

The **FOREVER
NOW**



Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World

MoMA



Laura Hoptman

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The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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Foreword

SINCE ITS FOUNDING, IN 1929, The Museum of Modern Art has organized exhibitions of very contemporary art that synthesize key ideas concerning the art of our time. Beginning with *Paintings from 19 Living Americans* in December 1929; through *Fourteen Americans* (1946), *15 Americans* (1952), *Twelve Americans* (1956), and *Sixteen Americans* (1959), all organized by Dorothy Miller; to omnibus thematic shows like *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) and *Information* (1970) and more recent exhibitions such as *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (2002), *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today* (2008), and *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (2010), MoMA has showcased the history-making art of the current moment. In these exhibitions, artists such as Andrew Wyeth, Jasper Johns, Bruce Conner, Hélio Oiticica, Kai Althoff, Kara Walker, Cory Arcangel, and Ranjani Shettar, among many others, were given national visibility and an institutional context early in their careers.

Featuring a group of influential contemporary painters, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* makes a compelling argument for the relevance of these artists' work to our lives today. Its premise addresses the current "post-Internet" cultural condition, in which instant access to images of artwork from all points on the historical timeline is not just a phenomenon but a given. Although most of the painters in *The Forever Now* make their work in the most traditional manner—using paint and brushes on canvas—the digital world has profoundly altered their relationship to what is old and what is new. On the Internet, past, present, and future are collapsed into a kind of fifth dimension—an eternal present in which styles and motifs from any era in history are free for reanimation, reenactment, and sampling. Each of these strategies is used to express *atemporality*, a term coined by science-fiction writer William Gibson a decade ago to describe a state in which a certain time in culture is not represented by any one style, method, or idea but rather by many styles, methods, and ideas, from many periods. The notion that there is no one signature style for the aughties might seem like a criticism, but the work in this exhibition argues for the liberating possibilities of an atemporal attitude, which, at base, refutes the notion that world culture was built by a few voices rather than by a chorus of many.

Contemporary art is alive with arguments meant to engage and even provoke, in addition to beguile. This feistiness reinforces the fact that art isn't simply a product of the world we live in, but instead an active, integral part of it. The Museum of Modern Art has consistently been a platform for this sometimes unruly, always speculative area of the art conversation. We use our bully pulpit to encourage debate and, perhaps more importantly, to broaden and deepen the ongoing discussion about the current state of our culture and how it might develop going forward.

The exhibition is organized by Laura Hoptman, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. I am grateful to her for diving into the lively and contested discourse on contemporary painting, and to the artists who have joined her. On behalf of the staff and trustees of the Museum, I would also like to thank the The Jill and Peter Kraus Endowed Fund for Contemporary Exhibitions, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art, the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund, and the Aishti Foundation, Beirut for the support of this exhibition.

Glenn D. Lowry

Director, The Museum of Modern Art



The FOREVER NOW

Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World

Laura Hoptman

ATEMPORALITY

What characterizes our cultural moment at the beginning of this new millennium is the inability—or perhaps the refusal—of a great many of our cultural artifacts to define the times in which we live. This is an unsettling and wholly unique phenomenon in Western culture and it should come as no surprise that it was first identified by a science-fiction writer, William Gibson, who in 2003 used the word *atemporality* to describe a new and strange state of the world in which, courtesy of the Internet, all eras seem to exist at once.¹ Since that time, atemporality has been observed in literature, popular music, and fashion, and subsequently called many different names, including *retromania*, *hauntology*, *presentism*, and *super-hybridity*.²

¹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 397. Gibson and subsequently Bruce Sterling, who coined the term “steampunk,” are cited as the first responders in a growing popular literature devoted to tracking the atemporal across cultural production. It has even been examined as a broad attitudinal phenomenon in media theorist Douglas Rushkoff’s *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Current, 2013).

² *Retromania*, music critic Reynolds’s book-length exegesis of the state of popular music since the end of the 1990s, is the most extensive study of the different strategies that pop musicians use to make atemporal music, and a number of his designations, including his explanation of sampling, have implications for contemporary visual art. *Hauntology* stems from the writings of Jacques Derrida, who used haunting as a metaphor to describe the contemporary state of Marxist thought in his book, *Spectres of Marx* (1993), which inspired the exhibition *Hauntology* at the Berkeley Art Museum (July 14–December 5, 2010). Curated by Scott Hewicker and Lawrence Rinder, the exhibition looked at hauntology as metaphor, presenting art with the themes of memory, longing, disappearance, melancholy, and so on. *Presentism* is used by Rushkoff in *Present Shock* (12), and *super-hybridity* was coined by Jörg Heiser in his “Pick & Mix,” *frieze* 133 (September 2010): 13, and discussed in a round-table conversation in the same issue: “Analyze This” (94–102).

