

The background of the cover is a piece of brown, textured fabric, possibly canvas or burlap, draped over a colorful abstract painting. The fabric is wrinkled and has frayed edges, creating a sense of depth and texture. The colors in the painting behind the fabric include shades of blue, green, red, and purple.

Art in America

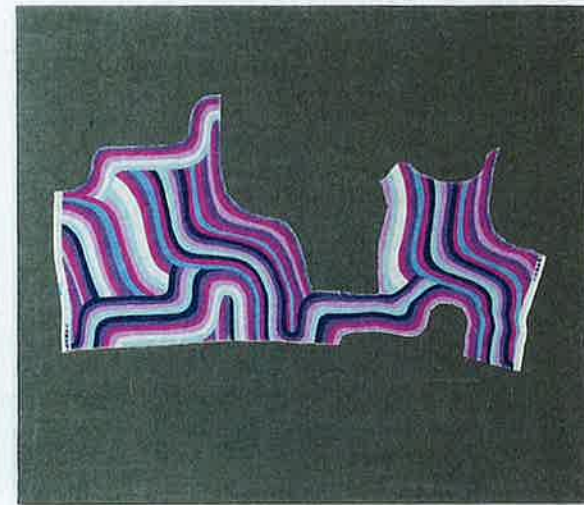
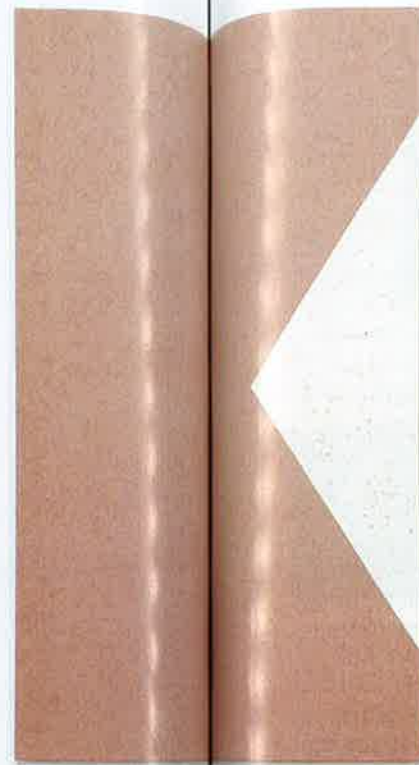
INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

Provisional Painting Revisited

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TO REST LIGHTLY ON THE EARTH



BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

In a sequel to his 2009 article "Provisional Painting," the author reflects, via artists named and unnamed, on the lure of the unfinished and the uses of doubt.

1. PAINTING IS IMPOSSIBLE

At the opening of his compact memoir *A Giacometti Portrait* (1965), James Lord is on a 1964 visit to Paris. He agrees to pose for Giacometti, who has proposed a "sketch" on canvas of his young American friend which is expected to require only a single sitting. They set to work in Giacometti's dilapidated studio, situated in an alleyway in the 14th arrondissement. Things start well, but at the end of the sitting, Giacometti announces his deep dissatisfaction with the results and obliterates most of the image. He asks Lord to pose again the next

day, when the process repeats itself. As more days, then weeks, go by, the artist increasingly despairs of his task, canceling out each day's efforts as Lord remains a virtual prisoner in Paris, waiting for his portrait to be finished, changing his travel reservations again and again. Finally, late one afternoon, on the 18th sitting, as the last light is going, he is able to dissuade Giacometti from painting out that day's work, and the portrait is . . . "finished" isn't the right word. Let's say abandoned.

