

What Comes Before, What Returns

Michael Scott, 1995-1996

by Bob Nickas

How do we receive a work of art when it first appears? There is the context that frames it—often imperfectly—affording viewers comparison to what else is shown at the time, as well as historical precedence. Certainly what an artist has done previously factors in to the equation, unless they are only being introduced in that moment. When an artist is already known to us, does new work appear as continuity (measured progression) or as repetition (more of same), or as a necessary leap taken to evade a creative stalemate, and if so, might it register as rupture, a break that potentially divides an audience, or invites a new one? (Think of Guston in 1969, leaving abstraction behind to become the great artist we know today, and would we if he hadn't? Or Dylan four years prior, at the Newport Folk Festival, plugging in an electric guitar, rather than an acoustic, shocking the crowd who booed in disbelief? Or the chameleon-like career of Francis Picabia?) And how do we receive works of art we are familiar with after a considerable passing of time? Of course there is only such a passage for the artist and for those who knew the work prior. For everyone else, what is presented appears for the first time. If they don't take note the date it was made, and unless the art shows its age, as so much does, it might as well be brand new. While a work made and exhibited in 1994 has its audience from that time, the same work shown in 2024 has an audience from today. It is also the case that art can be relevant to more than one period. Art is long, life goes on. Thirty years later, a new generation has arrived to contextualize artworks here in the present, a world no longer Euro-centric, when art movements and decades are a thing of the past, and with them art history, that wider frame that brings the periphery into view. Today, an artwork might not have been made by human hands, and an essay such as this one may not have been written by an actual person. We inhabit another world entirely, where, for better and worse, anything goes, and where a viewer's bandwidth has expanded, even as mental capacity begins to be outsourced.

The 1980s and '90s, oddly enough, had commonality with the 1950s and '60s, when artists and critics took sides and defended their positions. We may not have witnessed fistfights in bars, as with legends of contentious abstract expressionist times, but there were artists who were "in" and artists who weren't, and passions arose. As in the '60s, art in the '80s/'90s became politicized. Message-oriented art took common cause with issues of the day, alongside art engaged primarily with itself, with art's own concerns, raising a political dimension that may have been overlooked. (After all, a monochrome is the refusal of an image, which is no more pronounced than in an image-saturated world.) Painting, which had been declared dead at the end of the '60s, would reappear within ten years' time. In the wake of the New Image painters came the Neo-Expressionists—criticized as "ciphers of regression"¹—and their antithesis, those exploring a post-Pop Conceptualism. In sculpture, the readymade would return, and with it referential painting could be considered along parallel lines, the *Surrogates* of Allan McCollum having much to do with this view. With painting, what was "in" was primarily appropriationist, Neo-Geo, and any painting regarded as with and against itself. In "post-time," *Signs of Painting* and *The Last Picture Show* would reverberate.² This was the endgame context in which Michael Scott's work was initially seen. He would write, in a notebook from the mid-'90s, "On one level, my work is about denying itself as painting." Following a series of target/circle paintings on canvas and line/stripe paintings

on panel, he settled on an industrial material, honeycomb aluminum, as his support. None of his paintings offered any sign of brushwork. They were in no way gestural except in the conceptual sense, restrained and quietly intense in equal measure, based in perceptual and later mathematical premises. This was painting as gesture intended to result in a particular effect. (Disorientation?) First working exclusively in black-and-white, the “targets” repeated the motif from one to the next, always in the same modest size, as were the early line/stripe paintings. They would eventually be made in large scale. Vertical lines, closely spaced and thin, created an effect of soft grayish monochromes when viewed from a distance. Those with thicker, darker lines increased the painting’s pulse. (Some viewers found them difficult to look at in close proximity.) As Scott has noted, they were more optical than the Op art paintings of the ‘60s, many of which now look their age. When he introduced color in the early ‘90s, although it was at times subdued, it was, for the most part, electric, a heightened chromatics intensifying opticality. He considered all his work up until this point to be both formal and psychedelic. This was certainly true of the fluorescent line paintings, even as they were still seen in relation to geometric abstraction