All of these terms attempt to describe a cultural product of our time that paradoxically does not represent—either through style, content, or medium—the time from which it comes. The atemporal song, story, or painting contains elements of history but isn't historical; it is innovative but not novel, pertinent rather than prescient. In visual art, atemporality manifests itself as a kind of art-making that is inspired by, refers to, or avails itself of styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies, and ideas from an array of periods on the art-historical timeline. Artists have always looked to art history for inspiration, but the immediate and hugely expanded catalogue of visual information offered by the Internet has radically altered visual artists' relationship to the history of art and caused, as the painter Matt Connors puts it, a “redirection of artistic inquiry from strictly forward moving into a kind of super-branched-out questioning.”³ Unlike past periods of revivalism, such as the appropriationist eighties, this super-charged art historicism is neither critical nor ironic; it's not even nostalgic. It is closest to a *connoisseurship* of boundless information, a picking and choosing of elements of the past to resolve a problem or a task at hand.

Connors, one of the most self-conscious and thoughtful practitioners of atemporal art, understands his work not as a representation of a point in the art-historical past, but as part of a very new, very broad notion of a network of possibilities that stretches horizontally across time periods. He makes clear that his work does not fit easily within the art-historical matrix of influence, affinity, and context, because its subject is, in essence, the sum of these. When queried recently about his sources, he points to a genealogy of influence that includes artists from a large section of the postwar art-historical map: in addition to the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters whom he mentions generally, he cites Henri Matisse, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Ryman, Paul Feeley, Kenneth Noland, Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, Martin Barré, Olivier Mosset, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, Martin Kippenberger, Imi Knoebel, and Sigmar Polke.⁴ Looking at one of his highly saturated monochromes in the color of a Los Angeles sunset, one can only agree that, against the better judgment of our teleologically programmed brains, all of those references are there.

³ Matt Connors, quoted in Christopher Bedford, “Dear Painter,” *frieze* (March 2012): 104.

⁴ Ibid.

This use and assimilation of dizzying varieties of sources have pseudomorphic relationships to appropriation in the 1980s sense of the word, the weapon of choice for the postmodern critique of originality, the object, and the institution. More than thirty years on, one can argue that these battles are over, perhaps even won, or at least that artists aren't interested in fighting them any longer. In the eighties, artists lifted images and styles from art history and pop culture and dropped them in the arena of contemporary art as if they were toxic readymades, stripped of their auras of power and persuasion through decontextualization. In this new economy of surplus historical references, the makers take what they wish to make their point or their painting without guilt, and equally important, without an agenda based on a received meaning of a style. If one can use something with originality, it is the same as authoring it oneself.⁵ As the Colombian-born, London-based painter Oscar Murillo says bluntly: “We have everything available and we can just use what's there and around, but not feel concerned by it.”⁶ Murillo is not saying that there are no stakes involved in borrowing from the freighted language of Euro-American modernism. Rather he is reminding those of us with long memories of the opening salvo of postmodern critique: that the stakes have irrevocably changed. The transfer of styles, of motifs, of ideas, from a historical context to the present one does not reinforce their obsolescence. In fact, the opposite occurs. In the atemporal present, they are resurrected and made newly relevant. At this moment in time we can look back at the condition of postmodernism and say, “Yup, that happened.” And then we can observe, “Now, there's this.”

A work of art that refutes the possibility of chronological classification offers a dramatic challenge to the structure that disciplines like art history enforce—the great, ladder-like narrative of cultural progress that is so dependent upon the idea of the new superseding the old in a movement simultaneously forward and upward. This is not the first time that there have been challenges to the construct of historical progress,⁷ and in a sense it is not progress as such that is at stake in this new, atemporal universe. Time-based terms like *progressive*—and its opposite, *reactionary*, *avant-* and *arrière-garde*—are of little use to describe atemporal works of art.

⁵ Johanna Burton discusses this idea in “Not the Last Word,” *Artforum* (September 2009): 270–71.