Throughout Lord's little book, which lays out the ground for his subsequent full-scale biography of the artist, published in 1997, we get to hear repeated expressions of Giacometti's profound self-doubt. "If only I could accomplish something in drawing or painting or sculpture," he tells Lord on the first day, "it wouldn't be so bad. If I could just do a

head, one head, just once, then maybe I'd have a chance of doing the rest, a landscape, a still life. But it's impossible."¹ On the seventh day Giacometti laments: "The painting's going worse and worse. . . . It's impossible to do it. Maybe I'd better give up painting forever. But the trouble is if I can't do a painting, I can't do a sculpture either."² On day 13: "What I'm doing is negative work. . . . You have to do something by undoing it. Everything is disappearing once more. You have to dare to give the final brush stroke that makes everything disappear."³ Some of Giacometti's artistic pessimism might be put down to a superstitious artist not wanting to jinx his work in progress, but his relentless undos and restartings suggest that he really did mean it, that he really did feel that art—achieving what he desired in a painting or sculpture—was, as he says, "impossible."

2. I HAVE BEEN "WANTING TO PAINT THIS PAINTING"

In the postwar Parisian milieu Giacometti inhabited, "negative work" was considered inescapable. Its classic expression is Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. (Sartre and Giacometti were close friends and the philosopher penned numerous essays about the artist.) At one point in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre conjures up a struggling writer to illustrate what he calls "the origin of

View of Sergej Jensen's exhibition of textile paintings, at MoMA PS1, New York, 2011. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York. Photo Thomas Müller.

THOUGH PARTIALLY SHROUDED BY FAILURES—THE ARTIST'S, THE VIEWER'S, SOCIETY'S—THE PAINTING IS NONETHELESS THERE, IN ALL ITS OCCLUDED AND SHABBY BEAUTY.

negation." Here's the passage, which I have altered, substituting the act of painting for that of writing:

In order for my freedom to be anguished in connection with the painting that I am painting, this painting must appear in its relation with me. On the one hand, I must discover my essence as what I have been—I have been "wanting to paint this painting," I have conceived it, I have believed that it would be interesting to paint it, and I have constituted myself in such a way that it is not possible to understand me without taking into account the fact that this painting has been my essential possibility. On the other hand, I must discover the nothingness which separates my freedom from this essence: I have been "wanting to paint," but nothing, not even what I have been, can compel me to paint it. Finally, I must discover the nothingness which separates me from what I shall be: I discover that the permanent possibility of abandoning the painting is the very condition of the possibility of painting it and the very meaning of my freedom.⁴

There's little surprise in the idea that wanting to write a book or to paint a painting can define an individual, can be their "project." What's important here is Sartre's insistence that one is only free if one can abandon that project at any moment. But what sort of book is written under such conditions, what sort of painting gets painted? What does it mean to believe that in order to create a work of art one must entertain the "permanent possibility" of abandoning it, and to believe that something called "freedom" inheres in this situation? What does it mean to say, with Giacometti, that art is "impossible"? What are the consequences if a work of art is produced under the sign of abandonment, negation, impossibility? Until very recently, these questions sounded very old-fashioned. The existential self-questioning, the doubt, the anguish, all those hallmarks of mid-20th-century art, have been long put aside, superseded, forgotten, laughed out of the room. With the eclipse of Abstract Expressionism circa 1960, new modes of art-making were discovered in which the kinds of doubts that troubled artists from Cézanne to Giacometti became largely irrelevant. They were replaced by a solid work ethic, by an emphasis on production, by attention to surfaces (in

both a material and a psychological sense), by coolness, by social rather than individual identity; in short, Giacometti's gloomy, doubt-filled studio was replaced by Warhol's Factory. Even as James Lord was faithfully recording it, Giacometti's artistic anguish was already obsolete.

3. DRIVEN INTO A CORNER

Although he came late to abstraction and turned away from it after less than two decades, Philip Guston was able to articulate better than anyone the central experience of Abstract Expressionism. He summed up his attitude in the 1965 statement "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," in which he describes his studio situation in terms that sound like they were taken right out of *Being and Nothingness*: "You begin to feel as you go on working that unless painting proves its right to exist by being critical and self-judging, it has no reason to exist at all—or is not even possible."⁵ As we well know, within two years of saying this Guston concluded that no abstract painting he might attempt had a "reason to exist."

