

# The New Criterion

## Art

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### Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

James Panero on “Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings 2009” at Marian Goodman Gallery; “Pearlstein/Held: Five Decades” at Betty Cuninghams Gallery & “Ray Parker: The Simple Paintings” at Washburn Gallery.



Gerhard Richter, Abstract Painting (911-3)(2009), © Marian Goodman Gallery

The abstractions of Gerhard Richter tend to be mediocre paintings and polarizing works of conceptual art. An aura of academic theory surrounds them. To first encounter them in person is generally a so-so affair. There is much to look at but little to see. Once you get to know them, however, and to know *about* them, you either love them or hate them. (I have always come down in the latter camp.) The artist has built his career around this divided response. Now, an exhibition of several large new “monochromatic” abstractions at Marian Goodman Gallery has put this model of response in doubt, because I *liked* seeing some of the work in the show. [\[1\]](#) It left me wondering whether the aging German is off his game.

Born in Dresden in 1932, Richter escaped the RAF firebombing and later the Eastern Bloc to renounce all ideology. “I believe in nothing,” he said. This nihilistic position encouraged him to construct an artistic system out of (he claimed) moral and aesthetic equivalents. The traditional distinction between abstraction and representation became one such example. Here Richter took pains to occupy a middle ground, actively painting in both modes for much of his career. On one side, he appropriated a wide range of desultory images, often settling on the macabre, to create photo-realistic paintings of Allied bombing raids, Nazi relatives, Leftist German terrorists, snow-capped Alps, and burning candles. On the other, he labored to create facsimiles of mid-century gestural abstractions—like what is now on display at Goodman. In both approaches, Richter scrapes and pulls his paint across the canvas to blur the particulars, a process that effaces his hand from the work’s creation.

Self-effacement has enabled Richter to be taken up as both a Dadaist trickster and a top-selling commercial painter. He can bemoan the death of painting while making a living out of manipulating oil on canvas. He can leave his visual questions unanswered knowing that others will answer them for him. A cadre of theoreticians follows Richter from show to show, adding their own layers of varnish. The Dean of the Yale School of Art, Robert Storr, and the Harvard savant Benjamin Buchloh have been long-time boosters—Storr curated Richter’s large touring MOMA retrospective in 2002; Buchloh has recently worked at the American Academy in Berlin on a monograph of the artist. As an indication of what is to come, in the catalogue essay for the Goodman show, Buchloh shills for Richter with an opacity of language that reflects the artist’s own handling of paint on canvas.

In his essay, Buchloh attempts to link Richter with the history of avant-garde monochrome painting. The comparisons seem forced, because Richter’s one true antecedent has always been Andy Warhol. Richter saw his first Pop paintings in reproduction in 1962 and identified himself as “German Pop” a year later. His images of ruin, his aestheticization of violence, soon reflected Warhol’s, to the point where they both painted grieving portraits of Jackie Kennedy in 1963. Richter’s machine-like paint handling, which emerged from his training in Soviet Realism, also finds parallels in Warhol’s silkscreens (as do his exorbitant price tags).

Clement Greenberg once identified a certain style of paint handling as the “Tenth Street touch,” after the abstract artists who congregated on that block in Manhattan. “The stroke left by a loaded brush or knife frays out,” Greenberg explained, “when the stroke is long enough, into streaks, ripples, and specks of paint. These create variations of light and dark by means of which juxtaposed strokes can be graded into one another without abrupt contrasts.”

In his repetitive pulling and stripping of paint, half a century later, Richter takes the intentionality out of Tenth Street brushwork. Richter’s extended output of abstract art has made him into one of the most high-profile abstractionists working today, but he has mostly created Pop serializations of Abstract Expressionist gestures—work where the humanizing freedom of abstract paint handling has been numbingly beaten down and stripped away.

When Richter’s abstract paintings began appearing in galleries and museums, they resembled the rusting hulks of high modernism—another cold-hearted depiction of a ruined empire. What surprised me, and undoubtedly other observers as well, was the intensity with which Richter went on to develop his abstract idiom. You would think that once you’ve seen one Pop appropriation of an Ab-Ex painting, you’ve seen them all. Moreover, the evolution of an abstract style would seem to cut against Richter’s pose of non-belief. It would reveal an artistic mind making conscious decisions in the studio.

But Richter’s abstract work has evolved to display greater thickness and I might even say painterliness over the years. In his latest large work at Goodman, all from 2009, Richter took a

series of polychrome paintings in the making and worked them over in a gauze of white oils. Bits of old colored paint show through where his knife cut down to the under-layers. *Abstract Painting (911–4)* (2009) even displays areas of wavy brush handling that seem to be nothing less than personal gestures. (The title's oblique reference to September 11, 2001 strikes me as a failed attempt to impute the painting with political significance).

