

John Eric Byers, Painter

by John Perreault

Just as there are some people who won't eat a serving of unidentified salad greens -- let's say the various cutting "lettuces," ranging from butternut to Japanese mustards -- unless provided with the name of each tasty leaf, so there are some who will not look at art unless clearly classified. Is it painting or sculpture? Is it furniture or design? If neither, or both, then what do we call the art object in question? Unfortunately, labels are lenses many require in order to see.

When looking at John Eric Byers' new artworks, at first you might think you are seeing a grid of tiny tiles. But closer inspection reveals that the squares are in low relief, suggesting a single flat surface, although they are separated by incised, intersecting lines. The small squares so delineated are painted individually with six layers of casein, in equal numbers of six of seven different colors -- the seventh used as the "field" color. The single exception is one of the two large paintings (59" x 95") that uses all seven colors. There are an equal number of squares of each color in each painting, distributed randomly and/or intuitively, no color abutting a square of the same color. The color squares in the six 49" x 59" paintings, the two larger ones, and smaller paintings that Byers showed me in his Ithaca, New York, studio are deployed in such a way that they create a flat field and do not optically recede and advance as colors tend to do.

Neo-Plasticism? Only at first glance. The squares are equal but, in the overall view, particular. They do not bounce around like the unequal, composed rectangles of late Mondrian, in such paintings as *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.

Byers' squares are oddly serene. We are not seeing the roar of nature or the pushing and shoving -- the push and pull, in Abstract Expressionist parlance -- but the infinite variety. We are looking at a wall, not a playing field. Or if a field of play, then one that is beautifully detached and a kind of paean to universal plentitude.

We are looking at field paintings, rather than cubist paintings. Just as to some extent Byers' furniture is descended from the sculpture (and the furniture) of Donald Judd, his new paintings reference, I think, Ad Reinhardt and early Frank Stella. The squares of color are locked in by the congruent tonalities and the richness of surface. If there were a musical equivalent, it would not be a fugue or the syncopation of jazz, but an harmonic hum; not counterpoint, but a resonant chord. We could call these rules-based paintings; we could call them latter-day systemic painting. We could call them beautiful.

Otherwise at first glance, Byers' painted bas-reliefs come from left field. In the last two decades, painting has nearly been killed off by the so-called return to

painting. This, translated, means an ambitious tradition has been reduced to second-generation Pop Art and/or so-called Bad Painting. This theoretical return never had a payoff, possibly because it posited parody, quotation, “bad” subject matter and “bad” paint-handling as painting’s salvation. Abstraction was scotched, with the exception of a few really “bad” abstractionists, in favor of mass-media mediated representation -- with or without irony.

Byers’ new works show that there may be a way out of this cul-de-sac. That dead zone was created by letting theory rather than spirit create value. If we define painting as the application of color to a two-dimensional, or mostly two-dimensional, plane rather than limiting the term to paint on canvas or paint on walls, then painting may have some life in it yet. If it is too difficult to change the meaning, then change the means, which, in effect, changes the meaning.

Byers, who studied at the now defunct Wendell Castle School, has been making and exhibiting art furniture at least since 1990. In 2004, he was honored by a mid-career survey at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, and been awarded numerous awards and grants for his furniture.

It is daring of him to stop furniture-making and take up painting. His initial discipline, however, gives him some advantage. Because Byers does not come from a painting background *per se*, he is not burdened by the current, neo-academic stranglehold on painting. The specific problems that his exceptional problem-solving abilities address may be unique to his particular practice, but his methodology has a larger significance.

Nevertheless, Byers’ zigzag into painting might initially be confusing to the art-furniture folks and as well as, for different reasons, to the painting and sculpture crowd.

For the first, his move could be seen as an abandonment. After all, Byers has received considerable recognition for his accomplishments in art furniture. Byers is well-established as a furniture-maker. His signature “language” has stood him well. Typically his minimalist cabinetry is inflected with regular -- but not obsessively regular -- gouge marks, sometimes inside as well as outside wall-hung and free-standing storage units. The latter, as far as I know, is unique in furniture-making. Color in his most celebrated work is sometimes black, but mostly the flat, creamy white he achieves with multiple layers of casein or milk paint, an ancient water-based paint substance that preceded oil paint as a household staple. It is nearly impossible to make an uninflected surface with it. This and its characteristic flat finish is what Byers relishes.

Up close, the subtle painterliness of his layerings of milk paint can be identified as the cause of his furniture’s subliminal luxuriousness.

His comfortable but modest farm house outside Ithaca, in upstate New York, is a gouged environment. Not only are there prime examples of his studio furniture -- a dining table and various dressers and cabinets -- the doors beneath his kitchen sink, a large floor to ceiling bookcase and all of the woodwork is similarly painted and gouged. His house could serve as a modest, single-artist museum of sculpture-for-use.

