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# Teaching Painting Beyond Postmodernism: Implications for the education of artists

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of postmodernism on the teaching of painting and the education of artists. It involves a review of literature pertinent to the teaching of art at the post-secondary level and my experiences as both painter and art instructor. The title, *Beyond Postmodernism*, does not necessarily imply the negation of postmodern approaches to art. Rather, it signals a need for pedagogy that avoids further dichotomies between modernism and postmodernism, form and content, painting and critical theory. The ideas and questions discussed should be of assistance to other artist-teachers in the development of their teaching philosophies and the education of artists. Some directions for future research are recommended within the context of qualitative field methodology.

## Résumé

Cet article traite de l'impact du postmodernisme sur l'enseignement de la peinture et l'éducation des artistes. Il comporte une recension de la littérature au sujet de l'enseignement des arts au niveau postsecondaire et traite de mes expériences de peintre et de professeur d'art. Son titre, *Beyond Postmodernism*, n'implique pas nécessairement la négation des approches postmodernes de l'art. Au contraire, il souligne le besoin d'une pédagogie qui évite d'autres dichotomies entre le modernisme et le postmodernisme, la forme et le fond, la peinture et la théorie critique. Les idées et questions abordées devraient aider d'autres professeurs-artistes à perfectionner leur philosophie d'enseignement et l'éducation des artistes. L'article contient certaines directives au sujet des recherches futures dans le cadre de la méthodologie qualitative sur le terrain.

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## Introduction

Even though there is ample literature written on postmodernism and postmodern art education, there is very little material that addresses the impact of postmodernism on the education of artists, that is, on the teaching of students interested in pursuing a studio-oriented career in visual arts.

As a university-level art educator for the past five years, I have encountered little discussion among my teaching colleagues on the topic of a pedagogical rationale for teaching art to those choosing a professional career as artists. The underlying principles involved in the teaching are seldom articulated, and the practice is segregated even from its neighbour, art education. In this paper I attempt to clarify some of the issues confronting the teaching of painting and the education of artists today. This involves a review of related literature from the areas of art theory and education and my own perceptions in the field. The objectives of this paper are two-fold. First, I wish to generate ideas and questions that could be of assistance to other practitioners in the reflection upon and development of their pedagogies. Second, I hope to encourage more research that deals with the education of artists, and that draws upon qualitative, field-based methodology.

### Re-introducing Postmodernism

After more than thirty years of postmodern theorizing, a clear definition of the term remains elusive. This is because the very nature of postmodern thinking is against fixed concepts. In fact, it was modernism that was about fixed definitions, disciplinarity and interpretation of its timeless ideals such as aesthetic experience, the sublime, and universal truth (Sarup, 1993).

Charles Jencks (1996) was one of the first contemporary theorists to employ the term post-modernism. Initially, he used it to signal the failure of the modernist international style in architecture that drew upon Le Corbusier's machine-space buildings and Mies Van Der Rohe's glass curtain aesthetic of functionality. In his book *What is post-modernism?*, Jencks associates the term not only with art and architecture but also with pluralism and an age of information and globalization. Moreover, he refers to the post-modern world as

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the age of quotation marks, the 'so-called' this and 'Neo' that, the self-conscious fabrication, the transformation of the past and recent present, caused by the fact that almost all cultures are now within possible instant communication with each other. (p. 55)

Art educator, Roger Clark (1996) identifies postmodernism as one of the most popular terms of our time due to its "*deliberate ambivalence and communicative elasticity*" (p. 1) .<sup>1</sup> According to Clark, postmodern theories exist within most of the disciplines and that is how the term became associated with "...specialized terminologies such as master narratives, simulacra, and decentered subject, as well as diversified perspectives such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, and reconstruction, making postmodernism as-a-whole difficult to discuss" (p. 1).

