



# Abstract America: New Painting and Sculpture

Estelle Lovatt reviews the current Saatchi exhibition

**B**y the beginning of the 1950s, New York's Abstract Expressionists impulsively freed-up the Native American spirit. Indubitably animated, Pollock, Motherwell, Reinhardt and Rothko were expressive, on a giant scale. Then the 1960s brought Frank Stella, Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Brice Marsden's simple, pure art with as little as possible interference from the hand of the artist.

Following World War II it was this growth of abstract art that eclipsed conventional depiction. Late into the mid-Twentieth Century figurative painting made a come back through imagery from popular and consumer culture.

Built-in to a contemporary adaptation of the 'genre', Saatchi's thirty-two artists – painters and sculptors – invest in traditional methods, but with a new and lively light-heartedness and social irony. Making an historical acknowledgement to their forerunners of the mid-Twentieth Century art, they mix Old Masters' colours with tie-dyed splatterings of bubblegum pink and fluorescent lime green. Their artwork - gripped by the cyberspace of jpeg and You Tube - makes for the latest artists' American dream.

America can be celebrated through the arts. From the start, American artists have mirrored the independence of America through independent vision and original beauty, creating an artistic spirit - unique to America - that is appreciated and acknowledged around the globe.

The rebelliousness of much contemporary art can be marked as a response to 9/11. However immense the shock, in this age of change, art proves its substance. Today, embracing change, President Barack Obama says he is ready to reinvent and transform America. Obama's dream of an American Renaissance breathing new life into the arts, creating faith in the community and creativity, realises that contemporary art is integral to rebuilding optimism in shifting geopolitics. Having a President and First Lady that like art (Barack and Michelle had their first date at an art gallery) is clearly a step in the right direction in increasing the art of today.

Mixed-media sculpture by Agathe Snow converts simple stuff picked up from the streets into totems of arty construction and story-bound impiety reconstitute the build-up of everyday life as a

*opposite:* Peter Coffin, Untitled (Spiral Staircase), 2007. Aluminum and steel. 670.6 x 670.6 x 213.4 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London ©Peter Coffin, 2009

*below:* Matt Johnson, Malus Sieversii, 2008. Carved maple and acrylic paint. 9.5 x 7 x 7 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London ©Matt Johnson, 2009





is a hard-core spectacle or a debauched extreme sport - Roman style. Another art piece, *Focus on the Four Dots In The Middle Of The Painting For Thirty Seconds, Close Your Eyes And Tilt Your Head Back (Frantic Fruit)* is both the title and the instructions. When followed, a portrait will appear - Jesus, Che Guevara or Charles Manson, depending on the viewer's insight. Condensed, it's the ultimate Pop Art shorthand for a portrait offering immediate satisfaction of either religious or political dogma.

Engaging with art history from Cubism to Pop Art, Jonas Wood, looks at outstanding American artists of the Twentieth Century - Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, Stuart Davis. They are transformed into cinematographic canvases, which blur contemporary American life between figuration and abstraction.

A giant life-sized, *Pianist*, is Matt Johnson's fifty feet origami object of a concert pianist sat playing his piano. It is blue in colour, referencing Yves Klein's signature International Klein Blue. Another artwork, a half-eaten apple, *Malus Sieversii*, is titled after the very first variety of apple. The flesh of this life-sized wooden carving of the 'forbidden fruit' is mostly eaten, sawn with tiny Escheresque staircases winding endlessly up and down to its core and drawing on religious and scientific references from computers to record labels.

rambling, restless hallucinatory flash of communal breakdown and Judgement Day. Four (Centre Cross) is about "cartooning archetypes of power that I hated, with Mother Nature on my side". Sketching together a broad diversity of citations and allusions - from consumer culture to Renaissance painting - this comically models a modern-day St. Sebastian, a martyr of modern profligacy, nailed to a crucifix. A coup d'état of antipathy and decomposition, its tatty shopping bag and McDonald's flag symbolise an accomplice of the enemy.

Guerra de la Paz is the Cuban born collaborative duo who construct their sculptures from unwanted bits and pieces. In *Nine*, a monster pile of clothing - tons of prom dresses, Christmas jumpers and yesteryear fads - bear down the burden of a nation and its disclaimed historical narrative, a statement

Aaron Young's *Greeting Card 10a* (taking its title from Jackson Pollock, 1944 and echoing Johns and Rauschenberg's collaboration when a car drove on paper) develops the impulsive doodles and scrawled signs linked with action painting, using something much more potent - twelve high octane motorcycles. It was made, 'staged', as a performance with plywood panels laid out, 72 x 128 feet, over the floor, then painted yellow, pink, orange, red and black, before bikers rode over it, for seven minutes. Made in the dark, the motorcycles headlights lit the action, the deafening revving of the engines and smoky noxious exhaust fumes gave the effect of a rock-concert performance, suggesting abstract painting



indicating the might and significant worth of society today. It also references the Biblical narrative with Adam and Eve, who, created naked by God, felt no shame until they ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil against God's commandment. Seeing they were naked, they felt ashamed for the first time and to hide their shame covered themselves with leaves. Underneath the threads of the bulky collection of garments can be seen the feet of nine people propping up its foundations. The number nine is revered in religion, and considered a complete, perfect and divine number representing the end of a cycle.

*In memory of James Brown 'Godfather of Soul'* is both the title and source of Chris Martin's painting. The huge black and white patterned painting looks a lot like circular vinyl LPs and 60s Op Art - a group whose avant-garde funkadelic fashion are a creditable homage to Brown's legacy.

Reconfiguring the colour scale of Ad Reinhardt and Ellsworth Kelly, Joe Bradley challenges the understated framework of pantone-hued planes, inculcating time-honoured traditionalism and formalism with comic strip animated wit. Through this fusion of abstraction and figuration, Bradley

clinches the non-objective standards of 70's art and a contemporary humanist approach to high culture, equally. Championing the abject, in the variety suggestive of an available-to-all 'easy to assemble' Ikea reproducibility, defends their irony. Bradley's retro-futuristic style develops his abstracted 'figures', which, weirdly standard in representation, strip down graphic illustration to its most pocket-sized form, putting the essence of character and narrative in a nutshell, lifting the logo-istic shorthand of visual information as eminent to the appreciation of high art.

In total, it is promising art from the USA. If you're at all interested in art, head down to the Saatchi Gallery.

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*Abstract America: New Painting and Sculpture runs until 13 September at the Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Road, Chelsea, London, SW3 4SQ. Telephone: +44 (0) 20 8968 9331. [www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk)*

*opposite top: Agathe Snow, Three (Cross with Balloons), 2007. mixed-media sculpture - materials include balloons, found objects, cloth, wood, concrete and wire mesh. 300 X 180 X 80 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London ©Agathe Snow, 2009*

*opposite bottom: Guerra de la Paz, Nine, 2007. Mixed media sculptural installation. 365.8 X 213.3 X 213.3 CM. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London ©Guerra de la Paz, 2009*

*below: Aaron Young, Greeting Card 10a, 2007. Stained plywood, acrylic, burnt rubber. 6 panels: 4 x 8 ft each. Overall: 12 x 16 ft. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London ©Aaron Young, 2009*

