TRUE COLORS
David Pagel: On Richard Roth's Paintings
Playfulness—and the realities it generates—also animate Roth’s boxy paintings. Like Hutchison’s, his crisply delineated compositions make you wonder what you’re looking at: a painting? five separate paintings, each facing a different direction? a single surface wrapped around an invisible armature? the lovechild of a painting by Mondrian and a set of Lego building blocks? a smartly configured diagram that has been streamlined and stylized and inflated, so that it has become a three-dimensional chunk of impossible-to- name ambiguity? a wall-mounted sculpture? part of the architecture? a solid volume whose exterior shapes seem to go all the way through, in a quasi-geological fashion, forming single-colored bands, bars, and zig-zags? an impenetrable mystery whose surface is adorned with geometric patterns that dance off on their own, free from the restrictions of three-dimensional reality and picking up speed when they cut around the corners of the objects they animate? Like Johnson’s canvases, Roth’s seriously whimsical works form wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Their synergies generate viewer participation: Your body has to move—left and right, up and down, back and forth—to even begin to see what’s in front of you. And your mind has to move a lot more fluidly and flexibly and multi-directionally if you’re going to come to terms with the confounding complexity of Roth’s deviously generous works.

- David Pagel, 2021 - Excerpted from the catalogue essay for *Chromatic*, the group exhibition at the Bentley Gallery, Phoenix, Arizona

- David Pagel is an art critic who writes regularly for the Los Angeles Times. He is a professor of art theory and history at Claremont Graduate University and an adjunct curator at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, NY.

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STEPHEN WESTFALL: On Richard Roth's Paintings
Richard Roth is making a welcome return to painting after a more than ten year hiatus, during which he pursued collecting and archiving various examples of what might be called “vernacular modernism,” such as commercial paint color charts, blank filing forms, and women’s compact mirrors displayed with the lid open. His reconsideration of abstract painting is visible through the lens of his collecting activities: his small box-like format constitutes a more tangible object than the shallower projection of a conventional panel or stretched canvas. The deeper sides of the boxes are wide enough to constitute another pictorial plane, which Roth exploits by extending the composition around to the sides while making sure that the pictorial “event” is echoed on each side. The image is abstract, a structurally essential embedding of figure into ground that changes from painting to painting and which can be defined by a curve, a diamond, or a plane bracketed by taut bands running along the edges, on the sides, and top. This is an objectified space, what we call “iconic,” and Roth’s paintings are unusual in that this iconic space is fulfilled on three sides. We can add Roth’s current body of work to certain Mary Heilmann paintings and Jo Baer’s early canvases as being

among the few paintings that make the sides pictorially vital.

Roth’s pictorial compositions seem extrapolated from memories of the world, fragments of something seen: side furniture and architectural ornament, packaging, even masks and the contours of the body. They are geometric, nearly minimal, but always quiver with this sense of being sourced elsewhere. The colors, too, seem to come from another place, as rich and vibrant as they are: the world of worn signs, perhaps. This sense of the work having traveled is odd because of the pristine beauty of their execution. Roth has always been a wonderful painter and he exhibits an elegant touch in his new paintings with Flashe acrylic, a paint of brilliant color that dries matte to an effect that is more like gouache. Roth describes the paintings as “aphoristic,” like quips or snatches of conversation that expand in the mind. Their objecthood and their internal compositional variety across a regulated format suggest that Roth sees this body of work as connected to his collecting and curatorial activities of the last decade, as though he’s curating a “collection” of object/paintings that meet a certain set of criteria.

This is not a dispassionate process, just smart. It’s the “Self” observing itself having a conversation with the motivating culture of the “Self.” Since Mondrian, one wing of abstract art has largely been a Talmudic commentary on exposed indexical and syntactical operations, and on influence. Thus it joins material craft with philosophy. We can see Mondrian, Kelly, early Stella, Myron Stout, Blinky Palermo, and Moira Dryer in Roth’s conversation, but the important thing is that his art has its own character: exacting, circumspect, and humorous. Roth holds his own in this high flying company. His touch, color, sense of scale, and general exquisiteness are felt as an original contribution, not just to discourse, but the pleasure we take from well crafted form and image.

- Stephen Westfall, 2007 - from the introduction to the Richard Roth exhibition at Reynolds Gallery

- Stephen Westfall is a painter, art critic, contributing writer for Art in America, and faculty member at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. He has exhibited in the United States and abroad for over a decade, showing at Lennon Weinberg Gallery, Galerie Zurcher, and Galerie Paal. His work can be found in numerous public collections. He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council of the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In addition to Art in America, his writings have appeared in The New York Times, Arts, Art News, the Partisan Review, and the New Criterion. He holds an M.F.A. from the University of California, Santa Barbara and has taught at Bard College and the School of Visual Art.

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PAINTING THE SENSE OF THINGS
SAUL OSTROW: On Richard Roth's New Paintings
This exhibition marks Richard Roth’s return to painting.

