

# THE LOADED BRUSH

STATE OF THE ART

by George Alexander

FROM THE MOMENT WE AWAKE EACH morning, we fast-forward through the information superhighway in a cloud of burning rubber, scrolling through miles of online content. Images are a dime a dozen. The payoff should be instantaneous, quicker than a credit swipe. Is this the cause, or merely the symptom, of a culture's scattershot amnesia, its hamster memory, and the reason why novelty has become the main game in contemporary art, with huge investments in the marketability of the artist as much as the work?

So often pronounced dead, painting has re-emerged as the slowly simmered stew of the visual world, the Hatha Yoga of inward seeing, a new-old way of being attuned, of letting your engine idle when all the other rhythms of the round-the-clock multimedia autobahn leave us either glazed or wired with anxiety.

To entrust your creative labor to intensive, handcrafted painting is like traveling the psychic back roads, a way of performing "getting lost" and letting reverent nuances, moral delicacies and helpless erotic connections bloom. Painting, like poetry, is intense. It requires an immersion in qualities that have become rare: time, concentration and intelligence. The skill has deep continuities and is hard to learn; it matures slowly.

Consider the work of Melbourne-based artist Robert Owen, which underlines the art world's renewed interest in visuality and medium specificity. Born in 1937, Owen has spent 30 years studying the way light iridescences, the way it separates into different wavelengths when it skims off certain surfaces, like Perspex or the underside of a compact disc. Using the limitations of the grid, his luminously colored abstract panels—for which the artist employs some 2500 hand-mixed selections—delve into the relations between the permanent and the transitory. Contemplating his paintings, as natural light flows into the room, you can see the lines work as an edge, or create sliding planes behind and before

the surface. You notice when clouds pass, the colors' rate of vibration speeding up and slowing down, and it seems as if the paintings breathe and glow.

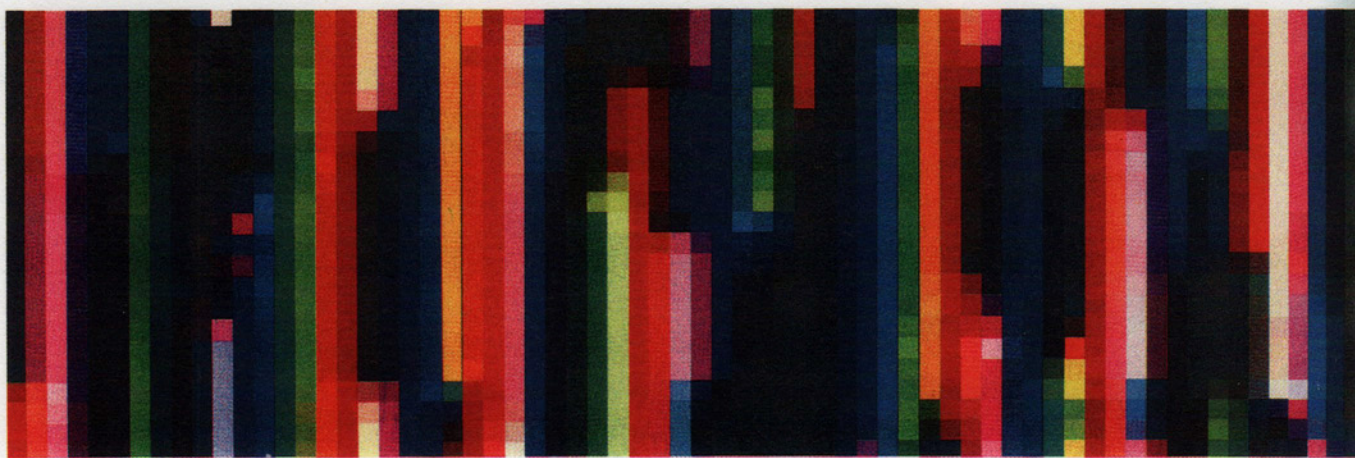
This painting series began with pieces of colored origami paper Owen bought for his daughter when she was a child. Some—like *Spectrum Shift #1, #2, #3*—appear to reference the pixels that mediate the image within contemporary technology, but the effect is neither like a photograph of a computer screen nor is it like the paint swatches at a hardware store. The work lives organically and reclaims painting as part of a psychodynamic practice—like the contemplative traditions of Buddhism or Sufism—to deepen your awareness and the quality of attention. The more awareness you have about the way your attention works on a transitory level, the more suppleness, the more space will form around that activity.

*Cadence #2* (2003-04) was made as a way to chart the artist's emotions and moods over an 80-day period. The work—a vibrantly painted linen canvas of radiance and scruple—provides the sensation as you scan its panels that the grids are resonating in your nervous system, like a mallet along the bars of a vibraphone.