The year after he wrote "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," Guston spoke about his work in a public forum at Boston University. The transcript is full of his characteristic brilliance and self-analysis.⁶ One of the most interesting passages is one in which he discusses what he feels is still important about Abstract Expressionism. Guston insists that the issues Abstract Expressionism raised regarding painting were "the most revolutionary problems posed and still are," despite the fact that so many people (artists, critics, curators) had tried to kill the movement off. The error of these would-be murderers is to mistake Abstract Expressionism as a mere "style, as a certain way of painting." It's a cinch to get rid of a style; as Guston says, "After 10 years or 15 years, you're bored sick of it. Younger painters come along and want to react against it." The revolution of Abstract Expressionism, however, was not a matter of any stylistic innovation; instead, Guston says, it "revolves around the issue of whether it's possible to cre-



ate in our society at all." He immediately draws a distinction between "creating" and simply producing art:

Everybody can make pictures, thousands of people go to school, thousands go to galleries, museums, it becomes not only a way of life now, it becomes a way to make a living. In our kind of democracy this is going to proliferate like mad. In the next ten years there will be even much more than there is now. There'll be tons of art centers and galleries and pictures. Everybody will be making pictures.

Guston is being impressively prophetic here, even if the present level of picture-making (and every other kind of art-making) is beyond anything he could have imagined. Guston's main point at Boston University was that the state of things in 1966 was very different from the original experience of the Abstract Expressionists around 1950 when, in his words,

you felt as if you were driven into a corner against the wall with no place to stand, just the place you occupied, as if the act of painting itself was not making a picture, there are plenty of pictures in the world—why clutter up the world with pictures?—it was as if you had to prove to yourself that truly the act of creation was still possible. Whether it was just possible.

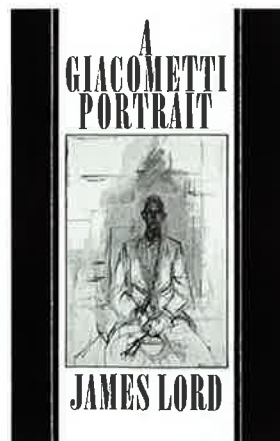
INTERLUDE I: The artist has chosen not to let us see the entirety of any of the paintings in the show. One has an old armoire jammed up against it, leaving only the margins of the painted canvas visible (broad gestures, drips, areas of scumbling and glimpses of spilling de Kooning-esque light). Another is barely visible through a much-creased and torn piece of plastic

sheeting. Multiple layers of plastic sheeting, black or transparent, are draped over another painting, though one of the bottom corners has been left uncovered and a tear in the black plastic reveals an area of painted canvas, but visible only dimly through the underlayer of transparent plastic; onto the surface of a third painting the artist has glued a frayed blanket, colored drab brown like a piece of army surplus. Rather than being smoothed out flat, the brown fabric has been irregularly gathered and folded to resemble both classical drapery and an unmade bed.

Having previously avoided the medium of painting throughout his lengthy career as a maker of sculptures, performances and conceptual provocations, the artist has now insured that there will always be something between the viewer and the painting; the painting will never give all of itself, nor will the artist ever give all of himself; something will always escape us, and maybe even something that is at the center of the work. But though it remains partially shrouded by failures—the artist's, the viewer's, society's—the painting is nonetheless there, in all its occluded and shabby beauty.

4. FINISHED/UNFINISHED

Once upon a time, New York painters tore themselves apart trying to determine what constituted a "finished" painting. During the famous Studio 35 conference of Abstract Expressionists, William Baziotis tied himself into verbal knots trying to clarify what he and his fellow painters thought about the subject: "In talking about the necessity to 'finish' a thing, we then said American painters 'finish' a thing that looks 'unfin-



Left, Philip Guston at the Jewish Museum during the installation of his 1966 show. Courtesy McKee Gallery, New York. Photo Renate Ponsold.

Far left, cover of James Lord's book, first published in 1965. Courtesy Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Opposite, view of David Hammons's exhibition, at L&M Arts, New York, 2011. Photo Tom Powel Imaging.



