

2012 AAA 75th Anniversary Print Portfolio Introduction

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Published as an introduction to the American Abstract Artists 75th Anniversary Print Portfolio, 2012

“The days of our years are three score years and ten” says the 90th Psalm. So at three score and fifteen you might conclude that American Abstract Artists is a society of the old in contradiction with abstraction’s historical role as a primary force for the new. However, art isn’t like that and artists don’t think like that either. In fact, a number of our members have reached an even greater age. But as is true for all, young as well as old, their real concern is with the absolute immediacy of visual experience for which abstraction has been the vessel since its invention roughly one hundred years ago.

American Abstract Artists was founded in 1936 when the war clouds were gathering world-wide, when enlightened culture was under direct assault everywhere—in Soviet Russia as well as in Nazi Germany it was already threatened with total extinction—and when the advances of innovative art in this country were stalemated by conservative forms of figuration that often, but not always, reflected conservative politics. AAA survived into the 1940s and 1950s when non-objective modes of expression were more broadly tolerated, but formally strict, non-expressionist variants were commonly but erroneously thought to lack urgency and feeling and thus required a rallying point. AAA provided it. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of Hard Edge and Minimal art but the need for dialogue among artists not aligned with those styles remained. AAA filled it. During the long drawn out pluralist era that has followed, tendencies competing for brief dominance have come and gone, but steady, slow-moving currents that crisscross and occasionally blend with “the mainstream” still seek places to pool and grow. For many artists who have been affiliated with it, including those whose work appears

in this portfolio, AAA has been and remains such a basin.

Throughout its history, AAA has served its members by fostering dialogue among artists sharing common ground, by opening that dialogue to the general public through panels and catalogs, and by providing exhibition opportunities for members to show their work to diverse audiences in galleries and institutions both large and small across the entire country. Thus, despite being based in New York City, the American component of “American Abstract Artists” has a substantial geographic meaning, although never a chauvinistic one. The Dutch refugee Piet Mondrian was among its earliest champions, and immigrants from Germany, Russia and around the globe have filled its ranks. Indeed, as is characteristic of America as a whole, this polymorphous aesthetic confederation is predicated on a healthy tolerance for variety rather than on rigid doctrines or criteria. Never has the AAA published a manifesto, laid down the law, identified an enemy, nor expelled anyone for breaching its orthodoxies in the manner of so many modernist movements. Because AAA is not a movement, there is no such thing as “AAAism.”

Rather than avant-garde rhetoric, what binds past and present members of AAA together is a deep respect for the value of visual experience unencumbered by programs and pretensions, for what one might call the poetry of the plain although in the hands of some AAA adherents, essential plainness achieves extreme states of intricacy or encompasses such exquisite refinement or subtlety that the average viewer might briefly be tempted to mistake it for its opposite.

As this portfolio demonstrates, nothing is inherently alien to rigorous abstraction except depiction. Yet even in this regard, it has never been an AAA priority to impose a ban on illusion or resemblance so severe that the evocation of volume or of corporeally coherent spaces was enforced at the cost of dynamic pictorial invention. In that respect, members as severe as Mondrian or the still more austere Ad Reinhardt or the forthrightly materialist Robert Ryman found themselves in a coalition in which others have claimed considerable license and latitude in areas once off-limits to absolute purists. Manifest form matters more to AAA than the Formalist ideology and the passage of time has proven that the anathemas of one generation may become the inspiration for the next without any basic loss in the underlying discipline abstraction requires in order to thrive.

“Presentness is grace,” Michael Fried once wrote. According to Harold Rosenberg, the indispensable component of quality in modern and contemporary art is freshness. While these two critics agreed on little else,

they would seem to be in approximate accord to this extent. We don't agree on everything with either of them nor amongst ourselves, but for the now long run of AAA's existence, consensus has leaned toward these two basic propositions. As AAA begins to round out its first century chasing abstraction into the future, "presentness" and "freshness" will remain the morning stars by which we navigate. Long may AAA endure in a perpetually regenerative now!

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