Logically, one might suggest that no matter how we look at it, "what postmodernism is, of course, depends largely on what modernism is, i.e., how it is defined" (Foster, 1984, p. 189). Here, I will be looking in particular at Clement Greenberg's (1963) definition of modernist painting, since his ideas have been pivotal to both late-modernism and a formalist emphasis in the teaching of painting. On the other hand, many contemporary theorists such as deDuve, (1996), Foster, 1984, Hamblen,1995, and Kelly, 1984, have criticized Greenberg's definition as a prelude to their own ideas on postmodernism.

### **Greenberg's legacy**

Drawing upon Immanuel Kant's philosophical work, Greenberg (1963) discussed modernism as a disciplinary and self-critical approach to art. He argued that each discipline, such as painting or sculpture, is determined by specific intrinsic aesthetic criteria. Greenberg proposed that the *raison d'être* of modernist art lies in a self-referential exploration of these criteria; that means ". . . the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (p. 12)

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Greenberg saw painting as the central discipline of modernism. In his earlier and famous essay, *Avant-garde and kitsch* (1939), he identified painting as an ultimate expression of avant-garde art, pitted against the materialistic culture and kitsch of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. It was crucial for Greenberg to distinguish painting from everything else and, most importantly, from its immediate neighbor, sculpture. "Three dimensionality is the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself from everything it might share with sculpture" (Greenberg, 1963, p. 14). Moreover, he identified modernist painting as a tendency towards the affirmation of two-dimensionality, or flatness, which he saw as "the only condition painting shared with no other art" (p. 14). As opposed to traditional painting, committed to representation and the illusion of three-dimensional space, modernist painting focuses on optical illusion. "Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye" (p. 16). This proposition lies at the core of a modernist pictorial space that finds its roots in the work of Manet and the Impressionists. One may see its ultimate end in the work of abstract painters.

It is important to underline that Greenberg's definition of modernist painting does not necessarily favour abstraction. Rather, it suggests a break from the traditional approaches to representation. This not only involves an abandonment of the traditional principles such as *chiaroscuro* and linear perspective but also a divorce from subject matter that pertains to literary content and everyday life. By drawing an analogy between painting and the modern scientific method, Greenberg insisted that "...modernist painting asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art — which means its being translated in such a way that it entirely loses its literary character" (p. 17). The self-exploration of the physical and pictorial characteristics of the medium defines the subject matter of modernist painting, as exemplified in the work of Jackson Pollock, Kenneth Noland, and Helen Frankenthaler.

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## Discussing Postmodern Painting

In contrast to a singularly-based and self-referential Greenbergian view of modernism, postmodernism signals interdisciplinarity and the emergence of eclectic and pluralistic art practices. Generally speaking, postmodern art finds its roots in movements such as minimalism, pop, conceptual art, performance and happening (Jencks, 1996). During the 1980s and 1990s, it was associated also with the rise of new media, including various photographic interventions, video and computer art. Initially, each of these new tendencies suggested more or less a reaction against the dominance of painting and formalist criticism.

As a matter of fact, the overall postmodern climate might be perceived as antagonistic to painting as "...the continuing debate between 'moderns' and 'postmoderns' is so often couched in terms of the life and death of painting" (Lawson, 1984, p. 164). Danto (1999) states that "the "death of painting" has, in the twentieth century, frequently been pronounced, usually as corollary of some revolutionary agenda, in which the agency of art was to be enlisted in some social and political cause" (p. 138). Even though painting continues to be made and included in major exhibitions such as the Sensation Show (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1999) and New York's Whitney's Biennial, and most of the young painters perceive the "postmodern death of painting" as just another meaningless theoretical concept, there is still doubt about its cultural relevance. I too find myself questioning what students need to know about painting and postmodernism.

