

Griffin, Jonathan. *Refusing Identification, Not Identity: Contemporary Positions in Abstraction*. Carla, Issue 35, February, 2024.



Rema Ghuloum
Constellation, 2022-23
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
17 x 23 in
43.2 x 58.4 cm

Sometimes, you only notice something when it's gone. In the past few months, I have become aware of the absence, in a growing number of artists' work, of narrative—in particular, narrative about these artists' biographies or identities. Much of this work is abstract, often purely abstract, and it seems that more and more people, myself included, are lately being drawn to this type of nonobjective and nonliteral work.

Historically, abstraction in visual art developed along two parallel avenues: the distortion of things seen in the world (Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso) and the invention of entirely nonobjective forms (Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint). The contemporary work I have been noticing is, by and large, aligned with the latter stream of abstraction. In something of a departure from the dominance of identity-centered figuration in recent years, much contemporary abstraction is being made by artists of color who are resistant to foregrounding their identities through narrative. As mixed-media artist Teresa Baker described her abstract paintings to me, she noted that it is work that “should speak for itself. I shouldn't have to give words to it.” Her position is echoed by Rema Ghuloum, a painter based in Los Angeles, who told me: “I really want the work to speak for itself.”

Even as recently as a decade ago, writers and curators would succumb to bouts of intellectual handwringing over which aspects of an artist's biography could be admitted into a critical consideration of their work. The art should exist separate from the world, it was often argued; to dwell, for instance, on Agnes Martin's mental illness or Picasso's dire treatment of women while engaging with their art was seen as an act of bad faith, an unfair imposition of the anecdotal onto the aesthetic. Recently though, such reservations have virtually evaporated. Alongside an urgent push towards greater equality and diversity in museums and galleries, biographical storytelling became the de facto cultural form of our time.

Narrative figuration, too, has become more popular than anyone ten years ago would likely have anticipated. While it is pointless to flatten such a broad genre into a shallow stereotype, this turn towards representation in a pictorial sense runs parallel to representation in a social sense: the idea that by picturing people, especially nonwhite people, artists are telling stories that don't usually get told, and uplifting their communities in the process. The art object becomes a vehicle within which a subject can gain symbolic entry into spaces that have been historically denied them: the museum, the blue-chip gallery, the collector's home.

Representation can also slide into objectification, however, especially when it is transmitted within predominantly white spaces, and when individuals (both artists and subjects) are

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Rema Ghuloum
Window, 2023-2024
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
54 x 34 in
137.2 x 86.4 cm

expected to represent the experiences of others whom they may only superficially resemble. Through social media and the growing industry of arts PR and in-gallery communications departments, we are seeing artists' lives with greater transparency than ever before, often accompanied by the ubiquitous in-studio photo portrait. But labels indicating racial identity can easily obscure other aspects of selfhood. I wanted to ask artists of color who work in abstraction, most of whose work I have followed and who were patient enough to engage with me in such difficult conversations, how they felt about having their identities drawn into the interpretation of their otherwise nonrepresentational work. I had to acknowledge the unavoidable irony that by writing this piece I might be perpetuating the very tropes that many of these artists are working to resist. Nevertheless, many agreed it's a subject worth confronting.

In my conversations, what quickly became clear is that these questions are differently nuanced for each artist, each of whom has a relationship to their heritage as complex as subjecthood itself. Baker, for example, has a father who is of Mandan and Hidatsa descent and a German-American mother. Baker has lived in New York, San Francisco, and Texas and is now based in Los Angeles, though she grew up in the Northern Plains. Her physical distance from that region and the Native communities who live in it, she says, shapes her abstract paintings, based on forms cut from artificial turf, a material she first began using while living in Texas.

Baker does not invoke personal narrative or identity with one-to-one, representative correlations of object and meaning. "Rather," she says, "I talk about [identity] in terms of process and how it's influencing me. The object itself is finished when I can't place it." But her work, she insists, still comes from those contexts that formed her. *Flow* (2023), for example, recently included in the Hammer Museum's *Made in L.A.* biennial, includes on its surface yarn, artificial sinew, and dried buckskin—all media variously used in traditional Indigenous American art. I understand such works as psychic maps of terrains more felt than remembered. Abstraction, for Baker, is about "bridging gaps."

Ghuloum, who says she admires Baker's work, told me that she hopes to make paintings that are connective, even universal. "I think a lot in my work about holding different kinds of spaces within a painting, like grief or pain and joy," she says. Ghuloum's distinctive technique of applying layers of color, which she scrapes, sands, and abrades, gives her paintings exceptional depth. They contain multitudes—like identity and human experience itself. Ghuloum refers to herself as "Lebanese-Jordanian-Kuwaiti-American," but, born in North Hollywood to first-generation immigrant parents, she identifies simply as "American" in her published bios. "I feel like all of that gets synthesized somehow," she says, referring to

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Rema Ghuloum
Afterglow, 2023-2024
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
54 x 48 in
137.2 x 121.9 cm

Philip Martin Gallery
3342 Verdugo Road, Los Angeles, CA 90065
www.philipmartingallery.com

her multihyphenate heritage, “even if I can’t explain it.”

