Terry Winters
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Matthew Marks Gallery
In the discourse around painting after the Second World War, attention to form as such precluded much thinking about the genesis of that form: not only the process of making, but the theorizations of that process. The rise of modernist criticism associated with the critic Clement Greenberg had much to do with this orientation. Greenberg’s mandate that art turn away from the world and participate instead in self-criticism, whereby “characteristic methods of a discipline […] entrench it more firmly in its area of competence,”¹ identified and helped to produce the very thing it described. The manifest certitude of his pronouncements (regarding individual practices and also larger theories of visual arts in the context of an incrementally dismantled cultural domain) contributed to the pervasiveness of his ideas. Nonetheless, vitalism — the doctrine that life exceeds mechanistic reductions — remains one of the period’s profound legacies, albeit one too often absent from standard accounts of American painting in this period.

Historian Jackson Lears has discussed the ubiquity of early twentieth-century cults of vitalism, and he broadly poses the pertinence of such atavistic thinking within the fields of philosophy, psychology, and advertising.² More recently Scott Bukatman has suggested this context as a
Harry Bailey and John Foster
Making 'Em Move, 1931
35 mm film, black and white, sound, 7 min. 30 sec.
precondition for the cinema’s quick popularization: “As much as it was a medium of movement, it was also a medium of life, and, to a great degree, movement and life were manifestations of the same force. If in France the medium was the cinématographe (the movement-writer), in America it was the Biograph or, more tellingly, the Vitascope.”

He connects early film’s enchantment with a sort of Pygmalianism — wherein objects such as paintings and statues come to life on screen — to a discussion of the animated film, which might be the vitalist form par excellence. To quote Bukatman once more: “In early animation everything pulsates with life — not only in the foreground, where barnyard animals, steamboats, and airplanes bounce and stretch in zesty rhythm, but, before the introduction of transparent animation cels, even the supposedly stable background scenery seemed to possess a vibrant buzz of its own. Forms were dynamic and mutable; all things were possible.”

Although this passage responds directly to Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished essay on Walt Disney’s early cartoons, it segues into another on animism in art history. Art historian David Freedberg has written extensively on these issues in the Renaissance, but ideas of living images — images that channel the force of their creator and their materials, images painted so realistically as to appear present, and so on — have remained peripheral to modernism.

When one looks at cases internal to, even constitutive of, modernist painting, however, vitalism persists. Jackson Pollock is but one signal
Jackson Pollock
Number 15, 1950
Oil on masonite
22 × 22 inches; 56 × 56 cm
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
Museum Associates Purchase Award (M.51.5.7)
instance. Art historian Jonathan Katz asserts the centrality of this philosophy — hidden, as it were, in plain sight — for Pollock and many others. Indeed, Katz uses thinkers as diverse as Herbert Matter, Henri Bergson, and Rudolf Steiner, and artists ranging from Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, and Robert Motherwell, to argue for a historically conditioned legitimacy to vitalist discourse. As for Pollock specifically, he quotes the artist as follows:

The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world — in other words — expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.

energy and motion
made visible —
memories arrested in space

If emphasis has traditionally been on the side of the unconscious, which is to say the inner worlds Pollock names, Katz would shift it to the energy and motion he makes visible, which likewise makes clear that this is not — or not always — spiritual flimflam but rather the stuff of particle physics and nuclear weapons. (T. J. Clark ultimately reads Pollock’s moves between macro and micro, particularly in the diminutive canvases he installed alongside his gargantuan ones in a 1950 exhibition
Eva Hesse
*Right After*, 1969
Fiberglass
Approximately 60 × 216 × 48 inches; 152 × 549 × 122 cm
Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of Friends of Art (M1970.27)
at the Betty Parsons Gallery, as imaging the convertibility of mass — an inhuman space of the infinitesimal or the infinite so germane to Pollock’s atomic age and the experimental physics that engendered it.\(^7\)

The larger point, and one that bears directly upon the work of Terry Winters, involves the turning of formal issues into expressions of the immanence that gives them form. While keenly interested in natural and theoretical sciences — as registers in the observable content of so much of his work, from the early specimens and data figures to the more recent diagrams and topologies, as well as the structural and organizational principles of his non-objective compositions — Winters conducts experiments in which the material potentialities of the medium in which he is working are tested over and again. In an essay titled “Evolution,” Richard Shiff proposes that matter responds with feeling to what is done to it. He quotes Winters as seeking “forces, geometries, and forms of ‘non-organic’ life” that would contribute to the development of “painting as a vitalized object.”\(^8\) A vital object results through the material, even as it allows for complex revelations that exceed its objective qualities.

