

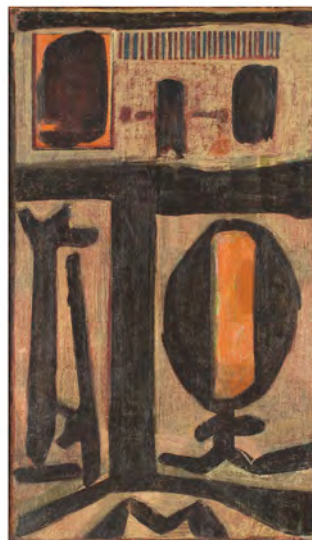
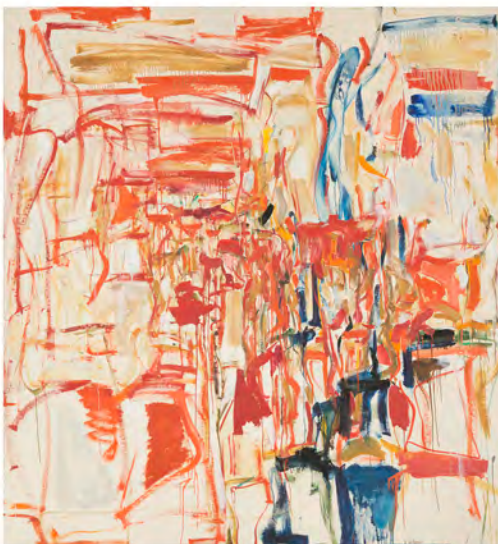
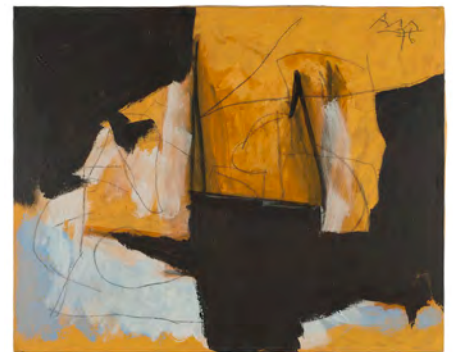
1945 to the Present | Highlights from the Ulrich Collection

Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Art

The period 1940 through 1970 in American art is recognized as a time of unprecedented stylistic growth and change. Artists in this country broke away from academic traditions and embraced an entirely new approach to art making. The atrocities of World War II had a profound effect, stimulating many artists to search for a new method of art relevant to such tumultuous and anxious times. Having torn away the mask of civilization, the war had delivered into human hands the means of complete annihilation, while the barbarism of Nazi concentration camps and the susceptibility of the masses to political manipulation had shattered faith in human morality and contaminated the belief in collective political reform. In response, many Americans began to question existence itself and soon turned their attention from public matters to their own inner lives. Artists led the search to find meaning in the human condition, to recover the lost wellsprings of the spiritual. In the intensely private revolution of Abstract Expressionism, artists sought to express universal and timeless insights. And out of this search evolved a new artistic language, inspired by many diverse and overlapping sources—among them, Surrealism, primitive art, mythology, psychology, and the mystical belief systems of the East.

While some artists expressed the tenor of the times through bold, gestural brushstrokes, others, working with broad washes of color over expansive canvases, sought a less expressionistic and more meditative effect. Drawing and working spontaneously on paper took on a new urgency as artists worked out their methods freely, finding inspiration in subconscious thought and the unexpected results of chance. In sculpture, artists sought freedom from the constrictions of the past by employing non-traditional materials and exploring bold, new forms.

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Entering the Postwar: The Junk Aesthetic

Emerging from World War II as the world's greatest power, America experienced an economic explosion—a boom that transformed the country into a nation of spenders. Exhausted after nearly two decades of hardship, uncertainty, and privation, Americans welcomed the normalcy and unabashed materialism of postwar America. Suburban tract houses, cars, television sets, and theme parks are just a few of the consumer goods that stood as quintessential symbols of America during this period. Promotion, advertising, and market research became billion-dollar industries designed to persuade consumers to buy. The imagery of advertising had become so pervasive—and invasive—that it became an essential feature of American life and identity.