In January 1994, a painting appeared unlike any ever before: *House of Abstinence*, still composed of high contrast black-and-white lines though clearly pictorial. We easily identify a house nearly at its center, and diagonal lines (new in his work) offer legible perspective. There is a tree and cloud shapes, the image having been put together by means of collage technique, also never previously used. In the same month, Scott made *Running Deer*, a more ambitious painting, less graphic, with an elusive image, in large vertical format. It appears abstract from a distance while offering an image of two deer, one antlered, immersed in a field of highly active lines. They are in motion, alternately discernible and camouflaged. (Imagine *Richter’s Hirsch*, 1963, as optical illusion.) A month later came *Magic Landscape*, whose pink, red, green and white lines offer trees and hills and sky as an all-over rhythmic, hybrid image, abstract and representational. This was a busy, productive period for the artist, and what would subsequently emerge from the studio would test those who had followed his work until then, as if his supposed rationality had fully embraced an irrational picture-making. For anyone who had Zenned-out to his “Quarter Mile” paintings, his polka-dot Pink Pony must have occasioned a seismic jolt. Scott said that he tried to make his subjects as absurd as possible, and he had. Even so, a number of them were linked very interestingly to the post-comic Pop of Roy Lichtenstein (his interiors) and to the deadpan “bad paintings” of the new Image artist Neil Jenney—*My Property Ends Here*, from March 1994, most prominently. *The Mood of Now*, made in the same month, an image of a paint can tumbling off the edge of a table, suggests no need for regret and inevitability: don’t cry over spilt milk, or, in this case, spilt paint. With this painting the hard-edged lines were set aside, and then the floodgates opened, appropriately enough with *House of Tears* (also March 1994). This image, possibly sourced from a child’s coloring book, with its lollipop “trees” and teardrop sky, seemed not to have been made by the same artist who only a few years prior had produced work related to Op, Minimalism, and Neo-Geo. For someone who had been involved with line paintings, he had come to realize that he was, after years of exploring them, at the proverbial end of the line. How, then, to explain what he went on to paint? Scott believed that the image-line paintings merged the formal, the psychedelic and the surreal, and that “the surreal takes its form through illustration.”

With *House of Tears*, and what came after, Scott pushed our notion of the psychedelic, a state that exists within the conscious mind, and the surreal, a situation outside of it, to overlay them pictorially. Previously hard-edge lines, like minds, would begin to melt. In the summer of ‘94 he began to use spray paint, lending a hazy, dreamlike quality to his images, continuing with the paintings from early 1995 into the spring: *Mountain House*, *In the Well of the World’s Sadness*, and *An Ancient Song Sung Too Long*, and *A New Day* among them. He didn’t expect people would be shocked by any of these works, but surprised, as possibly he was himself as he came to make them. He recalled that

among the artists he paid attention to in this period were Mike Kelley and John Miller, with their abject/melancholic arrangements and sensibilities, and Sigmar Polke, with his heady, hallucinogenic Pop. Each of these artists embraced absurdity and, in their own ways, would willfully “do the wrong thing.” But Scott was not at this time going against himself. He was consciously pursuing a path that he saw as parallel to, rather than divergent from, his initial program. If his early works were emptied of content, the representational and figurative paintings deployed deliriously banal, candy-colored imagery to the same end. In a notebook entry dated December 29, 1995, he observed: “One function of the avant-garde has been to give the greatest number of people what they don't want. But for those who are involved in art, this becomes what they do want. That is because one should always want their present notions of art to be subverted.”

