

“Blackstraction in Context”

blackstraction (blak-strak' sh-n) n.
the objectification of abstract painting

When I coined the term **blackstraction** to refer to the objectification of painting in 2000, it was the result of research that began in 1980. Looking at language as art led me to see poetry as the original formalist abstract art because all meaning is based on relationships created with words contained in the body of the work.

Experimenting with painting and drawing to study abstract art as language, I started looking at all kinds of paintings to understand how the materials are used. I began reading about what painting is, what art is and how the art world evolves. I found styles of painting correspond to the introduction of studio methodology.

How and what artists painted began to change drastically after the photograph. Until then, paintings were two dimensional and mostly flat with impasto used to emphasize details. In the industrial age, artists began to use it to alter how we see and perceive images. Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism and Constructivism, all inching away from painting realistically, developed during this time.

Late in the 19th century Modernism arrived. European exposure to African and Oceanographic art opened the way for Cubism, Surrealism, DaDa, Bauhaus and other styles propelling painters fully into imaginary realms. Collage, assemblage and intellectual discourse join the techniques used.

The next important additions come after World War 2. Abstract Expressionism gives us all over painting, Art Brut common materials like fiber and nontraditional techniques like stitching, and Spatialism introduces three dimensionality. While the painting itself remains a flat 2-dimensional object, pouring, staining, scraping and cutting are now used by artists exploring what painting can be. Depth is incorporated into the picture plane. These three styles lay the foundation for Blackstractionsim.

In the 60s and 70s, artists expanding and delving deeper into abstraction used all the above techniques to experiment with both the image and how the image is constructed. Action Painting, Color Field, Op Art, Hard Edge and other styles followed the trail of expressionism.

Spatialism led to shaped canvas, cloth and other alternatives to canvas, and finally dropping stretchers altogether. Relaxing the rigidity of the traditional painted rectangle ushers in Minimalism and Blackstractionism-- both dealing with the sculptural possibilities of painting. While Minimalists embraced design, industrial materials and commercial execution, Blackstractionists were focused on labor intensive experiments involving both aesthetic and physical properties of painting with depth.

Anne Truitt, among the first artists identified as exhibiting in the minimalist style, focused on "lifting" color into three-dimensional space and making color "sing" from inside. Jack Whitten, one of many artists developing blackstraction, described his work in 1983 as "...

a precise and continuous development of experimentations dealing with the possibilities of paint, using various processes towards defining a new spatial perception in painting...”

Going into the 1980s, painting had become any and everything, including intellectual discourse. The Postmodern era that had been building since the 60s brought new art favoring installation, performance and new media stemming from developing technologies. Indeed, painting is declared dead, art becomes “contemporary” and really of the moment. By the end of the century referential discourse describing what artists are painting becomes more important than the style of painting executed. We arrive at zombie abstraction.

Blackstraction in Context			
PAINTING TRENDS	ERA	PAINTING STYLE	STUDIO TECHNIQUE
artists start inching away from painting realistically	Mid-19th Century	Impressionism Post Impressionism Fauvism Expressionism	impasto
abstract art intellectual discourse	Modernism	Cubism Surrealism Dada Bauhaus Constructivism	collage assemblage
all over painting common materials non-traditional techniques picture plane includes depth	After W W 2	Abstract expressionism Spatialism Art Brut	pouring cutting stitching staining scraping
painting can be anything including discourse	60s 70s & 80s	Color Field Hard Edge Op Art Minimalism Blackstraction Craft As Art Neoexpressionism	shaped canvases no stretchers cloth & other alternatives to canvas
discourse and painting are inseparable	POSTMODERNISM	Zombie Abstraction	all of the above

Donald Judd, one of the most well-known minimalists as well as a prolific and influential critic of his peers, consistently denied three-dimensional painting was a movement.

He dismissed Truitt's debut columns in 1963 as tomblike with uninteresting color and between 1959 and 1975, he did not once review the work of Whitten or Sam Gilliam or Al

Loving or Joe Overstreet or Howardena Pindell who were his contemporaries in NY and exhibiting the work he talks about.

In the famous 1965 essay "Specific Objects," Judd was unknowingly describing blackstraction when he wrote, "...The new work exceeds painting in plain power, but power isn't the only consideration, though the difference between it and expression can't be too great either.... This work which is neither painting nor sculpture challenges both. It will have to be taken into account by new artists."

As Whitten noted in 1980, "Clement (Greenberg) would never accept the possibility of a Black man leading..."

He's speaking of one critic but it could have been the entire art industry then or now, as today that same industry seeks to add diversity by monetizing artists like Gilliam and Whitten without fully recognizing their contribution to the canon. 20 years into the 21st century, Stella is practically a household name for anyone interested in abstract art, while the effect of Gilliam's draped canvases has yet to be evaluated for the influence it exerted over all the work that follows.

I call this work blackstraction because I trace its beginnings to the European response to indigenous art and to confront the art world protocol of belittling, absorbing and erasing advances made in studio practice by and because of Black, outsider and other minority artists. Blackstraction provides a platform for discussion around the work these artists

executed in a way that acknowledges the full extent of their contribution as three-dimensional painting remains basically unexplored and is gaining favor in the art market. Its history must not be lost.

blackstraction (blak-strak' sh-n) n.

1. the objectification of abstract painting 2. an emotive non-representational work of art stressing formal internal relationships using African/Asian/American art practices at times employing craft techniques and three-dimensional presentation.

blackstractionist n. An artist engaging therein...

blackstraction (blak-strak' sh-n) v. t.

1. to make markings with color on diverse surfaces that relate to each other and their environment in two and three dimensions. 2. Painting using depth as part of the picture plane

blackstractioned, blackstractioning

Blackstractionism (blak-strak'sh-niz-m) n. Fine Arts

1. a style of emotive non-representational painting appearing in the US in mid- to late 20th century sometimes employing craft techniques and three-dimensional presentation.

2. theory and practice of three-dimensional painting