A shift in values took place in the late 1950s that was, in part, a reaction to this barrage of new products and accompanying mass media explosion. The new generation responded enthusiastically to the very media images that the Abstract Expressionists chose to ignore. Viewing the legacy of Abstract Expressionism as an oppressive mantle that had to be lifted, these artists were no longer concerned with the “act” of painting, in gestures and emotions. Rather, they found subjects within the immediate environment of their popular culture and sought to incorporate them into their art through calculated, depersonalized means. Using cheap and available materials, assemblage artists created two- and three-dimensional works that responded to the spirit of the age. In contrast to Abstract Expressionist painting (which was still being practiced in many circles), which they perceived as detached and inward looking, assemblage artists incorporated elements from the real world. Visual artists on both coasts were raiding the streets for common objects to incorporate into their works. Junk sculpture, as it came to be known, was an extension of Surrealist collage traditions into three dimensions. Even if it was on the wall, junk sculpture extended into the viewer's space in a confrontational manner. The work of assemblagists was not polite or well behaved—works could be humorous and irreverent while others took a more political approach, often addressing moral issues of the moment.

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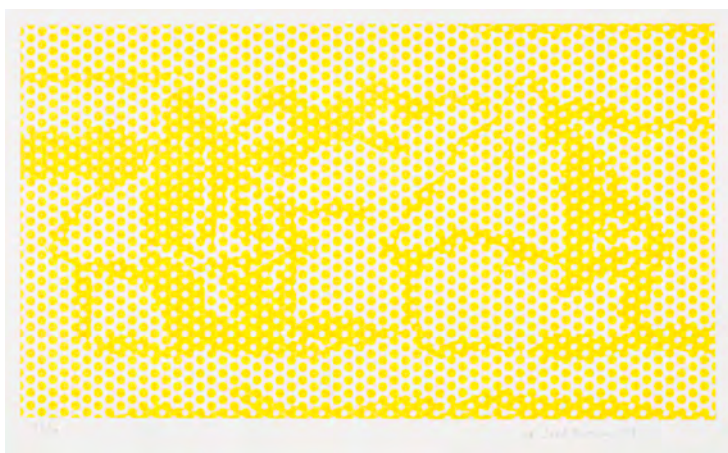


The Culture of Consumption: Pop Art

The Pop artists capitalized on the ubiquity of consumerism to create a movement in which art and life came together. But rather than reject the materialism that had come to pervade American culture, Pop embraced it by taking consumer packaging and products as well as media icons as source material for a cool, mechanical art. This practice set Pop apart from earlier vanguard movements, which for the most of the century, had explored various forms of abstraction. Pop art was one of the few representational movements that looked revolutionary rather than reactionary. The Pop artists, many of whom had begun as assemblagists, used unprivileged, common images from mass culture and from the man-made environment to create a distinctly American art form. They were responding to the new visual landscape, a vista of advertising, billboards, commercial products, automobiles, strip malls, fast food, television, and comic strips. They took print, film, and television images and transformed them into art, often through various mechanical means. Their pictures were often images of images, copies of copies, a twice-removed effect that echoed the techniques of mass production, the media, and marketing.

On the whole, Pop art manifested little interest in sociopolitical issues. It did, however, capture the contradictions of the “spectacular” culture of consumer capitalism, its glamour and its utter banality. Furthermore, the Pop artists, by using found images, repetition, and mechanical techniques, challenged the modernist belief in the artist’s creative originality and initiated a polemic against elitist views about uniqueness and aesthetic hierarchies. The idea of authenticity, long the cornerstone of artistic production and critical theory, was crumbling.