Edgar Ramirez, whose paintings are often made from distressed layers of painted cardboard, told me that around the time he graduated with his MFA at Art Center in 2020, he was aware that his peers were mostly making “identity-based work” and that he did not feel comfortable in that mold. Ramirez, who is Mexican-American and grew up in a working-class community in Long Beach, near the ports, aspired to make art that did not require a press release or prior knowledge of who the artist was or what he’d made before. He cites the work of James Turrell, noting that “for a very long time I felt that I couldn’t do that, because of where I came from.” He is also deeply invested in the history of art, particularly the white-dominated histories of abstract expressionism and nouveau réalisme, but also European landscape painters such as J.M.W. Turner. “I want to add my part into that,” he says.

Just as Baker uses aspects of her heritage to establish her intuitive language, Ramirez found a way to thread the needle between abstraction and identity: He developed a language of abstract painting that is informed by the colors, textures, patterns, and signs of the environment in which he grew up, but which extends through the leitmotif of the shipping port into more general reflections on global commerce and consumer capitalism. In a recent exhibition at Chris Sharp Gallery, Smoky Hollow, his paintings alluded to the colors, proportions, and scale of shipping containers—a subtly ironic critique of blue-chip paintings’ asset-class status.

Ramirez’s approach to abstraction has much in common with that of another young multimedia painter, Reginald Sylvester II, who recently exhibited in Los Angeles at Roberts Projects. Sylvester, who is Black, grew up in Oakland but is now based in New York and has family in both Chicago and Mississippi. His most immediate reference, however, is the grit of the industrial neighborhood in Brooklyn where he works. He uses sheet rubber, steel, and aluminum beams, and re-incorporates debris and scrap materials from previous paintings. He also collects military tent shells (his father served in the military) and sometimes applies the rope and canvas to the surface of his paintings.

At his Roberts Projects exhibition, titled T-1000 after the shapeshifting android from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), Sylvester presented works influenced by the retrofuturism of science fiction, such as the silver-painted *Ridgewood* (2023), a near-monochromatic assemblage of panels embedded with industrial materials.

Sylvester spoke to me of “working through the CliffsNotes” left to him by preceding artists in the hope of arriving somewhere

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Rema Ghuloum
Light Prayer, 2022-23
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
80 x 72 in
203.2 x 182.9 cm

new; he builds from the fertile compost of art history, vernacular traditions, pop culture, and his urban environment with his faith not so much in the representation of a contemporary moment but in the possibility of the appearance of something new and unfamiliar in the future.

Considering “Black abstraction” more broadly brings to mind painters such as Alma Thomas, Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, Ed Clark, Alvin Loving, Peter Bradley, Sam Gilliam, Stanley Whitney, and Howardena Pindell. The story most commonly told about this canon of Black modernists is that, in the 1960s and ’70s, they were dually marginalized by the separatist Black Arts Movement, which had no use for art that did not forcefully telegraph its maker’s identity, and by the white, liberal, commercial, and academic artistic mainstream.¹ Whatever the truth of this narrative (many of these figures, for instance, enjoyed considerable success before they were latterly “rediscovered” by the market, which burnished their stories),² it is undeniable that their devotion to nonrepresentational art posed a significant challenge to the structures of the art world at that time. As art historian Darby English wrote in his book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (2016), “art-historical texts that address black modernists tend toward a singular determination to reconcile them with the very ideology their practices escaped.”³ English effectively works to redress this imbalance, defending instead the position held by influential artists such as Bradley, for whom “modernism served as a broadly multicultural formation, a fragile community of equals where lines of affiliation differed significantly from public life.”⁴

During the years of the Obama administration, many commentators on the Left and the Right responded to the election of the nation’s first Black president by referring to a “Post-Racial” America. The now fantastical-seeming term, which first emerged in the 1970s,⁵ is echoed by the art-historical marker “Post-Black,” which curator Thelma Golden applied to artists in her epochal exhibition *Freestyle*, mounted at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. In her catalog introduction, she wrote that these were “artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of black-ness.”⁶ Rather, they were committed to reclaiming their unique subjectivities, along with all their heterogeneous interests and influences. Mark Bradford, Jennie C. Jones, Julie Mehretu, and Rashid Johnson are among the included artists whose work remains an important precedent for many of today’s artists who explore abstraction, even if the cultural moment from which they emerged, decades before the emergencies of the Trump presidency and the increased visibility of the realities of police brutality, is markedly different.