In the world of painting, there may be a territorial defensiveness and suspicion of Byers' craft background, for craft is still anathema in a world where ideas -- such as they are -- are seen as more important than materials or handwork.

But if the truth be known, not only is Byers repositioning himself, he is rethinking the grounding of two-dimensional abstraction. He is not parodying Neo-Plasticism, he is extending it, by factoring in the tactile and the subtle paint-handling occasioned by the difficult casein medium. He even seems to embrace some of Mondrian's spiritual intentions for art. The work is contemplative.

But why has Byers moved from furniture to painting?

Corrective surgery on ailing shoulders may have had something to do with his move to two-dimensional expression. Nevertheless, I suspect that sooner or later he would have outgrown furniture. His paintings are no less labor-intensive than the furniture, per square inch. They still require laborious hand-sanding and layers of paint, and if not gouging, then certainly incising. There is, however, a release of new energy and creativity. Making art without the crutch of cabinetry is a new challenge for him.

Byers told me he was uncomfortable with the fact that the furniture field does not embrace the beauty of irregularity. That beauty is central to his aesthetic concerns. He pointed out how irregular his gouging has always been, which, after thinking about it, I myself propose as the root cause of the liveliness even his most simple cabinets occasion.

I remember seeing my first painting by Mondrian in real life, as opposed to photo reproductions. The lines were not all that straight or sharp and in fact looked decidedly handmade. Those factors contributed to making the Mondrian so much better as an art experience than other, later, neater examples of Neo-Plasticism nearby. Or take the brief but once highly valorized Finish Fetish abstract painting that came out of the West Coast in the '60s, based upon -- or so rumor had it -- art magazine reproductions of work by East Coast painters like Barnett Newman. In real life, the West Coast paintings are curiously "dead," whereas a Newman with all its supposed flaws in view still sings.

Considering these factors, the logic of Byers' move from art furniture to painting is entirely persuasive. The surface treatments of his signature furniture now stand on their own, but transformed. They have morphed into relief paintings that

garner all the objecthood that was once the mission of advanced painting after abstract expressionism, but do so in a new way.

Both formalist painting of the '60s and Byers' new works have their roots in craft traditions such as anti-illusionism, truth-to-material, and the innate expressiveness generated by procedures of making. In the case of formalist abstraction, this antecedent is usually repressed. Given Byers' background, this cannot be the case in terms of his turn to painting.

But where do Byers' paintings fit within contemporary systems of art classification? Even if we yield, as we should, and call them paintings, what kind of paintings are they? They are *sui generis*.

The viewer searches for touchstones in contemporary art that might aid in interpretation; but they are wonderfully scarce. Some might initially think Pattern Painting would be one such reference. Pattern Painting is also called P&D, the P for patterning and D for decoration. Because of the restricted colors, the strict grid, and the formal tensions created, Byers' painted reliefs -- representing full-fledged attacks on several categorical templates -- are hardly decorative. To qualify as Pattern Painting, motifs must be used in regulated intervals. And although patterning is built upon grids, the grid itself is not a pattern -- or if so, a very dull pattern indeed.

When quizzed, the artist maintains that Pattern Painting was not his intention. Motifs can of course be geometric, vis-à-vis Islamic patterning, but the squares created by an equal number of equally spaced lines intersecting at a 90-degree angle cannot qualify as motifs except in the most minimalist way.

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Art furniture -- usually one-of-a-kind, primarily made by the artists themselves, signed, but like ordinary furniture intended for use -- has a distinct history. It dates from the worldwide Arts and Crafts Movement, which was a reaction against mass-production and an attempt to return to values of craftsmanship suddenly threatened by mechanization. It was also a concerted attack on hierarchical ways of classifying art. It remains to be seen if its late manifestation as what might be called the Art Furniture movement has, like its antecedent, seen better days. The problem with fine art (or its doppelgänger Art Furniture) is that styles and movements are finite. Fashion and creativity move on, leaving a trail of also-rans.

In terms of art furniture, Byers definitely made the last cut. He is one of the best of the second-generation Art Furniture artists. His language is all his and far above the pomo shenanigans that captured the fancy of furniture-makers -- and fine-art-furniture collectors -- across the board. Byers managed to marry formal

severity with a richness of finish not seen before. I think his cabinets are destined to be seen as furniture classics.

Now, by jettisoning function -- which is, after all, the traditional, defining distinction made between furniture and sculpture -- Byers is free to further investigate surface and color removed from composition and form. He brings his craft sensibilities and well-honed virtues to the arena of painting and all the paradoxes that this entails, in the process revealing the contemplative, perhaps even metaphysical, underpinnings of his stately use of repetition. But in his hands, the repetitiveness enlivened by the deployment of colors, breathes.

By turning his back on three-dimensional art, Byers is free to investigate his furniture surfaces in themselves, standing alone as themselves, becoming ... paintings. Having become paintings, his art is fresh. He is offering a new perspective on the dialogue between the optical and the tactile.

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