Leo Steinberg (1972) was one of the first to tackle the idea of postmodern painting. In his essay, *Other Criteria*, he states that Rauschenberg's assemblage paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s signal an inevitable erosion of the purified modernist categories. Steinberg identified Rauschenberg's painting with a so-called *flatbed picture plane*, "...in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes" (p. 84). As opposed to Greenberg's idea of flatness associated with optical illusion, Steinberg's flatbed picture plane refers to the horizontality of tabletops, pin-boards or studio floors onto which various materials and non-art objects might be adhered or scattered. For example,

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Rauschenberg's *Winter Pool* (1959) painting comprises a ladder, the legs of which touch the floor, inserted between painted panels; while his *Third Time Painting* (1961) includes an old clock and a flattened shirt alongside painted marks. Steinberg perceives this tendency in painting as a historical shift from the vertical picture plane related to *seeing* towards a horizontal one related to *making*, and a subject matter that makes more specific reference to cultural artifacts. The idea of a flatbed picture plane could be applied also to the work of Jasper Johns and Sigmar Polke.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990's there was a renewed interest in figurative painting, appropriation and representation. This has been often perceived as a postmodernist tendency. In the 1980s, homage to figuration was paid by the whole generation of German Neo-expressionist and Italian Trans-avantguardia painters, among them Anselm Kiefer, Jorg Immendörff, Sandro Chia and Carlo Maria Mariani. Generally speaking, their work appears as painterly-rendered figurative imagery on "museum scale" canvases. The meanings shift ambiguously between parody and pastiche, naiveté and mythology.

In the 1990s, perhaps the most important tendency in figurative painting has been appropriation, "...in which painters adopt images from elsewhere (media, fashion, technology) and/or mimic the appearance of techniques other than painting: photography, video and film, and computer technology" (Godeke, Japel & Skurvidaite, 1999, p. 21). These appropriations have led to a resurgence of interest in collage methods, the juxtaposing of disjunctive images, materials and different painting modes. There are different types of appropriation, one that is directed towards a self-reflective idiosyncratic painting (David Salle), another that draws upon cultural and political imagery (Manuel Ocampo), and still another that deals with issues such as body and gender (Lisa Yuskavage).

In contrast to the modernist climate in which the meaning of painting was discussed formally, that is, in visual terms without obvious cultural references, painting today is often looked upon as a visual document embedded with socially and culturally contingent representations. Nadaner (1998) points out that, "...some of the critical leaps regarding the nature of painting have included

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an insistence on language as the focal point of painting, and the demand that painting take as its subject the investigation of the nature of representation" (p. 169). Therefore, both painter and viewer are expected to adopt cultural rather than formal criteria in "seeing" the work and to engage in a contextual interpretation of its meaning. However, this notion seems inappropriate to abstract painting which relies primarily upon the visual experience of form.

One may argue that abstract painting has been particularly marginalized in the postmodern era. However, and in spite of the fact abstraction has been absent from the highly respected "Documenta X", and most of the Whitney's Biennials in the last decade, abstraction continues to be produced in many different guises. Drawing upon Jean Baudrillard's theories of communication, Peter Haley's abstract painting of the 1980s evokes the idea of digital fields, the structured space of cells and conduits that are "...akin to the simulated space of the video game" (Rubinstein, 1998. p. 126). The work of Argentinian painter, Fabian Marcaccio, embodies illusion, gesture and the "painterly mutations" such as marks (brushstrokes) rendered with a trowel spread in pigment-laden silicone. Polly Apfelbaum and Jessica Stockholder combine painterly, sculptural and installation techniques in an abstract manner (Rubinstein, 1997). David Blatherwick's painting employs colorful nets that reflect his interests in the minimalist grid of Agnes Martin, African flatweaving traditions, "neural networks", and techno music he listens to while he paints (Dault, 2000).

Whether we discuss postmodern painting in relation to Steinberg's flatbed picture plane, or appropriation and representation, our understanding of painting has changed significantly with postmodernism. As a teacher of painting I find myself reflecting upon how these developments have affected my own teaching and that of my colleagues. In the following section, I review some related literature and discuss some of my own teaching experiences in an attempt to address these reflections.