⁶ Oscar Murillo, quoted in Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Hans Ulrich Obrist Interview with Oscar Murillo,” in Juan Roselone-Valadez, ed.,

Oscar Murillo: work (Miami: Rubell Family Collection, 2012), 60.

⁷ For example, see George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962) or conservative pundit Francis Fukuyama's 1989 book *The End of History*.

While Kubler suggested a less “biological” model for historical development, he never questioned the notion of progress. Neither did Fukuyama, who argued that in terms of political formations of society, we had reached the apex.

It would be more accurate and more poetic to understand them as existing in *the eternal present*.⁸ This is a temporal state in which, to optimistic prognosticators, the past and the future have been made available simultaneously. Instead of an information superhighway,⁹ we can picture the eternal present as an endlessly flat surface with vistas in every direction—not unlike the surface of a painting.

COROLLARY: THE ATEMPORAL USES OF STYLE

In 2007, the journalist Chris Anderson introduced the theory of the “Long Tail,” originally formulated to modify international marketing strategies.¹⁰ The theory holds that beginning at the turn of the millennium, with the explosion of digital possibilities for dissemination of products, it became possible to have economic success if a large number of products were each consumed by a small, subgroup of consumers. This phenomenon of the few patronizing the many turned traditional marketing theory on its head because it obviated the economic necessity of an enormous, international cohort of people coalescing around one particular song, or cola, or dress length. This evolution away from the “hit,” encourages the proliferation of myriad genres and subgenres of products, each of which appeals to its own microcommunity. The Long Tail theory has a peculiar relevance to visual culture in the wake of information delivery systems like the Internet and, more recently, the smartphone, that have made visual art available not only to artists and critics, but also to a growing consumer base. These tools allow us to access data contemporaneously (despite the date of manufacture) and non-hierarchically,¹¹ erasing time-honored indicators of significance and value. One result of this is the enormous, international expansion of the contemporary art discourse. Another is that, arguably, today’s landscape of visual culture is no longer entirely ruled by a handful of hegemonic styles or monster artistic careers. Even artists like Jeff Koons and Marina Abramović, whose oeuvres have received worldwide recognition, and whose personas have penetrated, to a certain extent, popular culture, have not produced

⁸ This is a concept used by St. Augustine to describe the divine chronology, in which all is known of the past, present, and future. See *Augustine: Confessions*, Book XI.

⁹ The use of the term in the early 1990s

is often associated with U.S. Senator Al Gore (later Vice President).

¹⁰ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

¹¹ The Internet abets this flattening of hierarchies because it allows users to access digital data non-sequentially. Rushkoff, *Present Shock*, 260.

signature artistic languages dominant enough to obliterate the general cacophony of styles that continues to flourish in studios, art schools, museums, galleries, and magazines.¹²

For many critics, the absence of stylistic markers indicates the demise of a common culture, a deeply troubling development, which at best implies cultural stasis, and at worst, cultural surrender.¹³ “We live in a post-era era without forms of its own powerful enough to brand the times,” lamented the writer Douglas Coupland in an article in which he introduced literary atemporality, which he dubbed “translit.”¹⁴ Pop-music critic Simon Reynolds, who coined the term *retromania* to describe contemporary pop music in the aughties, also sees the erosion of era-defining genres as an intellectual dead end.¹⁵ “We’re quite deep into a phase of anything-goes, guiltless appropriation, a free-for-all of asset-stripping that ranges all over the globe and all across the span of human history,” he writes. “This leads to the paradoxical combination of speed and standstill.”¹⁶ Although, Reynolds explains, we have the possibility of “rapid movement within a network of knowledge,” he concludes with regret that we lack the modernism-fueled creative moxie that characterized the twentieth century, “the outward-bound drive that propelled an entire system into the unknown.”¹⁷ Without this jet pack driving us to a common creative future, Reynolds is despairing of contemporary music, and by extension, contemporary culture.