Sergej Jensen: *Untitled*, 2010, stained and dyed sewn fabrics, 122 by 118 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

ished,' and the French, they 'finish' it. I have seen Matisse's that were more 'unfinished' and yet more 'finished' than any American painters. Matisse was obviously in a terrific emotion at the time and he was more 'unfinished' than 'finished.'"⁷

Time plays a curious role in the perception of finish or its lack. Most Abstract Expressionist paintings now seem quite finished to us. But in some canvases—I'm thinking of mid-1950s Joan Mitchell and mid-1960s Guston—the flurries of marks have yet to settle down. It's rare to find a completed work that can retain an unfinished aura for several decades; Miró's white-ground anti-paintings of the 1930s are another striking exception. Long before Studio 35, Chinese artists had pondered the question of finished/unfinished. In his invaluable book on Chinese painting, *Empty and Full*, French scholar François Cheng quotes Chang Yen-Yuan, a Tang dynasty historian, in praise of the incomplete:

In painting, one should avoid worrying about accomplishing a work that is too diligent and too finished in the depiction of forms and the notation of colors or one that makes too great a display of one's technique, thus depriving it of mystery and aura. That is why one should not fear the incomplete, but quite to the contrary, one should deplore that which is too complete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it? For the incomplete does not necessarily mean the unfulfilled.⁸

This text, from the year 847—written, one can't help noticing, when the best artists of Carolingian Europe were spend-

ing their lives applying gold leaf details to illuminated manuscripts and crafting decorative metalwork—could easily be a commentary on 20th-century modernism. "One should not fear the incomplete, but quite to the contrary, one should deplore that which is too complete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it?" This sounds like something Duchamp might have said. How curious that the prospect of leaving a work intentionally unfinished remained controversial in Western esthetics some 10 centuries after its virtues had been recognized in Chinese painting, and some four centuries after Michelangelo's ambiguous embrace of the *non finito*.

5. PROVISIONAL PAINTINGS, LAST PAINTINGS

It's important to make a distinction between provisional paintings and last paintings. Last paintings appear within a narrative about the end of painting, an art history that believes (or believed) in a certain progressive logic; they occur within an esthetic dialogue in which artists feel compelled to finesse or outmaneuver art of the recent past. Provisional painters know that such conditions no longer prevail, and yet they don't want to give up the sense of difficulty that energized the painters of last paintings, such as Ad Reinhardt. I am tempted to say that the provisional painting is what follows after the

MAYBE IT'S WRONG TO TALK, AS I HAVE DONE, ABOUT PAINTING BEING "IMPOSSIBLE." IT'S IMPOSSIBILITY ITSELF THAT HAS BECOME IMPOSSIBLE.

last painting, except that doing so would entail a teleological scheme that the last painting was supposed to have brought to a close, and that is, anyway, no longer tenable.

In the 1980s, it was thought that last paintings would be followed by simulacra of paintings. Emptied of all transcendence, all utopian pretensions, all expressive qualities, proffered as signs of painting rather than the thing itself, "simulated" paintings like Peter Halley's were first and foremost a measure of diminishment, which seemed like a natural direction to go after the last painting, after the failure of the last painting to be the last painting. Does provisional painting appear when last paintings are no longer possible to paint? Maybe it's wrong to talk, as I have done, about painting being "impossible." It's impossibility itself that has become impossible.

Visiting the Brooklyn studio of one of the artists I wrote about in "Provisional Painting" [*A.i.A.*, May 2009], I get into a discussion about "impossibility." The artist thinks I've misunderstood something fundamental about his work. For him, painting is never impossible—just the opposite. I realize that I have committed one of the worst, if most common, critical (and curatorial) sins: recruiting an artist into a compelling critical narrative while missing something fundamental about his or her work.

INTERLUDE II: Among one Berlin-based artist's favorite materials are ammonia, hydrochloric acid and chlorine bleach. He applies these corrosive substances to pieces of canvas, linen or jute fabric, sometimes to create pale patterns, but more often to make the painting support look like something that's been left out in the rain or pulled from a mildewed basement. Using gouache or other thin paints, he will then add a few shaky geometric designs or stray gestures to his damaged fabrics. In other works, he sews strips and patches of colored or beaded fabric that seem to float atop the gently distressed, subtly atmospheric grounds. Sometimes he will stitch up a tear in the fabric. Delicacy and a sense of loving attention coexist with a mood of neglect and abandonment.

