

ROBERTA SMITH

The Staying Power (and It's Not a Freeze Frame) of Paint

JUDGING from the two big international shows in Europe this summer, one might almost conclude that painting is no longer a viable art form. There's barely a canvas to be seen in either Documenta 11, the latest version of the global survey that takes over Kassel, Germany, every five years, or its no-frills, equally earnest doppelgänger, Manifesta 4, a short train ride away in Frankfurt. Instead, video — that sleek, cost-efficient, hypnotizing successor to installation art — and photography rule the international survey circuit.

Perhaps quixotically, museums in two other European cities have taken the opposite tack, mounting exhibitions devoted to painting alone. In Basel, Switzerland, three museums, including the venerable Kunstmuseum, have worked in concert, organizing individual shows that are collectively titled "Painting on the Move." In Paris, the Pompidou Center has an exhibition of 18 mostly living, trendy painters in "Dear Painter: Figure Painting Since the Time of Picabia."

These shows are far from perfect, but that seems to be part of the point. The Basel shows have a relaxed, thrown-together air that plays well against Documenta's polish. The Paris show is named after "Dear Painter, Paint

Documentas and Manifestas aside, Europe offers evidence that art can still be made without film or videotape.

Me," a 1981 painting by Martin Kippenberger, the German maverick who died in 1996 (but seems more alive than ever) and has a bit of his sense of subversive high jinks.

Still, like Documenta, one-sidedness gives these shows clear agendas that are thought-provoking. That the painting shows are also interesting to think about as art, while Documenta tends to be primarily interesting for its newsy, sometimes wrenching subject matter, suggests the importance of form — of medium, not message. Art has to be for its own sake before it can convincingly be for anything else. The works in Documenta that seem to understand form — including the form of video — stand head and shoulders above the rest.

"Painting on the Move" in Basel covers mostly European and American painting from 1900 to the present in three overlapping acts. Some artists appear in two shows: Sigmar Polke, Laura Owens, Robert Ryman and Luc Tuymans. Gerhard Richter and Kippenberger are in all three.

Act I is "A Century of Contemporary Painting: 1900-2000" at the Kunstmuseum, organized by the museum's new director, Bernhard Mendes Bürgli. It celebrates the medium's longevity with 140 works — the majority by the usual suspects, Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse. It proceeds through Abstract Expressionism and Pop to as yet unlabeled work of relative youngsters like Ms. Owens, Elizabeth Peyton, Neo Rauch and Gary Hume.

But the quirky installation of the show seems intended to compensate for its predictability by questioning both modernism's linear order and America's supposed dominance of postwar art. Roy Lichtenstein's

comic-book weeping blond, "Hopeless," is next to a violent blood-red splatter by Hermann Nitsch. There are occasional harmonies, like the horizontal tangle of Picasso's 1950 "Young Women on the Banks of the Seine" (After Courbet) next to the horizontal tangle of Pollock's dark 1951 "Number 11" and across from the vertical tangle of Wols's "Painting" of 1947-48. For those who consider self-critique a postmodern innovation, Picabia's "Kiss" of 1924-27 suggests otherwise, ostensibly painted and surely parodying the swooning lovers

being churned out at the time by Marc Chagall, whose green and yellow "Rabbi" hangs on the gallery's opposite wall.

Act II is "There Is No Final Picture — Painting after 1968" at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Museum for Contemporary Art). The focus is 20th-century painting's best-known brush with death: its passage through the eye of the Minimal-Conceptual needle in the late 1960's and 70's. We can see painting being whittled down to almost nothing in the word-paintings of John

Baldessari and On Kawara; the simple stripes of Daniel Buren; the dots of Niclé Toroni; and the monochromes, or near-monochromes, of Robert Ryman, Olivier Mosset and Mr. Richter. The standout is a work by Mr. Polke that consists of a smattering of creamy white tile-like squares on a generic striped wool blanket. Surprisingly opulent, it manages to seem skeptical of both traditional painting and its particularly severe companions in Basel.

As the show continues, its haphazard selection surveys painting as it emerged from

the other side of the needle, changed forever. The medium began to expand again, becoming more conscious of its artifice and history, infiltrated by photography and popular culture, more physically eccentric.

Emblematic of the change is Kippenberger's recycling of the modernist grid as a thickly painted, pink-checkered table cloth, labeled with "preis," the German word for price. Sometimes there's an air of desperation. Adrian Seheiss's expanse of large painted panels dis-

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Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Torino



Nicholas Martin Kippenberger (Courtesy Galerie Garcia Caplan)



SURVIVING THE CENTURY Francis Picabia's "Kiss" of 1924-27, left; Martin Kippenberger's "2. Preis." (1987), top; and Wilhelm Sasnal's "Ohne Titel (Martyna)" (2001), above, are in the trio of exhibits "Painting on the Move" in Basel, Switzerland.

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played on the floor. Especially beautiful are Mr. Tuyman's pale, neoclassic, photo-based images and Raoul de Keyser's sketchy abstractions. "I can't go on, I must go on," these works seem to say, and they confirm that painting's redeeming quality may now be its modesty, as the American critic Douglas Crimp suggests in an interview in the catalog. The show concludes negligibly with Sherrie Levine's conceptually overburdened "Silver Monochromes (After Andy Warhol)" from 1999, 12 smallish silver panels inspired by Warhol's silver-pillow installation.

Act III, at the Kunsthalle, concentrates almost exclusively on painting's post-1968 rendezvous with photography. "After Reality — Realism and Current Painting" — a sharp, resonating title for a generally wan show — was organized by the Kunsthalle's director, Peter Pakesh. With Mr. Richter, and Chuck Close installed as éminences grises, it confirms that photo-realism has finally acquired postmodern credibility, becoming a place where high-mindedness and market can meet. The general message seems to be that it's all right to make paintings if you don't have too much fun doing it.