### **Postmodernism and the Teaching of Painting**

According to Becker (1996), one of the most visible effects of postmodernism on the education of artists is that it changes how and what artists choose to study and to specialize in. Their interests gravitate not only towards the

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traditional disciplines in painting, drawing and sculpture but also towards alternative approaches to multi-media, video and computer art. Perhaps this tendency is what prompts Lovejoy (1997) to suggest that one of the effects of postmodernism has been an emergence of interdisciplinary and multi-media art programs in university art departments.

But such programs are not just about approaches to media. Morgan (1996) conceives of postmodernism as a body of critical theory that has created a fertile ground for conceptual art, an alternative to formalist aesthetics. It has been appropriated from various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, linguistics and psychoanalysis. In fact, critical theory pervades the content of many undergraduate and graduate courses in contemporary and critical issues. One of the main objectives of the contemporary issues courses I have taught has been to introduce students to various theoretical frameworks that surround contemporary art production and to engage them in articulating the meaning of their artwork within both personal and theoretical contexts.

Becker (1996) asserts that the postmodern emphasis on theory has become a problem to some members of faculties of Fine Arts, "...some of whom are comfortable working with such constructs and with difficult theoretical text, some whom are not" (p. 98). The problem is not just one of knowledge acquisition. It is also a matter of temperament that has created a gap between "modernist" and "postmodernist" faculty. Indeed, one might say that postmodernism, has "...created a sense of a new and old guard not so much marked by age as by orientation" (Becker, 1996, p. 98). This split could leave students confused and unsure how to approach their art work and whose guidance to follow.

Although studio practice remains pivotal to the education of artists, Becker (1996) warns that in postmodernism the traditional medium is not as interesting to young artists as the ideas they want to transform and communicate. "Even the notion of making a specific piece of art oneself has evolved. Appropriation, collaboration, and technological advances have transformed the romantic hands-on/lone-artist model of production" (p. 98). Some of my colleagues perceive this change as problematic. Historically, in painting and drawing the mastery of technical skills and formal understanding preceded statement

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making. Most young painters today explore appropriation and collage while shifting and juxtaposing different ideas, images, and found materials to painted marks. As a reflection of this implementation, specific collage courses have been designed and implemented within undergraduate studio art programs.

Such manipulation of materials would seem to call for attention to formal considerations. However, one of the problems that I have encountered is that formalist questions, which seem to be generic to the visual nature of painting, tend to be seen, by some students and teachers alike, as modernist, academic and anachronistic to contemporary art making. Art educator, Dan Nadaner (1998) believes that the postmodern relationship between critical theory and conceptual art forms has resulted in a language-based approach to art and the marginalization of painting. "Painting is discussed most often as an artifact of modernism, and therefore an object of dismissal rather than a medium of promise for speaking to contemporary issues. If painting is not dead it is not very healthy within the critical climate of recent years" (p. 168).

In spite of this diagnosis Nadaner sees an essential relationship between language-based critical theory and painting. Thus he insists on the expansion of existing critical theoretical discourse. Drawing upon the semiotic perspectives of Bryson (1983) and Elkins (1995), he argues that "...critical theory must look at all elements of the picture, not only its identifiable subject, but its less easily identifiable marks, traces, and orli (shimmering auras) as well" (p. 171). Also, by bringing in Lyotard's (1971) idea that poetry and painting convey incommensurable presentations <sup>2</sup> and Bryson's (1983) distinction between *gaze and glance* in painting <sup>3</sup>, Nadaner stresses the importance of teaching painting as painting. This implies that art teachers must engage with painting on both theoretical and practical levels and raise critical philosophical questions. "How do paintings carry meaning if not through language? In light of the challenge to the significance of painting presented by many text-based works, how does painting continue to function with vitality in the current era?" (p. 180). Even though Nadaner's text does not specifically address the teaching of painting to aspiring artists, it provides an important theoretical background for further inquires into the links between critical theory and studio teaching.

