | 21 May 2021

tripylon, 2020, Oil and silkscreen on wood, in three parts, 78 3/4 x 165 7/8 inches, 200 x 421.3 cm

In art, America likes to take credit for originating many important movements since the middle of the last century, when abstract expressionism reached its zenith. But the truth is that even then, similar efforts were being made in Europe and even Asia, which may have recognized styles originating in New York City, but whose artists had the courage and the wherewithal to use that recognition as a base and then expand upon the styles of the New York School. Indeed, thinking on a moment's notice, the work of Henri Michaux and Pierre Soulages, both from France, and the paintings of Germany's Hans Hartung come to mind. These painters were most certainly looking across the Atlantic while they experienced New York cultural productions, but that does not mean that they lost a sense of themselves and yielded completely to the highly exciting but also dominating languages of such artists as de Kooning, Pollock, and Gorky. Given the American predilection for imperial sway, as well as the genuinely strong accomplishments of the Abstract Expressionist movement, many artists might have found it hard to resist a style in transparent debt to the New Yorkers. Still, it is important to point out that European artists were able to develop independent ways of working within the general language of expressionist abstraction, whose boundaries, at the time, were seemingly endless and open to nuances of all sorts. In Pia Fries's case, not only was she influenced by current thinking in abstract art, in the body of work described, she links her work to an extended study of Hendrik Goltzius, the Mannerist painter whose etching of Hercules is an inspiration. Yet is it hard to recognize the Dutch master.

We are now several generations beyond the initial accomplishments of American lyric abstraction, as it was established more than a few decades ago. One of the demands of art has been stylistic innovation, but the expressionist manner has remained active for a time far longer than its high point some seventy years ago. Moreover, this style, never entirely

constrained to the States alone, has been internationalized to the point where its practice is easo ily worldwide–and importantly, accepted as a language of lasting authority. Gerhard Richter, the major German painter, has made a career in which two bodies of work especially stand out: the exacting precision of his realist landscapes but also, equally important, the streaked abstract paintings that owe a great deal to American precedents. While this work may demonstrate the curious facility that attends so much of Richter's output, it is also recognized that such paintings silently declare that nationalism is truly a thing of the past–in abstract painting especially. If we think about it, there is nothing specifically American about expressionist abstraction, which is about itself and the specific actions of the artist rather than a style acknowledging the influence of a national culture.

pylon AR, 2020, Oil and silkscreen on wood
67 x 47 1/4 inches, 170.2 x 120 cm

The insight that cultural particularity no longer plays a role in much of art, and in the expressionist style in particular, is neither new nor particularly revealing. We have been living for some time with an idiom shared by artists all over the world, at first supported by the international delivery of art magazines and now, even more importantly, the instantaneous presentation of any image anywhere on the Internet. In the 19th century, it was still possible to find stylistic differences in such countries as Spain and France, where great painting flourished in part because of these differences. At this moment, though, abstract art has been changed by the broadening of its affiliations–we now have a nonobjective painting culture that makes as much sense to someone from Ghana (who, for example, may have taken his art degrees in Germany) as it does to someone from New York, where we are experiencing the expressionist abstraction of the fifth or sixth generation. But, again, this is not necessarily new news. It means that it has become acceptable, quite popular, to work in a vernacular whose geographical associations may have started from a particular point, but which quickly evolved into something far more extended than artists might have thought possible when the origins of such art were new.

What does this mean for a style dependent on feeling, surely not a geographical attribute, and a formal orientation so free as to lack constraints? Maybe the only rule for the work I am describing is that it does not usually look like anything recognizable, even in Fries's case, which owes a lot to the past. The other question has to do with the ongoing nature of the movement's popularity, which does not seem to be lessening in any way. What is it about expressionist abstraction that enables it to remain viable after so many years of its practice? Is the genre truly capable of nearly infinite variation? How can we generalize about a style whose efficacy is based on self-contained innovation, dependent pretty much entirely on the interior life of the artist alone? These questions are not easily answered; moreover, they imply, correctly I think, that stylistic individualism may be the defining factor in a time when new movements in art are close to being exhausted (political content is increasingly the means by which artists update and contemporize their practice). We have lived in a period of unusual pluralism ever since the Sixties, when the recognizable movements such as conceptual art and minimalism last had their high points. So we borrow with impunity–although in America our sense of history goes back only so far, to the beginnings of artists like Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Kline, and Rothko. Fries's studies originate in a much older art history.