Buchloh goes to great lengths to justify Richter's studio decisions as just another goose step in the march of the avant-garde. If Richter had left the polychromatic paintings as they were, Buchloh argues, the "obsolete chromatic constellation ... could have been easily associated with a tradition of multi-chromatic abstraction that continued to govern long and large segments of twentieth century and pre- and postwar art, ranging from Hans Hoffmann [sic] to Howard Hodgkin, all of whom had claimed Henri Matisse as their legitimizing ancestor... . Contemporary spectators would inevitably have felt deceived by a color scheme that shows no evidence of any reflection whatsoever on its deeply problematic illusionistic desire and unconscious naturalistic agenda."

Buchloh's academic dialect requires translation. Once deciphered, his argument reveals its flimsiness. "Problematized" art is great for what I might call "solutionatized" academics, those who spin political theories of the visual world, but I wonder if the mind games grow wearisome for the artists who supply them.

In his monochrome series, Richter seems to luxuriate in his own paintings. The sensuality of the finished work, which still reflects a high gloss shine and has not been worn down through the usual effacement, moves closer to Matisse, not further away. Has Richter found faith in the enduring life of paint? His latest work seems less like Pop appropriations and more like straight abstract canvases. He would probably consider this conclusion a failure. I consider it a success.

The pairing of Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924) and Al Held (1928–2005) in a comparative show makes more sense than you might think. Both artists arrived in New York around 1950 and exhibited in the same circle of Abstract Expressionists. They also became friends. Most significantly, they both matured from an early apprenticeship in the thick paint handling of the Tenth Street touch to a cooler, more hard-edged style. A five-decade side-by-side survey of notable work from each of their careers is now on view at Betty Cuninghams Gallery. [\[2\]](#)

What becomes immediately clear from the Cuninghams show is the importance of stylistic evolution to both artists, and how well this evolution has been documented in the selection of work assembled for the exhibition. These artists have confronted a similar set of challenges and arrived at different solutions (but not all that different, it turns out).

As evidence of their similar beginnings, the exhibition starts with a brushy figuration by Pearlstein (*The Capture* [1954]) and a thick abstraction by Held (*Untitled* [1958]). A decade later, both artists had already developed what we might consider to be their signature styles: Held's hard-edged, rounded color abstractions (*Echo* [1966]) and Pearlstein's domestic portraits of coolly aloof nudes (*Female Nude on Yellow Drapery* [1965]). As if to complete the circle, there is also Pearlstein's (clothed) portrait of Held and his wife Sylvia Stone from 1968, on loan from a private collection.

In the decades that followed, both artists went on to complicate their pictorial arrangements within their particular systems. Pearlstein increased the sharpness of his perspective angle, twisting and cropping his *Female Model on Ladder* (1976) against the picture frame. From the 1980s through the present day, Pearlstein filled his paintings with artifacts to make them into more complex tableaux. Held followed suit in his own way. By the 1970s, he also introduced volumetric space, first in black lines on white canvas. In *Northwest* (1973), he suggests a puzzle of three-dimensional geometric shapes that never fully break with the picture plane. His most accomplished and largest work, *Roberta's Trip II* (1986), follows on as a tour de force of spatial architecture and color flatness.

Pearlstein's paintings from the same time period look right at home alongside it. When you see their shared infrastructure, these artists' individual developments stand out in even greater relief.

Ray Parker (1922–1990) was the master painter of the edge. A second-generation Abstract Expressionist, sometimes called a Lyrical Abstractionist, Parker made his most well-known work as part of a series he executed in the 1960s called "Simple Paintings." Many of these paintings are now on view at Washburn Gallery. [\[3\]](#)

Simplicity is a gift. It also requires a command of complexity. Parker's great talent was to activate the edges of a simple arrangement of two or three color-forms in a white field through complex yet subtle means. The results are lush, energetic, and gestural but also naturalistic. Many of his shapes recall the pleasantness of clouds. The living quality of the work emerges from the careful arrangement of forms to each other (the color harmonies combined with the white space between them), as well as the modulation of paint around their edges. The underlying colors peaking out behind the forms speak to the history of a developing composition while also giving the forms extra chromatic resonance. In *For My Love Denise* (1961), reds, tans, and browns all emerge from what we first take to be a shape created by a single color. The results influenced decades of post-painterly and process artists. They remain as fresh today as they were nearly fifty years ago.

#### **Notes**

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- "Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings 2009" opened at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, on November 7, 2009 and remains on view through January 5, 2010. [Go back to the text.](#)
- "Pearlstein/Held: Five Decades" opened at Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York, on November 19, 2009 and remains on view through February 13, 2010. [Go back to the text.](#)
- "Ray Parker: The Simple Paintings" opened at Washburn Gallery, New York, on November 5, 2009 and remains on view through January 9, 2010. [Go back to the text.](#)

**James Panero** is the Managing Editor of *The New Criterion*.

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