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The Minimalist Quest for Order

Contemporaneous with Pop was an art of pure geometric abstraction that seemed even more oblivious to the mounting social crises of the day. A coast-to-coast phenomenon that included both sculptors and painters, Minimalism resulted in works that assert a physical presence through a pared-down, simplified format and the use of elementary geometric structures. Although seemingly diametrically opposed to Pop, Minimalism shared some of Pop's formal qualities and methods: the use of repetition and serial forms, a machine aesthetic, and a cool, deadpan presentation. And just as Pop art enshrined mass-produced consumer items, so Minimalists' sculpture used mass-produced industrial components, replacing manufactured images with units of manufacturing. Furthermore, Minimalism celebrated materialism—but in its own way. Minimalist artists were preoccupied with the literal nature of materials, with the solid, empirical, immediate world. The emphasis on concreteness also sets Minimalist artists apart from many Abstract Expressionists, who conceived their imagery as "relational," that is, with colors and forms balanced in relation to one another. To the Minimalists, nothing was more suspect than the self-conscious manipulation of composition for visual effect; they saw it as artiness and posturing, an imposition of the artist's persona that compromised the literal objectness of the work.

The Minimalists employed standard units in an attempt to deny both uniqueness and self-expression—to remove the artists from the consideration of the art. The serial sequences and repetitive structures of Minimalism abetted the campaign against authorship. Sometimes artists used simple shapes, often reiterating a single image in a succession of related works. At other times, the series was contained within a single work, as in Sol Le Witt's open cubes. These structured sequences were often based on mathematics, language, and logic, which became guiding principles in the development of Minimalism. By using agglomerations structured from modular units, some Minimalist works could be incredibly complex and produce dazzling perceptual experiences.

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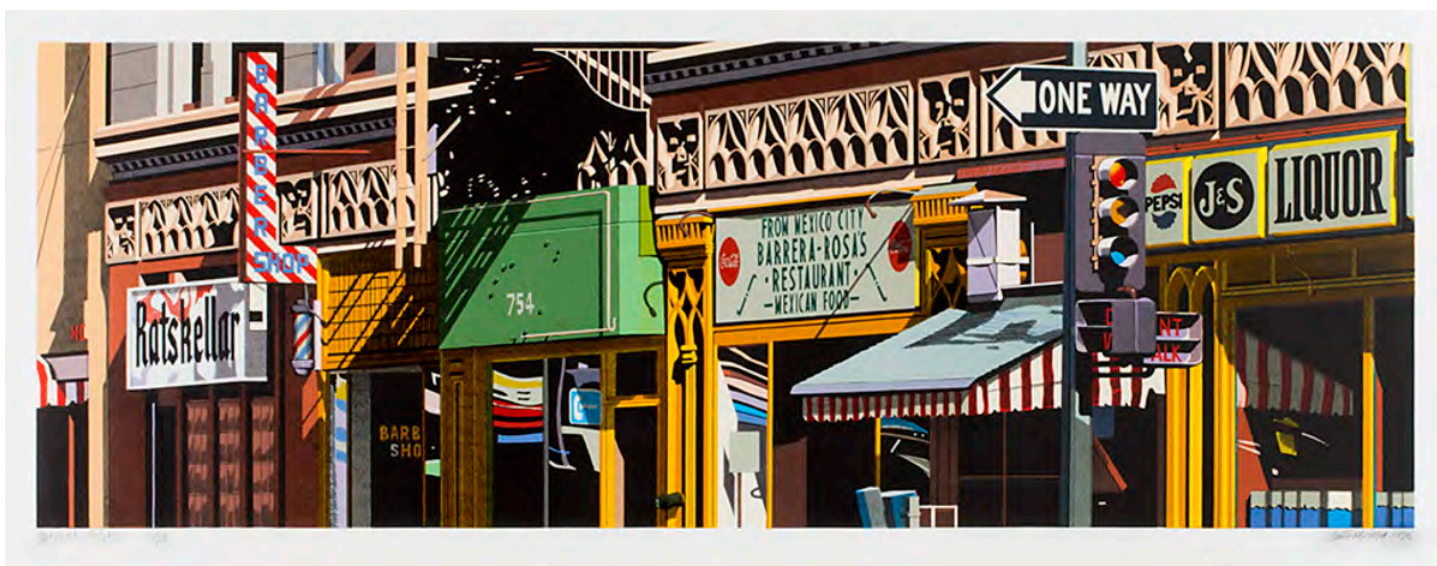


