

Martha Keller

works out of, albeit also against, a tradition that had valued "opticality" and "flatness"—terms taken in much postwar American art and art criticism to gloss the essentials of painting as a practice of "pure" visuality. It has for some time not been clear what of this tradition might still be vital. On the one hand, this Greenbergian modernism was hoisted by its own super-reductive minimalist petard in a way that made painting seem irrelevant or more simply surpassed within some progressive logic of advanced art. And on the other hand, its specifically painterly prospects were perhaps still more seriously undermined by the long-run consequences of Pop art—consequences that, in reducing painting to its own effect, left it evidently still standing but with its foundations invisibly sapped. What vanishes into its own effect can, it seems, no longer show itself and is left with no greater resource than, so to speak, its own shininess.

BY STEPHEN MELVILLE

My belated knowledge and understanding of Keller's work begins with the early 1990s when she can be said to have been at grips with a recognition of this effect in one of its most telling and recurrent forms: the presentation of the brush stroke as already its own quotation. If this has some previous history, most explicitly in Rauschenberg and in Lichtenstein but perhaps

RUDD YELLAN GRUEBLEEN ORANGEMAN (DETAIL), 1998, MIXED MEDIA ON LINEN

also buried in our tendency to take Duchamp's readymades as amounting to a "gesture," it has in recent years taken on the status of a signature for post-Pop abstract painting — one need only think of Reed or Marcaccio among a host of others — and become a standardbearer for a proclaimed new dispensation that releases painting into the vast freedom of cultural indifference. In such



SUMMER DISPERSION #64, 1993, OIL, WAX, PIGMENT ON CANVAS, 39"X37"

paintings as *Diva* (1992) and *Summer Dispersion #64* (1993), Keller's horizontal brushstrokes are caught and fixed in wax, which gives them their particular salience while offering a certain resistance to their reduction to pure quotation, and insisting on a material condition that remains irreducible to the citation it otherwise supports (one might wonder how far it is John's encaustic that withholds his brush strokes and hatchings from any more direct Pop appropriation).

Since sometime in 1993, first in her wall drawings and then in her paintings, Keller has been working in a vertical format, and the quarter-turn that produces her stripes is, in effect, accompanied by a rotation of this material base toward

a non-gestural body indistinguishable from the simplest facts of brush, paint, and the surface on which they work, so that these stripes appear as strokes and nothing more — featureless, anonymous, unquotable: merely painted, one might say, and making no contact with with the things we might be tempted to call "painterly."



SLITTING AND CLICKING, 1998, ACRYLIC AND OIL ON LINEN, 59"X57"

To say that these strokes are proofed against quotation is, however, not to say that they stand outside of repetition or reproduction. Indeed, there is a sense in which they stand wholly within it: Keller's yoked brushes are already simple bits of reproductive technology — as well as repetitions or recreations of earlier such tools used to mark and blur the cubist border between painting and collage. The marks they make

are, in Keller's painting, tied both to the inner parameters of the brushes themselves and to the most impersonal and repetitious of the body's limitations—facts of reach and jointure and breath. In her latest paintings, this inherent reproducibility has entered still more actively into the paintings themselves in the shape of blottings taken up and reapplied, cutting out, or in,

forms both elusive and sometimes quite hard-edged that cannot easily be placed within the spatial or material logic of the overall field from which they nonetheless arise: they are, I find myself wanting to say, "registered" within it — "notated," one might say, but also "impressed upon."

This orientation toward a certain non-citational reproducibility is at work in a different way in



POST PORETA (COLOR), 1997, ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 59"X58"



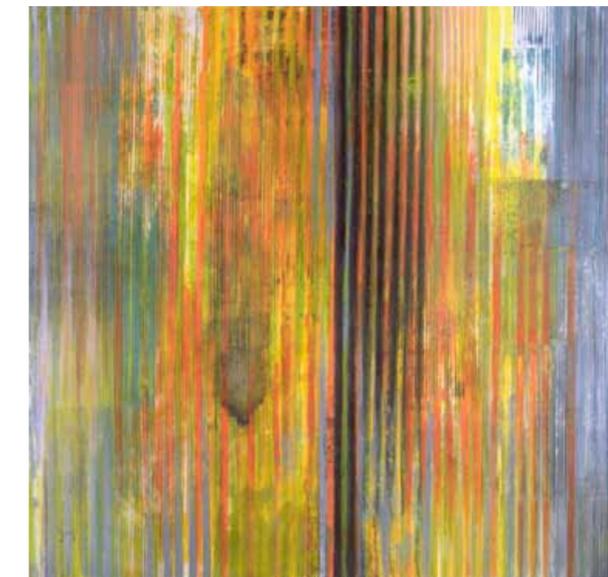
POST PORETA (B/W), 1997, ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 59"X58"