Occasionally the tension between the process of painting and photographic illusion is exploited to good effect, especially in the work of Francesca Gabbiani, David Korty, Wilhelm Sasnal (something of a Tuyman clone) and Sarah Morris, who develops her architectural abstractions on the computer. But overall it seems that photo-based painting may be the monochrome painting of the 21st century, only more so; that is, a new but already tired emblem of progressiveness.

"Dear Painter" at the Pompidou is the first exhibition organized by Alison Gingeras, an American who is the museum's new curator of contemporary art. Like "After Reality" in Basel, the show focuses on representational painting. But it mixes together photo-based images (Ms. Peyton again), work that borrows from illustration (Mr. Rauch and Kai Althoff) and that which harks back to a time when paint and flesh were



Brian Calvin's "Don't Be Denied" (2000), above, and Elizabeth Peyton's "Blur Kurt" (1995), right, are in the exhibition "Dear Painter: Figure Painting Since the Time of Picabia" at the Pompidou Center in Paris. The Pompidou and three museums in Basel, Switzerland, are examining 20th-century painting.

Painting on the Move

Kunstmuseum, Museum für Gegenwartskunst and the Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland.
Through Sept. 8.

Dear Painter: Figure Painting Since the Time of Picabia

Pompidou Center, Paris.
Through Sept. 2.

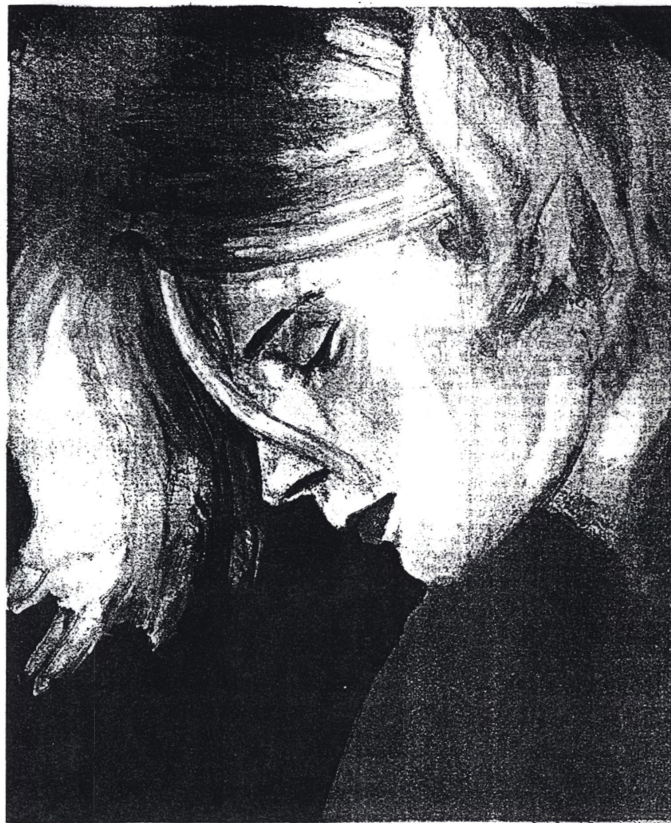
nearly synonymous (John Currin). This uneven show suggests that there are still a lot of different ways to paint and that German or Northern European artists have a particular knack for finding them.

Picabia presides in the first gallery with a wall of academic-kitsch nudes from the late 1930's and a lush, less cynical painting of a woman in a scarf. Alex Katz and Mr. Polke follow as more recent precedents, along with Bernard Buffet, the show's joking stab at revisionism. His warmed-over commercialized Picasso clones from the 1950's and 60's provide early warning that the French painters in this show make zero impact.

The possibility that everything old can be new again, that painting is now primarily a form of sampling, is everywhere apparent, in the Color Field landscapes of Peter Doig; the kicky, revised Social Realism of Mr. Rauch; Sophie von Hellermann's antic, wind-blown raids of Sandro Chia, German Expressionism and (maybe) Florine Stettheimer; and Brian Calvin's pasty, pseudo-naïve renderings of teenagers, whose simple silhouettes and vacant backgrounds recall Mr. Katz's tiny cut-out collages from the early 50's.

Reports of painting's death have been exaggerated for about 30 years. The shows in Paris and Basel are hardly definitive, but they provide a good Eurocentric browse, and the clarity of their borders highlights by omission how much interesting painting lies beyond them. The selected works give little indication that abstract or semiabstract painting also squeezed through the eye of the needle to re-engage illusionistic space as well as psychological and now digital space in ways that were previously taboo.

Meanwhile, art has spread out to other mediums, or become more in-



Garth Brown's Enterprise, New York

clusive. Pictorialism and color have ceased to be the exclusive property of works on canvas, if they ever were. They are actively exploited in film, video, photography and computer art. In addition, it is now recognized that age-old mediums like ceramics and textiles have contributed mightily to pictorialism for millenniums.

Painting retains a special potential

for conveying thought through touch and materials. You can hold its status as market commodity against it, but it's still pretty much a cottage industry, which is more than can be said for a lot of video and even photography these days. Most paintings are made by one person, without assistance from a location scout, make-up artist, director or editor, and they can't be reproduced and sold in multiples.

Painting remains the expression of an exceedingly human need for mark making — a basic urge to communicate like speech, writing and song. If this weren't the case, the century would not have had so many self-taught painters, some of them genius. Paintings can have the expressive density of written pages, and new ones are being made all the time that make exceptionally good reading. □