

Are Reductive Artists Having Their Moment? Yes! But let's make it last a while...

In Minimalism and After, Renate Wiehager speaks of the “abstract avant-garde”. This movement, our movement, has persisted for the last 100 years, sometimes rising prominently in the culture’s consciousness, at others continuing quietly on its way with little outside notice. But the present moment feels ripe for another re-emergence of this edgy sensibility.

In the political arena, there seems to be an opening – a space being created after all the blustering, lying, and failure of the conservative movement in the US government – something almost utopian reappearing, a faint whiff of the sixties in the air. While I don’t expect a repeat of that time, I feel that at least there is an interest in rupture, and also in renewal, and in creating community and finding commonality.

In the NY artworld, after the slow fade of post-modernism, formalism seems to have shaken off its doldrums and misconceptions among artists and regained its place as a method of serious critical thinking. While the marketplace still is overwhelmingly a force for conservatism (meaning that it has an avid interest in art that is story and language based, easier to explain and therefore to sell), it has also brought painting to the fore, and with it, abstraction and an interest in the visual language of art-making. From this follows an engagement with installation, performance and sculpture involved with “how we see”, think, intuit, conceptualize and feel.

In order to not become just another blip on the art history screen, we need to expand our audience out beyond other artists and the already-converted, into the group of art-lovers who are frightened of the abstract, reductive experience. We don’t have to be a cult for those in the know, even as we remain avant-garde. People need to be educated away from art education and museum labels, peeling away the layers of ideas and concepts to approach an area of pure perception and awareness – and this can open us up to being present with ourselves as critical, feeling beings. Then once the viewer is inspired, he/she can go on to explore the many varieties and history of this type of work. The language that we use to talk about our work also needs to be rethought and re-imagined, so that it is filled with the excitement and rigorous self-criticism we feel during our own processes and explorations.

All of the above is really a call for artists to take charge, connect with each other (not compete), share work, ideas and language. Sydney Non-Objective and Minus Space have already formed communities of like-minded artists who support each other’s work and processes, and so inspire and promote the growth of even more new and exciting work. I am also a member of a group called The Verus Painters who have connected through a common seriousness of purpose and in the spirit of “getting back to basics”. While our work may not “tell stories” in the literal sense, we can try and tell the story of its vitality and importance, and in this way, stay visible and affect change ourselves.

Karen Schifano, NYC, 2007