Keller's handling of color. Her characteristic tacking back and forth between colored and black-and-white work has increasingly settled into a practice of explicitly paired paintings. This pairing is at once processual and structural allowing no easy recognition of an underlying common ground even in the face of the two paintings' clear mutual belonging, and, despite all the palpable discreteness of the color, it never quite reads as an addition to, a coloring of, some black and white "original"—in part because the black and white painting has

also exceeded whatever it may have been at some no longer accessible beginning. Keller's color choices have a difficult specificity: they move away from nature and away from the purely optical and remain, in their exact character and extent, bound to the load and rhythm of the stroking brush, with the result that they hover somewhere between being displays of color as such and counting, perhaps more simply, as mere coloring of... Without surrendering themselves as paint, they bring something printlike to the painting, as if from the outside. But at the same time, they seem continuous with what is already engaged by or as the painting's registration of itself.

These are, I think, paintings at once discrete and discreet—say, discerning—making space out of the differences internal to their repetitions and thus making their unity or limitation only out of, and in view of, their

necessary dispersion. In this intense desire to explore painting as what finds itself only in and through a division that is understood not simply as the mark's effect upon its ground but as the very condition of the mark itself (its internal openness to repetition, its unarrestable passage to figuration, to rhetoricity) — in all this, Keller's work seems to me utterly apart from the current celebration of painting's open and more or less ecstatic access to the freedom of the image. Paintings that make a difference now are neither pure nor impure — an opposition of no actual interest — but absolute, a term whose grammar, both ordinary and



RUDD YELLAN GRUEBLEEN ORANGEMAN, 1998, ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA ON LINEN, 71"X72"

philosophical, assumes a difference engaged and sustained rather than an identity achieved or expressed. Absoluteness, as one might use it of painting, points toward what

is at once exact, inevitable, and contingent — as if one were to feel it true of an object that its very real, even actual possibility of being other than itself were the ground of its continuing attachment to itself. Work that is absolute in this way does not raise itself above time but stands necessarily within it, making itself out of an unmaking upon which it depends and by which it is sustained in time. It is the explicit acknowledgment of or confrontation with such complex temporality that might authorize, if any thing can, talk of "postmodern" painting.

If Keller's general insistence on a deep dividedness at the heart of painting can put one in mind of the work, however different

it otherwise may be, of Gerhard Richter, trying to grasp the temporal dimensions and consequences of such division might lead one also to think of the way in which...

Christian Bonnefoi



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, painting out of a grasp of the medium quite different from the one that has structured American critical and artistic practice, makes paintings that take collage as their indispensable accompaniment and condition. That is, for Bonnefoi, collage is less interesting as a possible passage out of painting (whether toward sculpture or toward something like mass or popular culture) than in its capacity to mark and to make explicit a particular struggle between the painting as such and the blank surface whose radical transformation that painting is. Collage matters because it makes explicit the way in which a certain material depth—the depth or distance measured and revealed by glue or pins or whatever else both emblemizes and activates the interval proper to what he calls "the tableau"—can be constitutive of painting as such. The lines of tension that radiate from the points of glue in Bonnefoi's collages are the visible transformation of the depth in which they are invisibly made. Painting that starts from this thought knows nothing of the image and is committed from the outset to a certain blindness, a certain acceptance of concealment as a condition of the work's visibility, so that Bonnefoi's actual painting practice is built out of a series of repeated moments that place him always

EUREKA IV-2 (DETAIL),
1998, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 24"X20"

on the other—the wrong or blind side—of the thing that will finally happen. This is a position from which even the viewer, standing in what we call "full view" of the painting, is also not finally delivered: painting, made out of its own depth and distance, is always partial (this is, as it is with us, an essential part or element of their frankness).

