

HYBRID Revelations

In 1958, Allan Kaprow published *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock*—his influential essay that acted as a new theoretical springboard, widening the scope of what was (and what would be) considered art.

Young artists of today need no longer say “I am a painter” or “a poet” or “a dancer.” They are simply “artists.” All of life will be open to them. They will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness. They will not try to make them extraordinary but will only state their real meaning. But out of nothing they will devise the extraordinary and then maybe nothingness as well. People will be delighted or horrified, critics will be confused or amused, but these, I am certain, will be the alchemies of the 1960s.¹

While the movement away from traditional artistic genres had been occurring for years, Kaprow marks Jackson Pollock as a major artistic influence. No longer would artists just be relegated to painting on the surface of the canvas, placing sculpture on the pedestal or even making art primarily within their studio. Pollock broke with tradition when he dripped off the canvas and artistic chaos and experimentation followed in his wake.

60 years later, artists continue to find new ways to (re)activate what might be called the most traditional of all medium—painting. John Paul Rosenberg’s assemblages keep that chaos and experimentation of a post-Pollock artworld in the forefront. Utilizing a variety of materials including wire mesh, velvet ribbon, elastic straps, expanding foam, tarps, suede fabric and drop cloths, Rosenberg’s works cull inspiration from various art historical references, including elements related to Pop art, Op Art, Arte Povera, Abstract Expressionism, craft and geometric abstraction. They strike a balance between two and three dimensions, and act as windows, exposing the space behind them.

While many of the works are framed within the stretcher bars, the varied shapes that are exposed create a visual language—distinct to Rosenberg but referencing the shaped canvases of Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly. In *Escort*, Rosenberg works with a square frame, balancing a blue tarp inside the stretcher bars. Secured with gold tassels, the tarp is folded down from the left corner, elegantly resembling a sail while expelling a gradient of blues that cascade down the work. This painting along with *Angels Envy* and *Tough Love* in particular, tote the line between minimal, geometric abstraction mixed with a craft aesthetic. The folding of the painted surfaces not only exposes the wall behind, but also adds a repetitive architectural element to the work—the square within the square. The choice of materials and how they are employed, however, elevates the idea of craft and ties Rosenberg’s

¹ Allan Kaprow. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 9.

work in quite nicely with the pioneering artist Lee Bontecou as well as contemporary artist Dianna Molzan.

Lee Bontecou embraced mishaps and non-traditional materials. Her work envisioned a tension between the industrial and the organic—the combination of which led to her to repurpose objects such as metal tubing and saw blades. “Her constructions in canvas and metal, intricately sewed and tied together, swell outward from the wall in heavy forms that build into space. Here painting and sculpture meet; canvas becomes form; painting becomes structure.”² Bontecou’s works manage to collapse such distinctions. In a similar fashion, Rosenberg’s work substitutes traditional painting materials, with utility tarps and used dropcloths that are then cut, rehashed and tediously supported by colored threads and rope. The work is light and precarious—unlike Bontecou’s that literally weigh more. However, both artists engage with notions of dematerialization and rely on form and drama to showcase their ideas.

Additionally, Rosenberg draws influence from the work of Dianna Molzan. Molzan’s interest lies in the painting as a contained space or a “container of space”³ and she explores how the physical possibilities of traditional painting materials can be exploited. She manipulates these materials—canvas, wood, and linen—to look untraditional. In addition, Molzan acknowledges the wall within each of her works with an opening up of her paintings. Rosenberg, in a similar way, creates windows with his paintings, allowing for the wall reveal. Exploring the idea of a painting as a framing device, depending on where Rosenberg’s works are installed, the implications of the work can change.

In Demo Gallery, the rawness of the space is juxtaposed with the materiality of the work. Seeing brick and concrete intermixed with the artwork allows a layered effect that enhances the materials used. In *There is No Meaning...and this is Good News*, the work actually resembles a hole choppily cut into drywall a la Gordon Matta-Clark. The interplay between the dark paint around the painting’s window tricks the eye—allowing one to think the opening is ripped drywall. The gallery setting intentionally heightens the tension inherently found in the work due to its material make-up, and the distinctions between positive and negative space.

Rosenberg creates hybrid artworks that attempt to wrangle the chaos they produce. When Robert Rauschenberg first started working on his *Combines*, his process eliminated the distinction between painting and sculpture. Literally combining everyday objects with the painted surface, Rauschenberg endowed new significance to these objects by fusing the artistic disciplines. There was no distinction, no hierarchy. Rosenberg, in a similar way, blends of what is conventionally understood

² “Lee Bontecou,” *Women in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), np.

³ Interview with Margot Norton, February 2011

as painting with sculpture. In this exhibition, each work is a dissected structure, revealing the manipulation of the materials and the crisscross of art historical references. In the end, Rosenberg's work is rooted in pursuits that blur boundaries, allowing for these hybrid forms to take center stage.

-Rachel Adams
Senior Curator
UB Art Galleries