Photorealism

Throughout the history of art, photography had long been considered a stepchild to painting and sculpture. In the seventies, however, photography began to play a new role in art, from serving as a key element in Conceptual art to documenting Earthworks and performance pieces. It would soon move to the center of avant-garde practice and, at the same time, become a vibrant mainstream medium for art making.

A manifestation of the growing popularity and reputation of photography was the great popular success of Photorealism—a style of painting, based on photographs, that simulated photography's shiny, cold surfaces. Photorealism appealed to Americans' sense of literalness and took Pop's fascination with the consumer landscape to the level of superrealism. Artists like Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle, and Robert Cottingham zeroed in on gleaming, reflective surfaces—the chromes and glass of shop windows, storefronts, car fenders, mirrors—to produce a somewhat dislocating, hyperreal landscape. Their works communicated the seamless surface of the photograph and the mechanical nature of the camera's eye. Significant to the development of Photorealism was the acceptance of color photography, previously derided as “impure” and too commercial, as a legitimate vehicle for fine art.

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The Rise of Alternative Identities

Liberation movements—Black Power, feminism, gay rights—that began in the 1960s at the margins of society soon permeated the mainstream and irrevocably altered American life. Not immune to the politics of representation, artists began to produce political work and to take direct action. In a spirit of protest, artists banded together to fight for artists' rights, to express opposition to the war in Vietnam, and to expose some of the art establishment's hidden machinations. Their energetic activities brought art communities together in common causes and raised the consciousness of other artists and the public about the inequities of the art world.

Protesting their exclusion from the mainstream art scene, special interest groups started forming their own institutions. These alternative institutions acknowledged the diversity of American culture and the different traditions from which that culture had emerged. The same acknowledgment occurred beyond the art world as terms like "Hispanic," "Native American," and "African American" came into usage, replacing older disparaging terminology. Television and advertising also bore witness to the new voices of women and ethnic groups. At the same time, traditionally marginalized groups of artists were also beginning to draw on their particular historical and artistic traditions to produce works as rich and diverse in style and attitude as their cultural heritage.

One of the most significant developments of the seventies was the emergence of feminist activity in the arts. In addition to the presentation of exhibitions devoted to the art of women, co-op galleries, collectives, specialized magazines, and activist groups were founded during this fertile period. Also established were women's programs, including the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in 1971. By 1974, over a thousand colleges and universities in America were offering women's studies courses.

Many of the political issues that surfaced within women's liberation activism were transformed into aesthetic investigation by artists. Role reversals, gender stereotypes, domestic activities, and female sexual imagery were introduced into art as subject matter. Also, the methods and materials of traditional women's crafts soon became the stuff of high art. The introduction of craft by women introduced one of the primary art trends of the 1970s, a movement known as Pattern and Decoration, which drew directly on various craft traditions and favored painterly, flat, floral, abstract decoration.



A Return to Figuration

The alternative art forms that flourished in the 1970s posed a challenge to the traditional media of painting and sculpture. Could these media survive the growing popularity of process-oriented work, Conceptual art, performance, video, and installation? The answer, for some painters and sculptors, lay in reconceiving their work in “impure” terms set forth by the new art. Rejecting the formalist dogma that governed painting and sculpture through Minimalism, they embraced subject matter and psychological content.

Abandoning abstraction, some artists reintroduced figuration, oftentimes using somewhat crude and expressionist methods. They embraced the subjective and emotional, paving the way for the reintroduction of recognizable subject matter. Exaggerated perspectives, unconventional poses, and unusual subject matter with personal allusions were only a few devices used by these artists to create works with unsettling expressive qualities. An exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1978 defined this revival of figuration as “New Image Painting.” The practitioners of this style challenged the old division between abstraction and representation and kept painting alive during a period when many considered it an outmoded practice.