BY STEPHEN MELVILLE

The question of painting becomes a question of finding ways ever more internal to painting itself to take up this limitation and division as its very structure, the terms and condition of the tableau's appearance. Over the course of Bonnefoi's career this has led to a complex practice of series, each organized around a particular problematic of division (of surface, of line, of color, of gesture... and of what in the course of the work has already been divided in those things), and each offering to rearticulate and reopen earlier problematics: The various series entitled "Eureka" take off in 1980 and 1981 from a group of relatively systematic and

EUREKA IV, 1998, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 63"X51"



legible transformations of simple number forms, but by 1994 this problematic has been taken up and transformed in the wake of the explorations of color in the "Prophets" (1993), to produce a series called "Stations," in which broad gestural strokes are everywhere separated from and continuous



STATION, 1994, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 77"X51"

with the glue and color that both divides and supports them. It's worth noting that Bonnefoi's efforts at a synoptic diagram articulating the ever more complex relations among the various evolving series have inevitably ended up displaying something of the three-dimensionality the paintings take as internal to their condition.

Striking as the gestures of the "Stations" are, they function neither as signature nor as quotation; while remaining visible as gesture, they are broken or cut away from the support that would make such appropriation or disappropriation possible. More generally, such stylistic unity as one may be

able to make out across the body of work taken as a whole is a no more than contingent feature of it; the underlying unity is more nearly structural and technical — matters of the laying down of pigment and glue, of rotation and reversal of the tartatane to which they are bound. The particular demand placed upon the underlying structure is that it should realize painting more nearly as event than as, say, extent; more exactly, it intends painting and its particular space as the finite (thus also open and endless) event of its being visible, its registering on us.

The painter Laura Lisbon has spoken of Bonnefoi's practice as a continuous re-fusal of collage—a way, I take it, of saying that his paintings are both other than collage and happen only in essential relation to it, re-fusing the cuts collage makes visible as it were outside rather than inside the painting. Such refusal should perhaps be distinguished from some simpler remarking of these cuts, the results of which would probably strike one more nearly as drawing than as painting. It is, I think, not accidental that the "Babel" series or metaserries, hinging Bonnefoi's paintings and the direct collages he continues to make, place a certain interrogation of drawing at the center of his work from early on.

If we imagine Bonnefoi's tableau as in some sense constituted of planes and surfaces, those



FIORETTI V (DETAIL), 1998, GRAPHITE ON CANVAS

surfaces are made to answer in it to what Bonnefoi calls "the plan" and sometimes glosses in his theoretical writings as the temporal dimension of the painting's presence, a temporal dimension that is materially present in the actual depth and sequentiality of the work. For work of this kind "sculpture" names not a threat to its presumed two-dimensional purity but a capacity taken up into the very condition of its appearing, and so minimalism's proffered overcoming of painting poses no particular crisis for it (this would be a way of locating Bonnefoi's distance from the weight American painting has had to bear). On the other hand, it is probably right to see in the architectural language that

enters into Bonnefoi's theoretical writings indications of a way in which his imagination of painting as an event does bring the work



FIORETTI V
1997, GRAPHITE ON CANVAS, 24"X20"

into a certain negotiation with the prospect of installation. That the tableau should recall itself to its own limits is as definitive of its appearance as the moment of division that constitutes its opening —

but it is also an imperative inscribed in the same moment: what is as division cannot be without limit.

Bonnefoi's engagement of painting by means of collage arises from a particular French tradition in which matters of

visual" that have exercised such a determinative sway over American painting and criticism than with the risk of a passage into a materiality imagined and practiced as if more simply given over to a segmentation not already at work within it.



FIORETTI V-8, 1998, GRAPHITE ON CANVAS, 24"X20"

cutting and folding—as in the work of Simon Hantai and François Rouan—cross paths with a strongly materiological strain that perhaps begins in Dubuffet and is then richly developed by bodies of work as diverse as those of Daniel Buren, the group Supports/Surfaces, and Martin Barré. Such crises as painting encounters within this tradition have less to do with the complex negotiations of abstraction and image internal to "the purely

The specific differences of this tradition may in the past have set certain limiting conditions on its visibility. But it now may be that painting from a variety of more or less independent traditions is finding its way to a place sufficiently shared that it makes sense to show Bonnefoi's work in close relation to another body of work likewise oriented to matters of repetition, difference, materiality, and temporality, even though...

PHOTOS: PATRICK MÜLLER AND D. CHONOREY