It should be noted that for an artist to refuse identification

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Rema Ghuloum
Last Night, 2023-2024
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
54 x 34 in
137.2 x 86.4 cm

through their art is not the same as that artist refusing to identify themselves at all. The Los Angeles-based painter Spencer Lewis told me that while he tends not to discuss issues around identity (“What do I gain from talking to white people about race?” he asks; “I don’t have to educate people”) he would also never deny the importance of his Blackness for his work: “It’s who I am.” Lewis makes big, untidy abstract paintings in thick accumulated crusts of paint on hairy jute surfaces. Sometimes he affixes pats or dried skeins of paper pulp to the painted canvas. Recently, he’s been adding oversized yellow pencils, a foot or so long, which can be moved around the canvas by unfastening the magnets fixed to their backs. The paintings are sincere, ingenuous, and vital.

I asked Lewis if abstraction, for him, represents a form of freedom. “I’m interested in economic freedom,” he responded, flatly. “I’m from a family where the important part is survival. In America, the thing I worry about when it comes to race is Black kids getting killed by cops. I don’t care so much about painting, right? A lot of painting’s just for rich people.” Lewis’ candor was arresting. I began this avenue of research with the hunch that the imposition of a recognizable racial identity onto the artist is often an exploitative mechanism of a venal art market in which diversity is simply another selling point. Lewis reframed the argument, whereby the market itself was not at fault so much as the white liberals operating blithely within it.

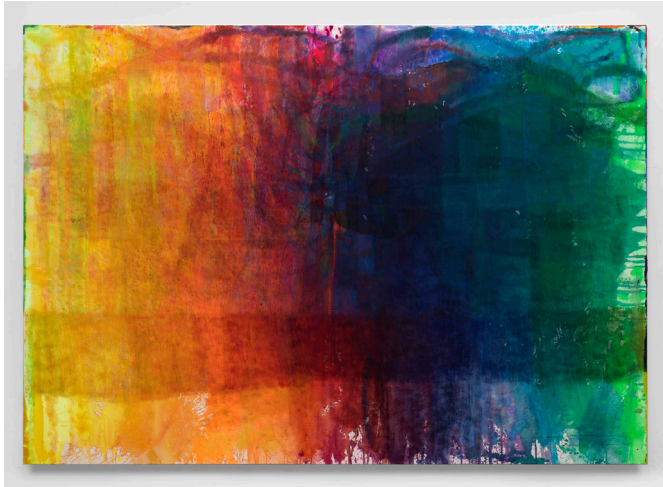
Why shouldn’t artists of color seek to gain any edge possible in the market over their white peers? Furthermore, in recent years, the demographics of protagonists in that market—gallerists and collectors—have gradually become more diverse. “In some ways, this conversation is not, per se, a productive one for me,” Lewis continued. “The conversation needs to be about the structural issues.” Those issues will not be resolved by individual artists, no matter what their work looks like, or how it’s framed. In the here and now, as Lewis says, “the game is to be sold, not told.”

In time, of course, the vicissitudes and inequities of the market will be forgotten or (hopefully) redressed, and what will remain will be the work, whether it was sold privately or not. Ghuloum expressed to me a sentiment shared by many artists I spoke to, one related to her reluctance to tether the meaning of her work to a contemporary biographical narrative: “I think about the work withstanding time.”

Jonathan Griffin is an art critic and writer based in Los Angeles. He writes for *Frieze*, *The New York Times*, *the Financial Times*, *ArtReview*, *Apollo*, and others.

1. See Megan O’Grady, “Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due,” *The New York Times*, February 12,

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Rema Ghuloum
Entrance, 2022
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
72 x 102 in
182.9 x 259.1 cm

2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/t-magazine/black-abstract-painters.html>; Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, exhibition catalog (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 74, 84.

2. See, for example, the career of Sam Gilliam, who exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971, the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1982, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994. Now consider the online erratum appended to my article “The New Dealer,” which clarifies that the print interview with Los Angeles art dealer David Kordansky “erroneously included a product among the types of things Gilliam bartered his work for at a lower point in his career. While he exchanged art for services such as dental work, he never traded art for laundry detergent.” See Jonathan Griffin, “The New Dealer,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, September 10, 2014, emphasis original, <https://archive.nytimes.com/tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/david-kordansky-art-dealer-profile/>.

3. Darby English, 1971: *A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 24.

4. English, 1971, 23.

5. The earliest recorded usage is credited to James T. Wootens, “Compact Set Up for ‘Post-Racial’ South,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 1971, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/10/05/79156105.pdf>.

6. Thelma Golden, “Introduction,” *Freestyle*, exhibition catalog, ed. Christine Y. Kim and Franklin Sirmans (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 15.