These paintings by Michael Scott were made almost thirty years ago. They were very much a departure from what he had done before, though for him they were part of an investigation he had begun in the late 1980s. How do they look to us now? Particularly for those who have no idea what he did prior? How do they appear against the current backdrop of Neo-Surrealism and illustrational imagery that is pop-inflected and highly stylized, Nicolas Party, for example, and the Italian painter Salvo, who himself created a major rupture for collectors and his primary dealer at the time, when he left language-based Conceptual work for image-based painting? Salvo would have understood these misunderstood paintings of Michael Scott's. He made them when he needed to, and they remain important to him. They allowed him to go on to something new at a time when he felt he had exhausted his earlier research. In the spring of 1995, he made two paintings, modest in scale but looming large in the imagination, each measuring thirty inches square. The first features a single, slender “peak” against a tequila sunrise sky, and small clouds. The second has three “peaks” with clouds around, and a radiant Sun that is either rising or setting. They share a title, *Timeless Painting*, an unexpected reference to Ad Reinhardt's “Black” paintings, early touchstones for Scott. Referring to them with images that might be from an animated cartoon suggests that they also lend themselves to deeper observation, to mediation. Reinhardt once wrote, “Black is not as black as all that.” What if these image of Michael Scott's are not as perverse as all that? Today, any number of artists appear reluctant to diverge from what they are known for, for what continues to find a home in the world. Well after the fact, *House of Abstinence* takes on new meaning in this respect. What is to be avoided? Following the same formula, to drink from an old well which had metaphorically ran dry? Michael Scott's paintings of the mid-to-late '90s remind us that art is not only meant to change what we expect of it, but of ourselves.

By 2005, ten years after these fantastical representational works, Scott had found his way back to line paintings, though not as a form of retreat. Quite the opposite, in fact, as they advanced on his earlier position, his intention to overlay formal concerns with the psychedelic through a filter of irreality, a strata merging intellect and the imagination, the conscious and unconscious minds. A blue painting from 2005 is in this sense exemplary. With slender, slightly rippling white lines on a cobalt blue background, the opticality is in glacially slow motion, the overall image reading as an amorphous curtain. This could be a blue painting by Ad Reinhardt filtered through Bridget Riley's wave at high tide on a hazy day. Would this have been possible for Scott if not for his research in the late '80s leading to his departure in the mid-'90s? There is the common notion that the work of an artist, its arc, can be neatly aligned, start to finish, with its beginning, middle, and end. Life, however, isn't always that linear. For some artists, beginning, middle and end won't necessarily unfold in that exact order, or they are more fluidly inter-woven. For these artists, every work, every line of inquiry and detour is necessary. Although every work is of its time, at least chronologically, not all will recur amidst a visual landscape that better describes their topography. Moreover, very few give us as much trouble as the first time around. In our conservative climate, this must count as some sort of achievement.

Notes

All quotes by the artist come from his notebooks, 1991-1996, selected and shared with the author.

¹The term is Benjamin Buchloh's. "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October*, Vol. 16, "Artworld Follies," Spring 1981.

²*Signs of Painting* was an exhibition at Metro Pictures in New York, April 5-26, 1986, which included works by Ashley Bickerton, Jack Goldstein, Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, John Miller, Walter Robinson, Gerwald Rockenschaub, and Philip Taaffe. *The Last Picture Show* was the title of Elisabeth Sussman's essay for her exhibition, *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Sept. 25-Nov. 30, 1986. The artists included were Ross Bleckner, General Idea, Peter Halley, Jon Kessler, Jeff Koons, Sherrie Levine, Joel Otterson, Haim Steinbach, and Philip Taaffe.



Photo by Jason Metcalf

Bob Nickas is a critic and curator based in New York. He has organized more than eighty exhibitions since 1984 and served on the teams responsible for Aperto at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and the 2003 Biennale de Lyon. From 2003-06 he was Curatorial Advisor at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. The author of numerous essays in catalogues and monographs, he was a founding editor of *Index* magazine is a regular contributor to *Artforum*. His books include two collections of his writing, *Live Free or Die* (2000) and *Theft is Vision* (2007).