When Winters began making art, Pollock was long gone, his influence reconfirmed by a 1967 Museum of Modern Art retrospective and literalized by Richard Serra and Eva Hesse, among others. By the late 1960s, painting was largely abandoned in favor of sculpture, notably Serra’s thrown lead and Hesse’s webs, and a range of conceptual approaches soon came to seem urgent, even — or especially — when
Robert Ryman

A painting of twelve strokes, measuring 11\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 11\(\frac{3}{4}\)"
signed at the bottom right, 1961

Oil and gesso on linen canvas in wood frame
14 × 14 × 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches; 36 × 36 × 4 cm

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Purchase through a gift of Mimi and Peter Haas
responding to painting-based precedents. Beginning in the early 1970s, Winters, freshly graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, studied how pigments, mediums, solvents, and binders worked in combination with an array of implements and supports. Eschewing post-minimal strategies, he remained interested in the history of painting as much as the technology that enabled it. Through classical ideas of gesture and touch, his works nonetheless reference film or computer screens, spaces of nascent opportunity.

Winters is unsentimental about the achievements of the New York School, and his work, so indebted to contemporary scientific research, is nowhere anachronistic. Still, his compositions, which eschew part-to-part relations and cover the canvases without reserve, deliberately return us to the all-over motifs of Abstract Expressionism via the display properties of the screen and the distribution of energies thereupon, constitutive of information and image simultaneously.9

Artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Ryman were more immediate touchstones for Winters. Not only did they suggest ways of generating form, they further insisted that such activities were primarily material. Johns maintained the physicality of paint handling by using fast-drying wax, effectively showing the hand without highlighting its transmission of subjective expression. And Ryman pragmatically tested materials and their mutually determining relationships (whether primer and paint, paint and support, support and edge, or edge and wall), offering a model of
Frank Stella
*The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, 1959
Enamel on canvas
903/4 x 1323/4 inches; 230.5 x 337 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund
what it might mean to investigate mediumistic conventions through the physical stuff of painting.

Winters began by analyzing minerals, as from itemized lists in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, and his knowledge of the fundaments of the enterprise are remarkable — knowledge gained in practice. The question for Winters then became how to achieve a surface covered by marks that are distributed without being either suggested in advance or being random in their disposition. In this, Frank Stella’s 1959 “Black Paintings,” themselves a crux between high modernist abstraction and minimal object production, were also crucial, as they proposed a model of composition resulting from the dimensions of the support, whereby the literal shape of the canvas determined the depicted shape of the painted image within. Working up from basic questions of how to paint, Winters realized a pictorial intelligence that somehow stands outside of the issuing subject — wholly intended works, based not upon pre-existing matrices or a-compositional methods but on necessities that accumulate and progress as the painting is brought into being. He has referred to this route as “collaborating with circumstance.”

Despite or because of the variance of the results of such trials, paintings escape Winters’ control (thus the ineffable sense — the “feeling,” in Shiff’s words — of the material responding to the artist’s action). Repetition with variation is a mechanism of evolution, and Shiff presses the parallel to biological developments, which Winters’ subsequent
appropriations of imagery from scientific illustrations encompassing biology, botany, geology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics would seem to confirm. Yet Winters also revisits the promise inherent in his own work. In his recursive approach, felicities develop into pictorial incidents, and incidents become future prospects, which in turn lead to new artworks.

Since the early 1980s, this thinking through painting for Winters has also involved prints and drawings, with trials in one format often migrating into another, not as ready-made or given but rather as the basis for elaboration, which is likely different in kind because of the material limitations of a given substance. In the words of Adam Weinberg, this move to build something new out of something past precipitated “a move from more or less discrete object-forms to a newfound immersion in form as field. In drawings that seem to metamorphose before our eyes, the subjects are not so much represented as they are the capturing of multiple forces in the act of becoming.”\textsuperscript{11} In this way, even if prompted by some exogenous source — a page from a technical manual, say — Winters’ compositions stray further and further from that source, mediated as they are by the history of his output and their own very obdurate material presence. Emergent from the drawn or etched line or skeins of viscous paint, pattern and incident appear as forces — what the philosopher Henri Bergson named \textit{élán vital} in his 1907 book \textit{Creative Evolution}. 