When the artist exhibits his work, he generally leaves the gallery or museum lighting exactly as it had been arranged for whatever show was previously in the space. But for all the desultoriness that seems to go into their making and presentation, his paintings have a remarkably consistent focus. His compositions resemble fragments salvaged from the shipwreck of modernist abstraction: melancholy, vulnerable, absolutely convinced of their own necessity, lying in quiet wait for viewers willing to give a piece of their lives to a rectangle of barely-there-ness.

6. IT JUST HAPPENED . . .

Provisional paintings can show signs of struggle and can also look "too easy." In the case of easy-looking provisionality, we encounter a paradox: the struggle with the problematics of painting results in a painting that shows no signs of struggle in the sense that the finished piece displays a minimum amount of work (Michael Krebber, for instance). But in other cases we can see the record of the artist's struggles, though not necessarily accompanied by Giacometti-style anguish (Raoul De Keyser). But whether it looks easy or arduous, the provisional work is always opposed to the monumental, the official, the permanent. It closes the door on the era of the high-production-value art market (Hirst-Koons-Murakami-Currin). It wants to hover at the edge of nonexistence. It wants to rest lightly on the earth.

Robert Ryman is often cited as a maker of "last paintings," but read this quote from him and ask yourself if he doesn't sound more like Matisse than Reinhardt: "The one quality I look for and I think is in all good painting, is that it has to look as if no struggle was involved. It has to look as if it was the most natural thing—it just happened and you don't have to think about how it happened. It has to look very easy even though it wasn't."⁹ In a 1974 interview, Martin Barré, a French painter whose work was often fiercely provisional, approvingly quotes Jean Cocteau: "The work must erase the work; people must be able to say, I could have done that."

Right, Joan Mitchell: *Aspadistra*, 1958, oil on canvas, 77 by 69 inches. © The Estate of Joan Mitchell. Courtesy Joan Mitchell Foundation and Cheim & Read Gallery, New York.



Far right, Philip Guston: *Group II*, 1964, oil on canvas, 65 by 79 inches. Courtesy McKee Gallery.



7. AUTO-ICONOCLASM

Provisionality inoculates the painting, conveys to us the dissidence of the painter from a prevailing style. Once, not all that long ago, artists could establish their dissidence through the innovative originality of their work, but the avant-garde strategy of rupture, the creation of an iconoclastic artwork, has become so thoroughly assimilated as to no longer serve as proof of anything more than that the artist is a good student. Perhaps the only time that iconoclasm retains its power is when the icon that is broken is the artist's very own work. This is what a provisional work can do: demolish its own iconic status before it ever attains any such thing. The provisional is born in the moment when the painter hesitates between painting and not-painting—and then begins to paint nonetheless.

INTERLUDE III: The scene is Paris in the early 1960s. An art critic remarks to a young expatriate American painter enjoying his gallery debut of thinly painted abstractions, "I see you're not very interested in *matière*." The artist replies, with a deceptive nonchalance, "Well, I'm interested enough that I try to eliminate it." Within a few years the materiality of oil paint takes on a more central role in his work when he begins to make paintings by depositing small amounts of liquid paint onto his canvases and tilting them this way and that to direct the paint toward the edges of some faint pencil markings. He never knows exactly what will happen, how a painting will look when it is finished; it often seems to be "doing" itself. Thin color has flooded the canvas or, as he increasingly turns to smaller formats, sheets of paper, and receded, leaving visible a residue of barely emerged imagery: hutlike structures, wobbly Roman numerals, luminous grids that suggest an archeological dig seen through patchy fog. Rather than minimalist, they are subliminalist. For a 1987 show of small gray paintings he has a passage from the French writer Maurice Blanchot typed up and affixed to a



wall of the gallery. "Speech," the quotation ends, "is the replacement of a presence by an absence and the pursuit, through presences ever more fragile, of an absence ever more all-sufficing."

8. AND WHAT IF?

And what if provisional painting is an implicit critique of human ambition, a kind of *vanitas*?