Both Coupland’s and Reynolds’s observations reveal an acute nostalgia for a time when things were new and a deep mourning for the missing propulsive shot of energy that attended an act of what could be interpreted as cultural progress. But what if, as in William Gibson’s original formulation, atemporality was considered as a strategy of resistance, a way of “opting out of the industrialization of novelty,”¹⁸ the syndrome of growth and expansion at any cost? What if abstaining

¹² In a recent article, Michael Sanchez argues that in the art economy of today, with its disempowering of academics, critics, and curators in favor of consumers and sellers, visibility can be equated with legitimization. “Because of the proliferation of an image via smartphone,” he writes, “what has been a process of *legitimation*, attributable to particular institutions or critical bodies, now becomes a process of simple *visibility*, attributable to the media apparatus itself, largely outside the channels of print media and cumbersome

zeitgeist-encapsulating exhibitions.” Sanchez, “2011: Michael Sanchez on Art and Transmission,” *Artforum* (Summer 2013): 297.

¹³ In an issue of *frieze* focused on *super-hybridity*, a term coined by the critic Jörg Heiser (see note 2), art critic Jennifer Allen questions the idea of culture as a mechanism for communitarianism, arguing that technology is now the greatest aggregator. Allen, “Postmodern Postmortem,” *frieze* 133 (September 2010): 21.

¹⁴ Douglas Coupland, “Convergences,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2012, *Sunday Book Review*, 1, 10.

¹⁵ Simon Reynolds, “The Songs of Now Sound a Lot Like Then,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2011, AR14.

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 426–27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 428.

¹⁸ David L. Ulin, “Book Review: *Zero History* by William Gibson,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/19/entertainment/la-ca-william-gibson-20100919>.

from new aesthetic forms meant gaining new ways of understanding the use of form in light of digital technology and the swift circulation of knowledge.¹⁹ What if the promiscuous mixing of styles has the positive outcome of providing a mechanism to overcome “oppressive traditions [and] xenophobia?”²⁰ What if atemporality allowed us to roam around, instead of plow forward?

In the language developed to describe postmodernism, the term *pastiche* was used as a pejorative for the practice of imitating past styles—often in combinations—without the mitigating factor of parody. Pastiche, for Fredric Jameson, a formidable voice of postmodern criticism, was an impediment to the representation of our time, as it blocked our ability to “live time historically,”²¹ cognizant of historical precedent and thus primed to strive for a more evolved condition. Considering atemporality as a goal, rather than an undesirable result, redefines pastiche as a conscious strategy rather than a dodge. Calling out the obsolescence of periodization challenges cultural hierarchies and the insistently twentieth-century habit of considering the history of style as if it were a dog race replete with a winner’s circle of those who get the privilege of representing what our moment looks like—as duly noted by art-history books. In a cultural landscape that has, in critic Jörg Heiser’s terms, “moved beyond the point where it’s about a fixed set of cultural genealogies and instead has turned into a kind of computational aggregate of multiple influences and sources,”²² the “anxiety of influence,” in Harold Bloom’s deathless parlance, might have found its meds. In Heiser’s hopeful picture of the cultural now, courtesy of technology, there are no more “hungry generations...treading one another down.”²³ There are only “the pleasures of intellectual inspiration and perceptual bliss”²⁴ that can be found in depthless bytes of information.

Pastiche is an antidote not only to the dream of originality, but also to the conventional notion of style. Art historian T. J. Clark memorably quipped of Abstract Expressionism that it was “a manner in search of an object,”²⁵ to a certain extent it is accurate to say that a great many contemporary paintings are objects

19 This question is raised in the “Analyze This” round table discussion, *frieze* (September 2010) (see note 2).

20 Heiser, “Pick & Mix,” 13.

21 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 284. Cited in Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of*

Nostalgia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

22 Heiser, “Pick & Mix,” 13. In his discussion of super-hybridity in contemporary art, Heiser uses the concept of hybridity as formulated by Homi Bhabha, who avers that cultural identity now is not about being somewhere but about being between places. This is a formulation of location rather than time, but it parallels atemporality.

23 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 6.

24 Heiser, “Pick & Mix,” 13.

25 T. J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 38.

in search of a manner. It is not exactly that style has become obsolete,²⁶ but perhaps rather that signifiers of styles—gestures, languages, and strategies—have become motifs. Painters in particular have been using style as a subject unto itself.²⁷ Oscar Murillo’s use of calligraphic marks in some of his paintings is an example of this. In some paintings, Murillo incorporates the titles or parts of the titles of the installations of which his canvases are a part, transforming them into a kind of signage. On these canvas signs, very readable words share space with marks and scribbles that read not as writing but as glyphs in the manner of a chain of art-historical precedents, from cave graffiti to Henri Michaux and Cy Twombly. These marks on the canvas function in a similar way to the words with which they share space; they can be read as signs, in the literal sense, of a modernist lineage, creating an aura that suggests, in Murillo’s words, that his paintings have been found in or come from “some other space or time.”²⁸