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In the epilogue of his book, *Teaching Art: Academies and art schools from Vasari to Albers*, Goldstein (1996) addresses postmodern tendencies in the teaching of art. He states that in spite of being pursued from various perspectives, the postmodern critique of modernism has "... taught one lesson above all others: that the Western tradition, modern as well as Renaissance, has been ethnocentric and anti-feminist, marginalizing the cultures of non-Western peoples and women" (p. 295). Goldstein recognizes the ongoing debate on the teaching of art that includes questions such as what to teach, how to teach and to whom art is taught. He acknowledges also the untenable position of the "old disciplines" in art schools where painting and drawing have been largely displaced by photography and video. As well, the value of art has been discussed in reference to commercial success rather than specific formal criteria. In response to postmodern commercialism and hasty recognition of new media, in Britain there has evolved a perceived need for new academy and curricula that involves classical drawing from the cast and human figure, and studies of anatomy and perspective. Goldstein supports a need for "remedial instruction" that focuses on development of technical skills and formal understanding. In this context, he sees postmodernism as "...just one more political trend that, once having lost its novelty, will find itself in the dustbin of history" (p.299).

In a somewhat similar vein, Stuart Richmond (1996) argues that in a postmodern climate dominated by deconstruction, focus has been placed on the conceptualization of issues rather than on an understanding of art through experimentation with the medium. "Students in visual art classes in universities and elsewhere are just as likely to be asked to deconstruct and rework existing art in order to show its inadequacies, or politicize chosen issues and events, as develop their own creative work" (p. 2). In the worst scenario, students interested in formal experimentation have even been criticized or ignored as socially irresponsible (Richmond, 1996).

A contrasting position is suggested by Morgan (1996). He states, "...being an artist today is a matter of trying to locate one's position in Postmodern culture. It requires an inner directed sense of reality, one that resists de-centering

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and the loss of self-esteem" (p. 75). Given these contrasting viewpoints, it seems that the question is whether we should prepare artists to fit in or to challenge postmodern culture and its theoretical frameworks.

Becker (1996) insists that young artists need to be trained to be more socially responsible and develop a better understanding of their audience. Students interested in exploring political content have to learn that their art should be able to reach beyond a selective audience of like-minded practitioners. "Students need to be helped to understand not only the subject of their work but its objective. They must learn to ask themselves who would be their ideal viewer and who, most likely, will be their actual viewer" (Becker, 1996, p. 68). Teaching that does not address the issue of audience loses its critical and political credibility. This does not mean that students should be taught to simplify their work for a general audience but to envisage the social and political implications of their art. As critical pedagogues, we need to discuss with them also how once radical political art has been commodified and trivialized by the artworld.

Without such assistance, even post-modern work seems caught in a modernist paradigm - as it waits for its inherent genius and universal appeal to be discovered and trickle down to the masses. As we offer students our knowledge and experience, we extend to them ability to communicate to as large an audience as they choose. As we encourage or discourage the art school tendency toward hermeticism, we either free young artists from the confines of the art world's terminally hip subculture or circumscribe them within its discourse forever. (Becker, 1996, p. 68-69)

### **Beyond Postmodernism: Implications for Teaching and Research**

As both a painter and art instructor living in a postmodern era that I perceive as being frequently critical of painting, I have been compelled to examine the impact of postmodernism on the education of aspiring professional artists, and on the teaching of painting in particular. One of the main challenges to

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methodological inquiry is the dearth of research that addresses specifically the teaching of art at this academic level. There is a need for more work that investigates underlying pedagogical issues, values and concerns of both students and teachers. This section offers some ideas and questions that might extend the dialogue on teaching and generate more research on the education of artists. The phrase “beyond postmodernism” used in this section does not necessarily imply a negation of postmodernism. Rather, it signals a need for pedagogy that reaches beyond the dichotomies of modernist and postmodernist perspectives, form and content, painting and critical theory.

Within the specific context of studio teaching, the formal issues of colour relationship, brushwork, composition, the relation of size and scale, positive and negative space, should be presented to students not as modernist and anachronistic, but as generic to the pictorial understanding of painting. Teaching painting beyond postmodernism means to engage students in questioning the interplay between form and content in their work. This implies also an extended analysis of the process and expression, making students more aware of the links between their ideas and the medium.