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The evolution of Winters’ compositions is partly a reflection of the concepts (in biology, physics, technology) that inspired them — concepts that provide not only visual material but methodology. In pairing observation and formal experimentation, his recent paintings are powerfully beholden to their own internal dynamics, and to those of the series to which they belong. Because of this, they might exist as an array of colors, as in *patterns in a chromatic field* (10) (all works 2013), or they might — however provisionally or ambiguously — assume the guise of something decidedly more bodily, as in the contour suggesting a female torso in *patterns in a chromatic field* (12). Of course, the hourglass shape in the latter work finds its counterpart in many related pieces, where it might provoke thoughts of corporeality and mortality. That said, the hourglass shape — or the nebula of dots, for that matter — also threatens to revert back into the matrix from which it arises, or at least switch priority with it.

Winters has long insisted on the capability for representation within abstraction, seeing these eventualities not as antagonistic but as mutually determining — often within the same picture. (Kathryn Tuma summarizes: “Winters’ driving question, following artists like Matisse and Pollock, has been how to make abstraction into a figural space without collapsing into outmoded thinking about figuration.”12) Movements of the brush, colors applied wet onto wet in small dabs and thus fixed on the surface in a state in between, or whole scrims applied wet over dry,
Henri Matisse
*Shaft of Sunlight, the Woods of Trivaux*, 1917
Oil on canvas
36 × 29 ¾ inches; 91 × 74 cm
Private collection
reveal evolving orders or “patterns,” as Winters frames it. His paintings oscillate between figure and ground to the extent that one is hard-pressed to determine which is which. Every element is somehow in between, not negatively (neither figure nor ground) but positively (figure and ground, multiplying as layers of paint respond one to the next). This is notable in the two larger panels, Red Ground and Blue Figure, which just as easily could have been reversed (that is, Red Figure and Blue Ground) without losing their accuracy. Crimson Lake moves beyond the binary, maybe sublating it, in a forthright divulgence of the paint Winters used (lake pigments are organic dyes fixed to a powder mixed with a binder).

Similarly, patterns in a chromatic field is descriptive more than poetic, or both equally. The title is taken from a 1981 score for cello and piano by experimental composer Morton Feldman, a New York School denizen who attended meetings of the Eighth Street Artists’ Club and surrounded himself with poets, dancers, and visual artists. A field is defined in physics as something that has a value for every point in space and time. Although Winters disavows a one-to-one correspondence between his marks and exact sections of Feldman’s music, he does confirm “a sympathy with Feldman and his compositional procedures.”

One can understand why. Reflecting upon his own practice, Feldman wrote a turn of phrase that could well have been written by Winters, if “sounds” were replaced with “paints”: “I feel that I listen to my sounds,
and I do what they tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my life to these sounds.”

Erik Ulman glosses this as being “the core, at once mystical and materialist, of his aesthetic, in which existential responsibility and an ideal purity meet in ‘a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating.’”

Winters similarly offers forth a pragmatic materialism in which unseen forces (physical, chemical, something else entirely) shape and perhaps animate matter. In so doing, he allows things otherwise inaccessible to have a life within — as — mark making. For Winters’ new series does not depict animation coming from its obverse, but embodies it as a matter of course.
4. Ibid., p. 13. This has more recently become the subject of Mathias Poledna’s Imitation of Life (2013), a three-minute animation screened in the Austrian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale.
10. Winters frequently made this point. See, for example, Winters quoted in Jeffrey Kastner, “An Energetic Imagist Who Dances with Chance,” New York Times, August 19, 2001, Arts Section, p. 29. Winters has recently begun to think about this process in relation to scale-free networks, wherein nodes are added to an existing network unevenly but purposively.
13. E-mail correspondence with the author, January 9, 2014.
15. Ulman, op. cit.
Plates
patterns in a chromatic field (2), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (3), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (4), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (6), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (7), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (8), 2013
patterns in a chromatic field (12), 2013
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Each painting from the series patterns in a chromatic field is 40 × 32 inches (102 × 81 cm). Red Ground, Blue Figure, and Crimson Lake are each 80 × 60 inches (203 × 152 cm). All paintings are oil on canvas.

Frontispiece: The artist’s studio, Gallatin, NY