

The show “Brushless” at Morgan Lehman is a representation of how painters today have let go what was once an integral part of their process: the brush. Upon entering the moderate sized gallery where most the work is visible at the same time, I would be confused about this grouping if I didn’t know the theme. There’s a small slick painting resembling a flat screen tv by Rachel Ostrow directly to the left of the entrance. A huge floral colored 10ft square painting by Hilder Asgeirsdottir Jonsson is hung like a tarp on the right. The somewhat topographic imagery helps it function like a giant map for the show. In the back there’s a wall painting installation by Nathan Randall. This is not a show about the visual experience so much. This is a show about painting strategy.

Although going brushless today is not as novel as when Jackson Pollock began dripping or when Kenneth Noland began pouring, it is refreshing to see the contrasting positions on painting without a brush in this show. Inherent in this idea of a brushless painter there are two ways to go about it; the brush was an important part of the history of painting that needed to be abandoned, and the brush is an arbitrary factor to what makes a good painting. When entering the gallery its clear that each one of seven participating artist represents a position on what it is to make a brushless painting.

There’s a certain logic for some of the artist whose work demonstrates a refinement that would not of been the same if a brush was used. Halsey Hathaway uses a homemade atomizer to spray ink to the effect of giving the shapes in her lyrical abstractions the appearance of well crafted origami paper. Nathan Randall uses a roller to make wet on wet stripes on an irregularly shaped canvas, and on the walls itself that it’s hung on. Carolanna Parlato pours paint and tilts the canvas so that the shapes overlap. Her paintings remind me of the multiple paint jobs showing through on a subway pillar.

The choice of tool for Rachel Ostrow is a squeegee in which she lifts, pulls and pushes paint against a moderate size wood panel. The effects are laser like lines and color shapes resembling the cosmos against a dark background. One could say the imagery resembles a 80’s Star Trek poster. I had a few growing up so I know. Her work more than any others in the show, I would not appreciate as much if a brush was used. The randomness of the paint blots contrasting with the well calibrated smudged lines, makes the painting a slow read that you can travel into. The presence of the hand at work is in Ostrow’s squeegee.

In Wayne Herpich’s painting, the hand is very much present in his palette knifed swipes that is applied with such rhythm that they resemble brush mark dabs. Herpich is painting abstractions but the visceral paint makes me feel that I’m looking at figuration. With every swipe, multiple clean ribbons of colors are created. The flowing rise and fall of every thick paint gesture is used for an all over effect of waves in an ocean of paint.

The connection to figurative and landscape painting is clear in Herpich’s work. Andrew Schartz’s painting like Herpich’s, seemingly falls more conventionally into a figure or landscape painting. What looks like an abstracted headless figure, is actually his paint soaked clothing and bed sheets that has been rubbed and stamped into the painting. Recently painters such at Keltie Ferris and Fran

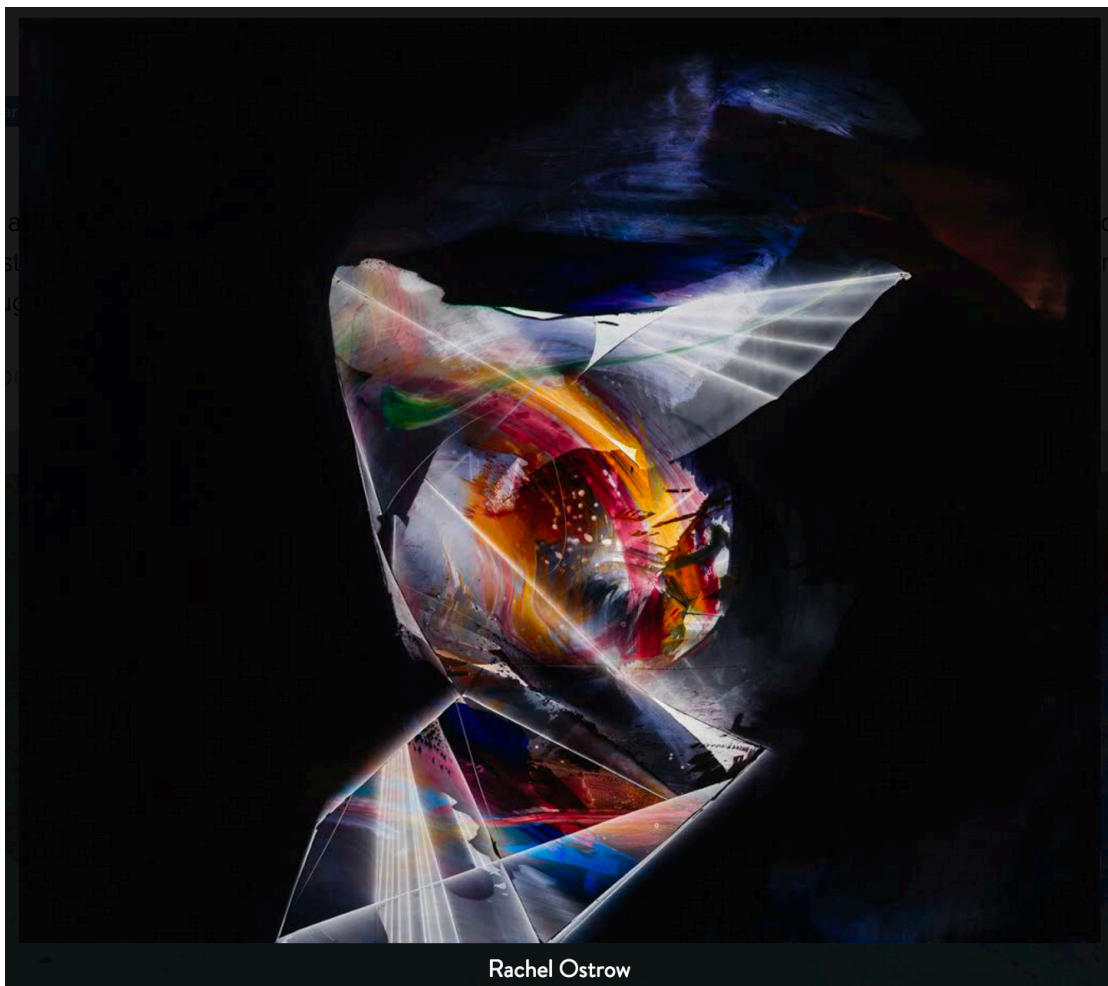
O’Neill have been using what Yves Klein has coined as their “human paint brushes” as a tool for expression.

For most painters the guessing game of how something is made allows us to be in constant dialogue with our contemporary’s. For some contemporary artist the explanation on process is the frosting on cake. That’s where the divide in the show exists. The degree to which the materials, concept and intention relate to each other does not apply to every artist in the show. I’m sure if Wayne Herpich was given a butter knife he could make an interesting painting on any surface. The stained and woven paintings of Hilder Asgeirsdottir Jonsson on the other hand, is a direct product of her materials and concept.

As the medium of painting has fallen in and out of fashion, the introduction of new materials and methods has become a pathway towards relevancy. Is it the critics who feel that painting needs to be reinvigorated by finding new ways to apply the material, or artists themselves who find that the brush has become a tool of stagnation. I would like to think that this healthy dose doubt is the best reason to be a painter today.



Hilder Asgeirsdottir Jonsson



Rachel Ostrow





Wayne Herpich