By the 1980s, a younger generation of representational artists had emerged. Dubbed “Neo Expressionists” because of their love of bold gesture, heroic scale, mythic content, and rebellious figuration, this diverse group of international artists embraced expression and sentiment to create an emotionally and physically charged art of excess. Satiating an art world desire for excitement and imagery, this postmodern style mirrored the unabashed decadence of the booming eighties. In addition to defying Minimalist restraint and reviving agitated, feeling-laden brushwork, almost all of the Neo-Expressionist generated content by exploiting taboo, primal, or vulgar imagery. Paradoxically, however, while previous avant-garde movements had tended to renounce the past, the Neo-Expressionists sought to liberate themselves from modernist restrictions by rediscovering those very elements within tradition most condemned by progressive, mainstream trends. Not coincidentally, sexuality loomed large in their work. Their allusive figurative content that was inspired by or appropriated from numerous sources came to epitomize postmodern painting.

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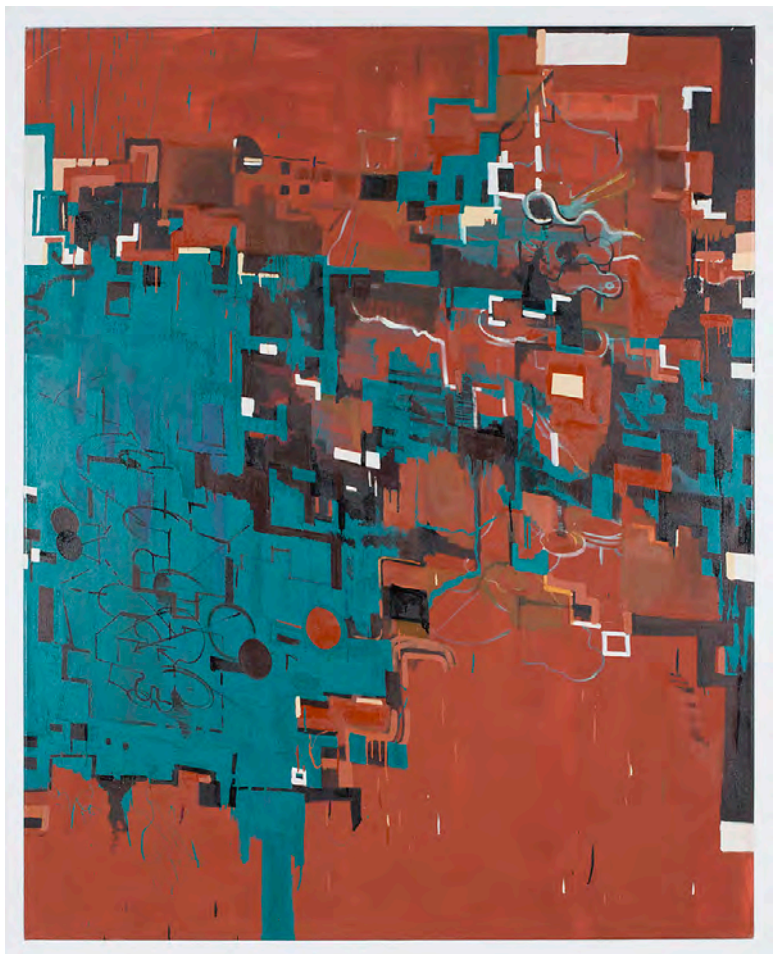


The New Abstraction

A revival of interest in abstract painting surfaced midway through the eighties, in part as a reaction against Neo-Expressionism. Acutely aware of distancing themselves from rigidly self-referential Minimalism or overtly personal Abstract Expressionism, the Neo-Abstractionists went their own way—and in a variety of styles. The paintings of Neo-Abstraction invariably refer to something beyond themselves, usually to earlier styles, often in a combination of analytic geometry and poetic gesture, with these overlaid or layered in the manner characteristic of postmodern art. These artists often mixed invented forms with existing ones borrowed from past styles or artists and/or incorporated found imagery such as decals, stencils, signs, organic forms, and diagrams.