Having started as a painter, then having explored that ambiguous terrain of assemblage that constitutes a synthesis of the best aspects of formalist painting and sculpture, Roth proceeded to abandon painting altogether to explore the conceptual and aesthetic capacity rooted in the readymade world of visual and material culture. During this later period, his primary activity was the assembling of collections of such edifying artifacts as color charts, compacts, targets, and legal forms. In other words, Roth has spent a significant part of his professional life trying to escape the gravity of paint on canvas only now to be pulled back into its orbit.

Roth has come to the realization that “paintings are cunning artifacts that can alter perception, and create new narratives.” What is interesting about this statement is that it is not a refutation of his previous concerns, nor that of Post-Modernism, which asserted that painting was dead. Instead, these two goals constitute criteria by which what is possible (using anything to make art) and what may be necessary (changing our awareness) are to be judged. Given this proposition, the quote constitutes a manifesto reflecting a repositioning of art, and with it, painting’s function. This radical interpretation may be the rationale for a con-servative turn, or inversely, it could represent an act of resistance against the standardized and repetitive narratives of contemporary art and the ersatz products of the entertainment industry.

Whatever the conscious intent of Roth’s thinking, it none-the-less is premised on the view that art (specifically abstract art) may aesthetically embody a politic concerned with the totality of interrelationships involving our relationship to power, authority, and our sense of self. This politic resides in art’s ability to confront us with the unfamiliar in the sense that it can be used to challenge those expectations and conventions which are associated with intellectual and aesthetic complacency. This view is founded on a belief that on the level of individual experience, abstract art, as phenomena to be made sense of – rather than an unpacking of literary contents – requires engagement. For some this appeal to the primacy of experience and self-reflection offers the possibility of creating models of “self,” engagement, and “agency” within a cultural environment committed to the spectacle of mass media. As such, one’s encounter with abstract art may bridge and inform our understanding of the differing agendas that form our trajectory across the numerous territories and environments of everyday life.

By re-engaging painting’s geometric tradition, Roth

positions himself within a network of influences that reflect Modernism's systemic, industrial aesthetic, which over the course of the 20th century was promoted by Piet Mondrian, Rodchenko, Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, Myron Stout, Jo Baer, as well as Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, and Peter Halley. Grasping the significant changes that have taken place within art's function and criteria, Roth acknowledges the differing goals and affects of these practices, rather than their similarities. Roth finds the impetus for his project not only in previously understated, unacknowledged or prescient practices of modernism, but also in its conventions. By working in series that are intuitively, rather than systemically ordered, he investigates how many different ways a given affect may be created or deployed. The subtle "pop" references to contemporary design, and his choice of color lend the work a degree of aesthetic accessibility as well as a sense of humor.

In privileging form, physicality, and opticality over painterly process and a desire to give representation to his personal reality, the consequences of Roth's approach are two-fold. First, though the series he works in begins with a set of parameters (primarily, those of format) and the images are often variants of one another's general characteristics – each painting's composition or identity is pre-ordained. The second is that rather than producing a group of individuated objects joined by style or sensibility this series represents an investigation into the multiple aspects of opticality via form, composition, structure, limited palette – two colors, single image. What is important is that the series gains specificity by recording not the artist's decision-making process but the variants (and options) that will fulfill imagistically (design) structurally (materially) and phenomenologically (perceptually) his functional criteria. The resulting paintings therefore rather than being objects are assemblages of literal and structural events that unfold in real time.

Though the work may be reductive and mechanically severe in appearance, Roth transforms the Modernist abandonment of craft into something positive. What had once been an aspect of a nihilist impulse, in these works becomes part of a process meant to resist any further concessions in the direction of the arbitrary. By challenging both his own and the viewer's subjectivity, Roth orders an "encounter" via his paintings, which is the result of more than a random conglomerate of effects, conventions and simulations. The importance of Roth's phenomenology (the painting as an event) and as a material proposition (as an assemblage with its own internal logic) renders up a discourse that illuminates the variety of markers by which we establish correlations

between experience, memory, consciousness
and the things and processes that initiate them.
Gratification is consequently neither purely aesthetic
nor intellectual but lies in the intersection of the two.

Roth’s emergent practice, therefore, can be understood
to focus on how the subject-hood of such a simple thing
as a painted object depends on the complex economy
that exists between things, their reception. The
illusionism that Roth employs effectively causes the
object/painting’s appearance to dramatically change
as the observer discovers the true nature of the work
in time. This permits them to occupy the interface
between the modernist reductive “object” and speculative
assertions concerning function. As a group
of objects, each painting acts in concert with the other
to generate an embodied sensory (aesthetic) moment,
unmarked by conflict or despair. This permits the viewer
to take pleasure in engaging both the object and
his/her own self-reflectivity. Consequently, the model
of art that Roth articulates depends on the broad-range
of concepts we employ to give order, structures
and meaning to the phenomenon and experiences that
make up our perceived world. In this, he induces
us to make sense of the existent order of things
as well as our preconceptions.

- Saul Ostrow, 2007, from the introduction to the Richard
Roth exhibition *Cowboy Magic* at the Lamar Dodd School of
Art Main Gallery, The University of Georgia

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