The point, though, is that borrowing has its limits. One of the unsettling aspects of looking at new expressionist abstraction is the recognition that the terms of the work no longer demonstrate the expansive energy and freedom that characterized the early American work. There may be a social aspect to our skepticism as well: abstract expressionism has been turned into a national industry in the States, where our love of individual freedom is echoed by our affection for the romantic excesses of the artists working in the 1940s and '50s. But we must remember that the origins of this style are rather distant, stemming from themid-years of the preceding century, a time when a rebellious stance had not yet hardened into an attitude more self-involved than free. Because expressionist abstraction has become a historically received style, weighted

pylon VS, 2020, Oil and silkscreen on wood
57 1/8 x 39 1/2 inches, 145.1 x 100.3 cm

by more than more than seven decades of practice, we could say that its manner has reached the limitations of possible effectiveness. This is not to mean poor work has taken over, although there is certainly enough of that; certain painters, such as the European artist Pia Fries, the subject of this essay, are still making highly accomplished painting–in a direction clearly resulting from the work I have been describing. But that still does not dispel the lingering doubt that this is an art whose time is over, overwhelmed by the *previous* achievements of its practitioners. In Fries's case the past of the Late Renaissance may be as much an inspiration as that of her mentor Richter.

Despite the long history (for a modern movement) of this kind of art, one assumes that the style is not about to go away. It offers too many opportunities in terms of personal freedom of expression. In fact, it is so generalized a way of working as to allow artists painting in profoundly different ways the formal freedom needed when so many painters are making art. The larger question presented by art practice generally today is, Have we reached the boundaries of stylistic creativity? The history of both figuration and abstraction is by now so thoroughly developed, one might say "Yes" to the query. In New York, we have been discussing the problem of a moribund creativity since the 1970s, when the New York critic Arthur C. Danto spoke of the end of art. Yet the creative impulse refuses to die; it is part of the imagination, which is central to our endeavors as a species–being then a necessity regarding our need to express thought and feeling. Where does that impulse go if our precedents come close to stifling our need to speak out? The question is especially germane in a field such as abstract expressionism, in which esthetic liberty has become nearly a fetish. This may be why Fries roots her current work in a period, long ago, of great art. Too much liberty can be as dangerous as not enough, in the sense that it lulls the artist into a feeling of absolute freedom, enabling him to do anything and call it art. But good art almost always possesses a degree of measure.

Certainly an unboundaried space won't work long as a field for stylistic accomplishment, which relies on some sense of order, even if that order is seemingly rejected. The intuitive mind responsible for abstract expressionism cannot be understood as unending; instead, it is limited by many things: the painterly past, the boundaries of a style that rejects figurative depiction, the limits of the artist's own talents. Instead of romanticizing the work of the artists involved in this subgenre of painting, we need to ask why its popularity does not diminish. Inevitably, an inflation of the style's value has occurred, simply because we refuse to give it up in a time when its history is a much a burden–at least in the way it occurs in America–as it is a bulwark of change. But neither can we walk away from such art when nonobjective expressionist painters are still making work of genuine value. The circumstances intimate a bigger question, affecting all the arts: Can good work be made when innovation seems to have come to a standstill? This is true of poetry, classical music, dance–even avant-garde genres such as performance art. One hesitates to make blanket generalizations, but it is easy to feel like we have come to the end of the road.

Yet that feeling of an ending in advances in art is undermined to some extent by highly achieved work currently being made. Pia Fries is an excellent example of just how good some painting remains, as well as supporting the idea that expressionist abstraction is no longer limited to a particular site. Born in Switzerland, the artist studied there, moving to Germany, where she worked with Gerhard Richter from 1980 to 1986 at the Kunstakademie Duesseldorf. Currently, she lives in Duesseldorf and Munich. Her art, broadly lyrical paintings making use of dense amounts of pigment, screen-printed images, and geometric visual support, exists within a hybrid field of American and European, perhaps specifically German, abstraction. The poetic gesture, so central to expressionist abstraction, stands in Fries's work, in which large amounts of white background occur. These large swathes of a neutral white intensify the colors Fries uses. Certainly one detects the presence of Richter hovering behind the art, but American art serves as the precedent behind Richter, making it clear that the presence of artists in New York making paintings in this manner does not easily disappear.