In order to deconstruct modernist myths, many artists made “generic” versions of past styles. Through their use of appropriation and simulation, these artists acknowledged their understanding of the history of twentieth-century abstraction, which had always been regarded as a progressive unfolding of styles--each built upon the other, each “heroic,” “original,” and unrepeatable. By throwing the “correct” sequence awry with the appropriation of an “incorrect” style, these artists showed that the past offers a variety of possibilities and has no fixed, necessary relationship to contemporary artistic practice. Artists employed for their own gain Minimalist grids and repetitive elements, the hard edged forms of sixties Op art, the gestural passages of Abstract Expressionism, decorative patterns pulled from P + D, and the mechanical techniques of Pop. Abstraction from this period has no single look or set of principles. What it does share is the following: a conviction that abstract painting and sculpture have not outlived their relevance, a desire to recover and expand abstraction’s capacity to articulate human experience, and an interest in exploring the boundary between abstraction and representation.

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The Pluralist 90s and the New Century

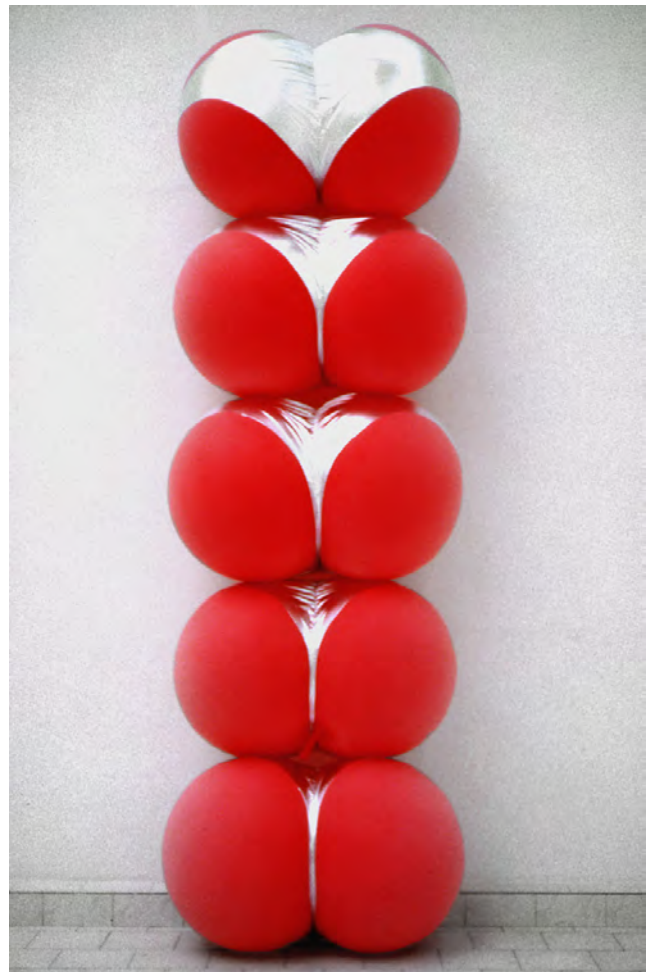
The art boom of the 1980s marked not some final excess but the beginning of a true pluralism. At the advent of a new millennium, art opened itself to diverse voices, shed its confining assumptions, and embraced the complex truth of a multiple identity. Global communications, mass media, and new technologies have combined to make the world a smaller place, but at the same time, have resulted in a complexity of voices. In a shifting, borderless world, America has become newly cosmopolitan and polyglot.