Such teaching means also being sensitive to the different backgrounds of young artists. There is a need to develop specific studio projects that will allow students to explore their cultural differences in painting and to realize better the aesthetic sensibilities associated with their gender, race, sexuality, ethnic and religious backgrounds. There is a need to encourage painting that goes beyond the appropriation of politically correct representations. Young artists interested in appropriation and collage/assemblage, should be provided with both theoretical background and useful technical tips that will help them to integrate found materials and objects with their ideas.

As teachers, we must also raise questions that promote critical thinking and social responsibility among young artists. Through the issue of “audience” students must come to realize the actual objectives of their work as well as potential consequences and responsibilities of making political art. This sensitivity should reflect a pedagogy that is *political* rather than *politicized*.

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A political, as distinct from a politicized, form of cultural work would encourage artists, students and other cultural workers to become insurgent citizens in order to challenge those with political and cultural power as well as to honor the critical traditions within the dominant culture that make such a critique possible and intelligible. Political cultural work means decentering power in the museum, theater, classroom, and other pedagogical sites...On the other hand, politicizing education or cultural work is a form of pedagogical terrorism in which the issue of what is produced, taught, and exhibited, by whom; and under what conditions is determined by a doctrinaire political agenda that refuses to examine its own values, beliefs, and ideological construction. (Giroux, 1995, p. 10)

Young painters need to be told that one might explore abstract painting and still be very socially and politically active because it is the interaction of the entire person that matters (Becker, 1996). As a matter of fact, the education of artists should promote the education of the entire person. This means not only introducing students to a plurality of approaches in the making of art and its discourse. They need, as well, instruction that will encourage a critical understanding of society as well as a flexibility and tolerance.

### **Conclusion**

In order to further the education of artists in the new century, there is a need for more field research that addresses the teaching of artist-teachers. My contribution, as part of ongoing research, is to engage painter-teachers in questioning the impact of postmodernism on the development of their teaching philosophies. Qualitatively-oriented interviewing provides an ideal method to pursue this question, and to generate various perspectives on the topic from the practitioners. In fact, qualitative research methodology offers many interesting ways to address the education of artists. More specifically, I recommend initiating studio-class observations, interview studies, action research, and other phenomenological approaches. As Watrin (1999) notes,

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...qualitative research, like art, describes and interprets details of lived experience. Descriptive writing, like artwork, cuts through surface appearances and penetrates into the meaning of events, places, people, or processes (p. 94).

Even though most artists-teachers may perceive educational research as time consuming and less familiar territory, there is a need to get involved and to expand knowledge in this area of education. I hope that ideas and questions raised in this paper will be seen as an invitation to such an important project.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Clark (1996) perceives the communicative elasticity of postmodernism as an outcome of the following three characteristics. First, postmodernism is *transitory*; that means " *postmodernism* suggests only what it is *not* rather than what it *is*" (p. 1). Second, it is *transcendent*. "First gaining popular currency within the field of architecture, postmodernist theories can now be found within most disciplines, especially literature and sociology". Finally, postmodernism is *transitional*". Feminist and postcolonial theorists, in particular, may speak from perspectives that are modernist, postmodernist, or somewhere in-between" On the other hand, Clark links the deliberate ambivalence of postmodernism to the recent paradigmatic shifts from objectivity, rationality and universality. In *Art education: Issues in postmodernist pedagogy*. (p. 1-2)

<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Discours, figure*, Lyotard (1971) states that painting and poetry offer incommensurable events, capable of presenting the figures that exist outside of discourse. According to Nadaner , Philip Guston's late-career paintings exemplify this notion.

<sup>3</sup> Bryson's (1983) distinction between the gaze and glance in painting offers a possibility to understand the floating signification of the painted mark. Bryson argues that Western painting has historically oriented the viewer towards the gaze of pleasure rather than glance that allows painted marks to be valued for what they are: signs as signs. In *Vision and painting*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

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