Karin Doleske: The Drama of Abstraction

Matthew Ryan Smith, The University of Western Ontario

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/matthewryansmith/36/
Karin Doleske: The Drama of Abstraction

*By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another’s world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure.*

—Knud Ejler Logstrup

In the late nineteenth century, artists began to withdraw from representations of nature resulting in a dramatic fragmentation of pictorial space. Several decades later, the chronic horrors of World War I compelled painters to reject the mirroring of reality as reality itself had become too complex and painful to render on a two-dimensional surface. Abstract painting was also influenced by a growing number of European museums that displayed ethnographic materials, including ceremonial masks and ritualistic artefacts, from so-called “primitive” civilizations. The combination of these events, coupled with several other cultural precedents, bolstered emotion and spirituality as vehicles for creative inspiration and critical interpretation. Today, as it has stood for many decades, emotion and spirituality remain powerful vehicles for producing and understanding visual art.

The drama of abstracting reality is performed by the artist and unfolded by the viewer. To encounter abstract art is often to face the tension of emotion and spirituality itself, rife with nuance and riddled with subjection. Given that abstraction contains little to no tangible reference points for which to locate and ground semblances of reality, the lived experience and personal history of the viewer stand as generators of meaning. The eminent colour field painter Mark Rothko once stated that “there is no such thing as good painting about nothing.” Abstract art is negotiated by the viewer’s experiences: the learned theories, the raised queries, the feelings and emotions that have shaped what they are. Living is what makes sense of abstraction, what makes a nonrepresentational painting into ‘something’ concrete and consequential.

Karin Doleske’s most recent series *Embedded Paintings* from 2012 maintains a heightened interest in placing the viewer as an arbiter of knowledge. With these works, Doleske has manipulated poetic narrative for the visual sphere so that viewers may experience her paintings as they would written texts. However, in a twist of semiotic mischief, each painting formally characterizes an empty page to be filled by the viewer’s thoughts and imagination. For example, the horizontality of *Ten* (fig. 1) subtly points to the lines of a written novel yet alphabetical letters are clearly absent. By doing so, it is as if Doleske has created a space for the viewer to write their own story onto the painting, a story informed by their particular tastes, emotions and experiences.

*Two* (fig. 2) comes to best exemplify the *Embedded Paintings* series as a whole. In this 4 ft. x 4 ft. square painting, individual vertical stripes are patterned into three separate levels to create a hierarchy of painted blocks. The vertical stripes in the top and bottom levels are noticeably similar in their proximity to each other while the vertical stripes in the middle level are positioned much closer to each other. This optical device, although faint, allows the stripes at the top of the painting to appear as if they are moving to the right while the stripes at the bottom of the painting seem as if they are moving to the left. Consequently, while the painting may look static and unassuming at first glance, upon closer inspection, it erupts into a dance of movement.
Not only is movement a significant feature of this painting, so too is its temperate colour scheme. By underpainting an assortment of orange hues beneath the blue vertical stripes, Doleske’s painting thrusts out to the viewer, into their space, and correspondingly pulls the viewer into the painting as well. Furthermore, the application of recognizable household materials throughout the piece, such as kitchen twine, makes reference to anthropomorphic forms similar to amoeba, fish or boats. This is an interesting connection in view of the coloured “hooks” that sporadically mark the composition and help to lead the viewer’s eye over the visual plane and balance the composition. Not unlike Wassily Kandinsky’s *Improvisations* series from the early twentieth century, the hooks act as an abstracted latticework bringing rhythm and harmony to an otherwise linear aesthetic.

Using the vertical colour schemes that we’ve come to associate with Barnett Newman, and the opaque horizontality of Robert Ryman’s work from the mid-1960s, ensconced with the quirky throngs of nonfigurative shapes reminiscent of Ross Bleckner, Doleske’s *Embedded Paintings* are a product of historical patterns and contemporary drifts, making them both referential and contemporary. Ultimately, Doleske’s aesthetic is an energetic convergence of emotion, spirituality and poetics, which allows viewers to use their lived experiences and personal histories for deeper meaning and understanding. This series represents a departure for Doleske, particularly from her previous *Algoma Paintings* (2010), in that it is a more refined approach to collinear minimalism that embraces the transcendental possibilities of colour, line and space.

Matthew Ryan Smith
Matthew Ryan Smith recently completed his PhD in Art and Visual Culture at Western University in London, ON. His current research addresses affect, trauma and the ethics of spectatorship in photography and video practices. Matthew’s writings have been featured in several Canadian and international publications including C Magazine, ArtUs, FUSE Magazine, Magenta Magazine and Shift: Queen’s Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture. He has recently curated a group exhibition at the McIntosh Gallery in London, ON titled Some Things Last a Long Time, which investigates the viewer’s relationship to autobiographical artwork.

List of Images

Figure 1.
Karin Doleske, Ten, 4 ft. x 4 ft., oil on canvas, kitchen twine, (2012).

Figure 2.
Karin Doleske, Two, 4 ft. x 4 ft., oil on canvas, kitchen twine, (2012).