But for all the aesthetic downshifting (here one expects a basso profundo voice-over from ubiquitous critic Robert Hughes) this version of art as a kind of Higher Knitting conjures precisely those mutinies that have threatened gilt-framed traditional painting since the invention of photography. Painting's reality-quotient was too low for dada. It lacked the big sexy visual kick of cinema. It was not paradigm-shifting enough for the Conceptualists or installationists. For the card-carrying vanguard, the mindless, quivering-lower-lip fussiness of painting went into the back of the van, rather than the front. Matisse revamped for wine bottle labels, Mondrian lost to L'Oreal Mousse design packaging.

One era's sublime is the next era's heritage wrapping paper. In 1965, Roy Lichtenstein's *Little Big Painting* took a pot shot at the Abstract Expressionist cult of the brushstroke as the precipitate marker of existential authenticity by stenciling the thing as if it were a blow-up in a magazine reproduction, and then painting it as a deadpan oil on canvas. In the mid-1980s, Chilean-born Australian artist Juan Davila (SEE P. 102) merged the *Glug Glug!* of Ab Ex with the *Pow!* of Pop, and then drained them of their color in a "neoexpressionist/neo-pop" take on the work, a painterly strategy for dismantling, from the geographic margins, the historical crises of these established international styles.

Despite severe pressures from everywhere—even from its own loaded history—painting keeps bouncing back from the



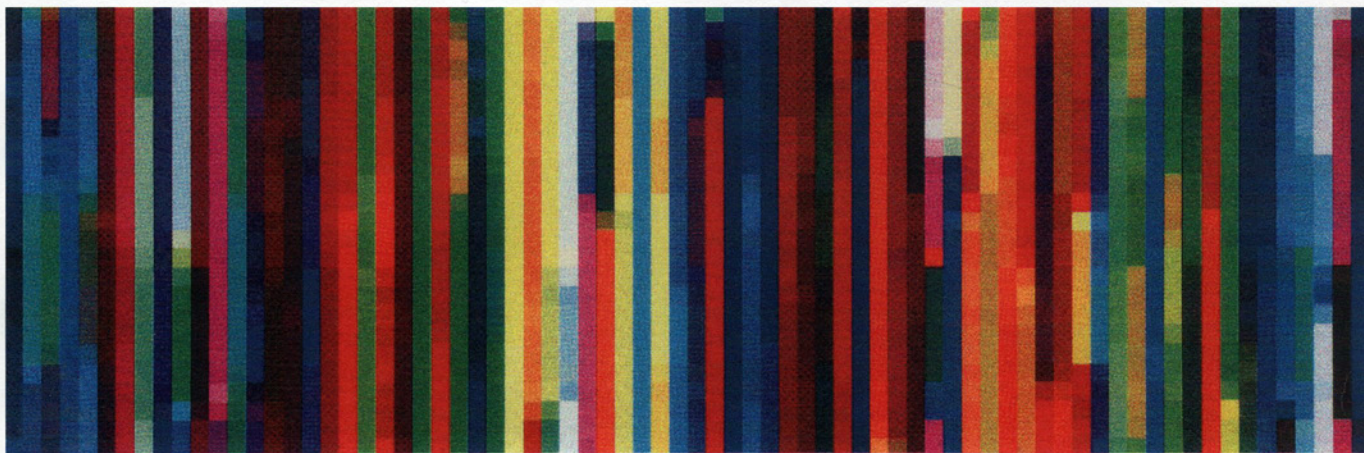
■ Robert Owen — *Spectrum Shift #1, #2, #3* (2003-04) Synthetic polymer paint on linen in three panels, each 198 x 198 cm. Photo by Diana Panuccio. Courtesy the artist.



dead. Culture clearly has uses for painting, and not just “pure painting” à la Brice Marden. There are other kinds of paintings and artists who use the medium more as a means than an end. Someone once described such objects as “para-paintings,” doubtless based on the principle of parachutes—painting with its feet off the ground. In fact para- is the Greek prefix meaning alongside of, beside—indicative of some sideways extension of the medium’s function.

Alert to postmodern society’s fault-lines these artists are less

painters of paintings in the old-fashioned sense than diagnosticians of the image. They can talk about art, as much as work within painting. Think Gerhard Richter and his testing of the boundaries between blurry photography and painting, painterliness and minimalism, or his way of finding abstraction in the scraping back of paint layers. And so we have “bad painting,” “conceptual painting,” “deconstructive painting” and so on, that not only are pleasures to look at, but manage to act like CAT scans of art history as well.



■ Robert Owen. Photo by Diana Panuccio.

■ Robert Owen — *Cadence #2* (2003-04) Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, five panels, each 259 x 167 cm. Photo by Diana Panuccio. Courtesy the artist.