

LATE LIBERTIES

JOHN CONNELLY PRESENTS, NEW YORK
12 JULY - 24 AUGUST



The organisers of *Late Liberties*, the summer group exhibition at John Connelly Presents, curated by Augusto Arbizo and John Connelly himself, have some claims to make about contemporary abstract painting. They hold that ‘abstraction’ went on hiatus at some point in the early 1990s and, as with all such aesthetic absences, a whole generation of new artists, not to mention curators and dealers, grew fond of it in the interim. There are two problems with this outlook, however: first and foremost, it isn’t history, it’s fashion; and second, ‘abstraction’ never went on hiatus: yes, modernist abstraction may now seem ‘outmoded’ (a favoured term), but that’s because it was *modernist*, not because it was abstract.

As an exhibition, though, *Late Liberties* does demonstrate that the organisers have some understanding of this distinction. As Arbizo explains, “What I see in *Late Liberties*... are artists who have a daily painting practice, one that somehow manifests into a kind of painting that is defined, by context, as abstraction.” That “by context” is an important caveat, conceding that abstraction, as is so often the case today, remains in play by the sheer force of something like semantic inertia. What Arbizo and Connelly suggest, then, is that there should be other ways to think about their artists’ practices.

First among those practices is Kim Fisher’s. Her *Set 55* and *Damaged (pink), 46* (all works 2007) offer signal examples of Fisher’s exacting, hard-edged but irregular geometries of paint set off against the pristine duct of thick, untouched linen. That linen itself remains ‘untucked’ behind each

work’s stretcher bars, leaving a fringe of canvas onto which the painted geometries often bleed, thereby materialising something like an out-of-focus depth of field just behind the picture plane.

Together with Elizabeth Neel’s *The Theory* and *Picked Over*, two paintings that demonstrate Neel’s comfort with paint’s full capacities as a viscous solution, Fisher’s crystalline works describe one axis of *Late Liberties*: artists manipulating paint as a corollary of brute nature (in this case, mineral on the one hand, organic on the other). A second axis is described by two positions on the image of technology: one advanced, as with Jeff Elrod’s *Untitled* painting-as-digital-drawing and Michael Zahn’s *in and out (not up and down)* iconography of the computer ‘desktop’; the other archaic, as with Tauba Auerbach’s *L* and Dana Frankfort’s *GUTS (yellow/gold)*, both of which hypostasise the atoms of language.

The question now is not whether one axis is more successful than another, but what kind of artistic field or terrain these axes, when taken together, describe or delineate. Or more succinctly: what kind of abstraction is this?

It is certainly not the kind of which Clement Greenberg was thinking when he turned to the figure of the ‘tacked-up canvas’ as the limit case of abstract painting. Such a thought issued from an understanding of artistic modernism as a process of stripping down and laying bare, an exercise of the mind through which one might break through to pure forms unburdened not so much by matter but by content. There is a different figure we could turn to, however: ‘When you start with a portrait and search for a pure form, a clear volume, through successive eliminations, you arrive inevitably at the egg.’ The statement is Pablo Picasso’s. And between Greenberg’s ‘tacked-up canvas’ and Picasso’s ‘egg’, we might do well to consider the egg. Not because it is the more successful figure of the modernist project, a purer form, or a more irreducible essence, but because it is less so.

One does not ‘arrive inevitably at the egg’ from ‘successive eliminations’ when beginning with a portrait (and by ‘portrait’ I think we may take Picasso to mean not only the image but also the idea of someone); one arrives at the egg – ‘inevitably’, as it were – when one turns back the clock on that image and idea: we might characterise the difference as the one between a being’s ‘essence’ and its ‘conception’: the one is reductive, the other, generative. And even then the egg is not a pure form but a pure potential, a multiplicity, which is a different kind of ‘abstraction’ altogether.

Does this second notion of ‘abstraction’ (as potential, as multiplicity) offer a productive way of thinking about, understanding or working through the kind of contemporary painting on offer in *Late Liberties*? For that answer we will have to wait, I think; for just as the reductionism that came to characterise modernist abstraction had its roots in the social, scientific and technological upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the generative abstractions in which this new art may indeed take part have only begun to grow. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

above: Kim Fisher, *Damaged (pink), 46*, 2007, oil on linen, 213 x 191 cm (with fringe).
Courtesy John Connelly Presents, New York



Tauba Auerbach, *Ready or Not or Ready and Not*,
2007, gouache and paper on panel, 76 x 56 cm.
Courtesy John Connelly Presents, New York