Without the benefit of historical perspective, it is extremely difficult to define the art of the last several years. What do we make of the events and the artwork of our immediate present? There has been no single dominant style, medium, or movement. And while it may be difficult to characterize the art of this time, a number of themes recur. Among those is an interest in identity politics and gender; in exploring the provinces of public and private space; in investigating the possibilities of a hybrid art, particularly as it relates to installation and new media work; and in reexamining the events and culture that affect our everyday lives.

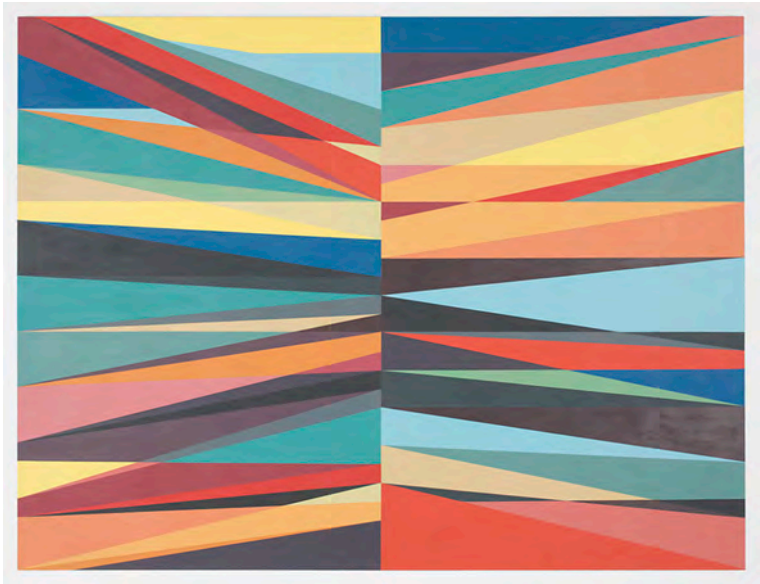
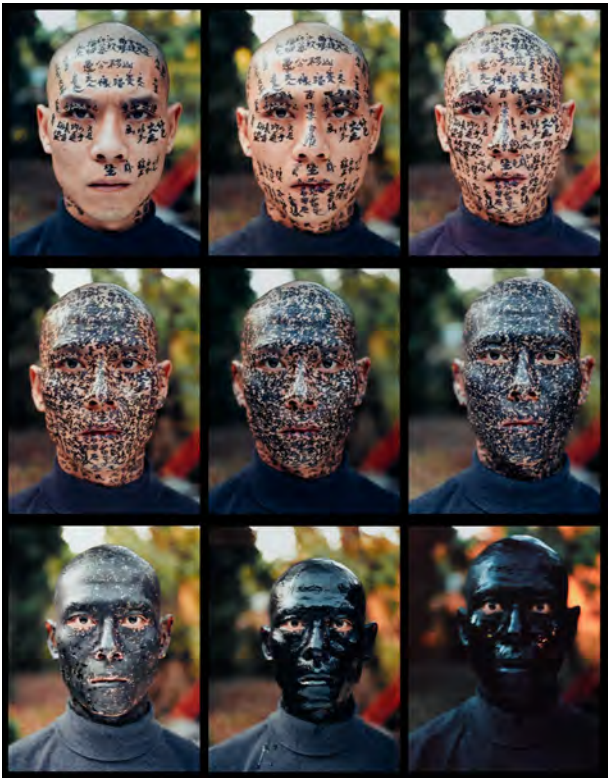
The works highlighted here represent the multiplicity of ideas, practices, and issues that have circulated since the 1990s began. Artists of several generations are considered. The artists who have matured in the 1990s perhaps tell us the most about the world, offering fresh insight; those who have been working longer suggest the longevity of some current concerns. In addition, several artists who have been active for some time have recently become celebrated because, in the current climate, their work seems more relevant. In contrast to earlier decades, in which artistic styles and the formal strategies that constituted them were much easier to discern, the past few decades thus far defies simply categorization.

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The Last Decade of the 20th Century



The 21st Century



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HARD TO
MAKE YOU
FEEL COM-
FORTABLE



fertile with theatrical
scenes of dreams