At the same time, art history is central to these paintings. The work is strengthened by Fries's long study of the Dutch painter and printmaker Hendrik Goltzius, active in the Mannerist school. Her close focus of Goltzius invests her recents eyes *parapylon* and *pylon* with a complexity and depth usually not aligned with the freedoms of expressionist abstraction. But we will be concentrating more on her relations to recent art. (A second essay might well be written on how Fries merges her studies of art with the liberties now available to her.) But she is hardly contemporary only in her affiliations The two major series of paintings by Fries produced in the last few years owe a lot to her regard for Goltzius's etching The *Farnese Hercules*, produced in 1592. The engraving, kept in the Fogg Museum of Harvard University, is an important study of the naked back, butttocks, and legs of the mythic hero, and indicates that the artist is brilliantly using the Late Renaissance to inform a style most of us today would see primarily as contemporary in its origins. there may well be a difference of intention in Fries's art when we compare it with American art, for it aligns with the past in ways the vigorous American abstraction of the 1940s and '50s was removed from. It is important to recognize that one major way of making a style contemporary is to use the past for inspiration, as Fries has clearly done.

pylon AR (2020), a large canvas by Fries in the show, is a strong statement, as much dominated by the white background as by the forms and colors conveyed across it. The palette is mostly light, with pale blues, light grays, and yellow–there is also a brightly orange shape on the upper right. Shapes, neither particularly linear nor overly graphic, are slightly superimposed on each other, resulting in a composition of quiet deftness, in which form and hue are evenly matched. The shapes do not block out large expanses of white, which seem to behave as more than mere background. Instead, the color, which is regularly considered a neutral hue in painterly consideration, becomes a statement in its own right, not only intensifying but also standing up as its own component. If we did not know the background of Fries's interest in Goltzius, it is likely we would see this painting as entirely modernist in spirit.

Thus, *pylon AR* does not answer the question whether contemporary work of this sort can sustain a positive comparison with work made before our time. It is extremely difficult to compare the strengths of current art with the strengths past efforts. One has next to no insight into whether a work will project beyond the career of the artist, especially now, when expressionist abstraction is so thoroughly shadowed by achievements that came before it, and by practices of creativity that do not in any way look to expressionist abstraction for guidance. But, as I have said, the problem is general both to cultural practice and the judgment of its strengths. It is impossible to return to the Renaissance, but one may feel tempted to use traditional notions of achievement to comment on and even structure contemporary works of art. Of course, most of the time this doesn't work–every generation sees their situation differently and makes work according to the spirit of the time. But in the case of the art we have been describing, the relations between the present and past of considerable length are particularly important to elucidate. Fries is a painter of strength, based on her allegiance to both past and present.

In *farnese kD* (2020), we experience a technique similar to the one for *pylon AR* (2020). White is strongly evident; a phallic white form rises upward in the middle of the painting. The colors, aided by silkscreen imagery, are both muted and vivid–in the upper right corner, there is a patch of aquamarine blue. There is a thick stripe crossing the painting diagonally behind the white shape. It is variously colored gray, red, and blue. And there is a thick horizontal stripe, with reddish and gray segments on the left, that fills the lower end of the composition. As with all of Fries's work, we regard her efforts with enjoyment and the respect that results from something well done. And as happens so often with art of this kind, the overall experience of the painting is one of untrammeled freedom, even though we know that the work is shaped by study of the past. So

we look at *Farnese* and wonder if its self-reflexive use of abstract art's different paradigms is capable of communicating a truly original point of view. In light of the spectrum of contemporary art, it does appear that Fries has established a fairly independent style, one in contrast to Richter and the painters before him. This style has been strengthened by awareness of visual precedents. It is true that, despite the limitations of the style, some current artists are capable of working out schemes and patterns of genuine originality. But we cannot extend the insight to a broad generalization, primarily because Fries's work also shows a debt to her forebears.

Other paintings in Fries's show perform similarly. *pylon VS* (2020) consists of a jumble of forms, painted mostly mauve, blue, and gray, that are strewn across the canvas. White is largely evident. In works like this, and in expressionist abstraction generally, the sheer joy of painting's most basic attributes, shape and hue, is taken up without regard for the resemblance to real things. This frees and limits the style in the same moment. Depiction is marginalized in favor of an active treatment of fundamental elements. Yet the latter cannot be turned into an endless creativity. No style can, but with figurative art we have the chance to change subject matter and thus vary the content of the work. Some critics might argue that the abstracting of painting frees it so much as to enable infinite variation–but then in Fries's show we are not looking at entirely abstract art. In *farnese kE* (2020) the overall balance of the palette is lighter, reflecting bright yellow, bold areas of white, and purple, sometimes divided horizontally by black stripes. As with all the paintings in Fries's show, it is more than difficult to specify the forms and their interaction–relations between the shapes are intricate and random. Once again, we are startled by the intuitive precision of the painting, which justifies the inevitable use of chance in its making. But as we know, this is only part of the story.