For the past decade, artist Josh Smith has been prolifically painting in a myriad of genres on identically sized canvases. He has produced hundreds of gestural abstractions, expressionistic still lifes, “name paintings” that feature Smith’s signature as the central motif, monochromes, and, most recently, beachscapes in hot, tropical colors. Although the artist paints in series, there is no developmental chronology to the kinds of paintings he makes: paintings of fish are produced simultaneously with wholly abstract works; monochromatic groups appear at the same time as a brace of tropical sunset paintings. Availing himself of color Xerox technology to make more work at a speedier pace, Smith has been known to Xerox his own paintings and glue the results to canvas, sometimes collaging more than one composition together to create yet another kind of abstraction. Smith’s attitude towards his own work is polyamorous, and his profligacy in a gene pool of his own creation turns him into a kind of mad breeder. Style for Smith is neither an emotional vehicle, nor an attitude, nor a belief system. It is a subject, in the sense that the flag was a subject for Jasper Johns. When asked about why he painted abstractly, Smith said of his paintings, “I don’t care so much about how they look because I know how they look...they are going to look like abstract paintings.”²⁹ When his works first appeared fewer than ten years ago, there was an impulse to see them

26 Coupland has suggested that atemporality can be considered a “bold new perpetual every-era/no-era” style for our moment. Coupland, “Convergences,” 10.

27 Reynolds observes this about recent popular music in *Retromania*, 307.

28 Murillo, quoted in Legacy Russell, “Oscar Murillo,” *Bomb* (Winter 2012–2013): 37.

29 Josh Smith: *Abstraction* (New York: Luhring Augustine, 2007), n.p. Cited in Daniel Marcus, “Eyes in the Heat: Daniel Marcus on Figuration in Jean Dubuffet, Cathy Wilkes, and Josh Smith,” *Artforum* (Summer 2011): 373.



Josh Smith
Untitled, 2007
Oil on canvas
60 × 48" (152.4 × 121.9 cm)

as a revival of mid-century American abstraction. Quite quickly, despite the artist's penchant for group hanging or exhibiting works in stacks leaning against a wall, commercial galleries began to exhibit Smith's paintings individually on white walls with plenty of room around them—the better to contemplate them as singular expressions, rather than as the serial examples of a generic notion of abstract painting that they clearly were.

Abstraction is a language primed for becoming a representation of itself, because as much as it resists the attribution of specific meanings, the abstract mark cannot help but carry with it an entire utopian history of modern painting. Murillo and Smith are not alone in their acknowledgment of the received meanings of their expressionist marks. It would be difficult to identify a contemporary abstract painter who is not self-consciously referring to that history.³⁰ "How can you look at a drip without thinking of Jackson Pollock or Sigmar Polke?", Kerstin Brätsch asked rhetorically during a recorded conversation with painter Amy Sillman. An abstract gesture is "not empty anymore but loaded with historical reference."³¹ It is characteristic of an atemporal painter to see and utilize style, as if it is a bit of iconography; some even use specific stylistic gestures and strategies in a manner akin to a medium. What atemporal painters do *not* do is use a past style in an uninflected manner; in other words, as a *readymade*.³² By avoiding this, they not only definitively separate themselves from the 1980s legacy of appropriation, but also place themselves in opposition to the use of style as a paean to some sort of "time-warp cult" or worse, as a kind of "zombie burlesque"³³ parody.

³⁰ Although perhaps German painter Tomma Abts is one, as she insists that her abstractions appear *sui generis* on her canvases. See Laura Hoptman, ed., *Tomma Abts* (New York: Phaidon and New Museum, 2009).

³¹ Kerstin Brätsch, quoted in Brätsch and Amy Sillman "Chromophilia," *Mousse* 29 (Summer 2011): 166.

³² The notion of "neo-modernism" was inspired by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's potent identification of a neo-avant-garde published in *October* ("The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 [Summer 1986]: 41–52).

³³ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 299. Reynolds used these epithets to describe a show by eighties band the Cramps.

of contemporary painters accuses them of "mimic[ing] the formal moves of some modernist art." Geers, "Neo-Modern," *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 9.

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 Robert Wedemeyer: 38.
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