And what if provisional painting is a response to the renewed dematerialization of art that has accompanied the rise of digital mobility, a way for painting to say "I, too, am just a momentary image on a screen?"

But what if provisionality is nothing more than a stylistic trope, rather than a matter of profound artistic conviction and philosophical reflection? I keep rereading a sentence I came across in one of Frank O'Hara's art reviews: "It is simply a property of Bonnard's mature work, and one of its most fragile charms, to look slightly washed-out, to look what every sophisticated person let alone artist wants to look: a little 'down,' a little effortless and helpless." Could provisional painting, or at least some of it, be merely the medium on a casual Friday?

9. FAILING BETTER

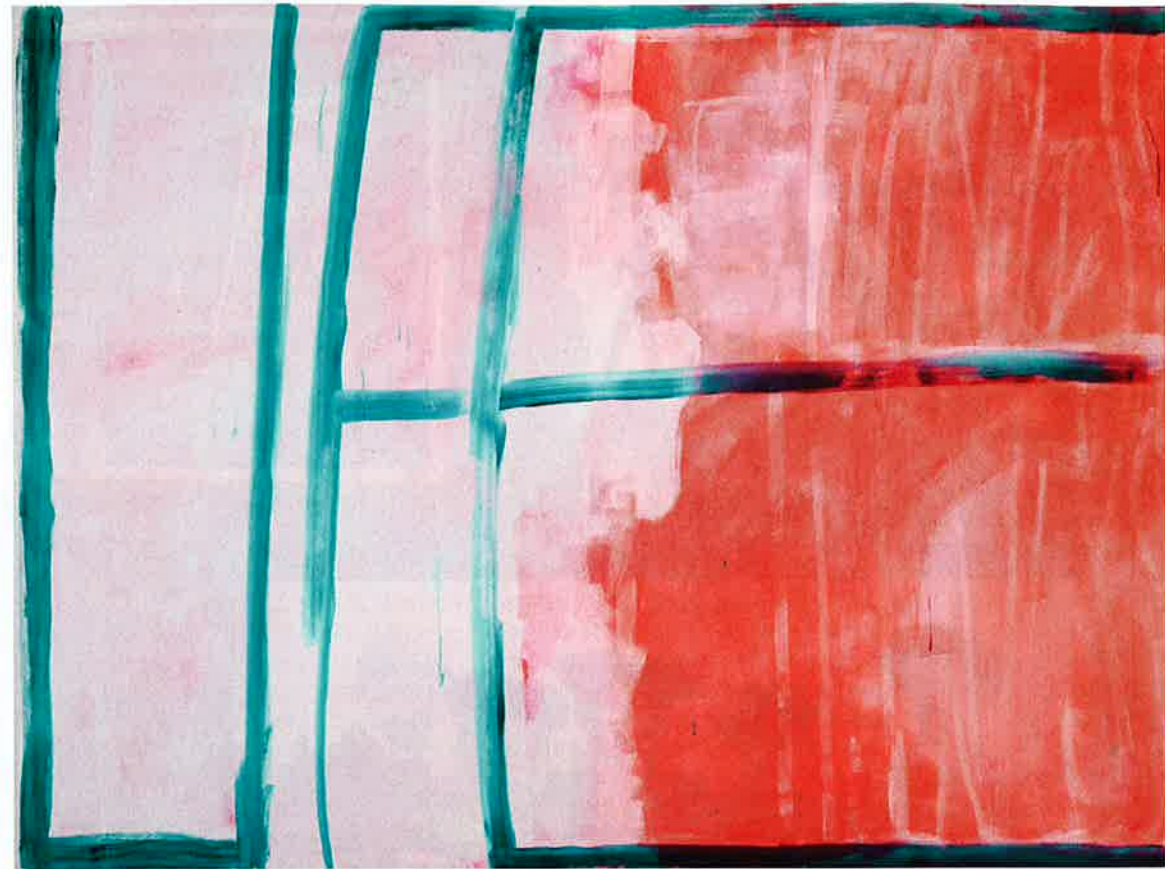
How does one respond, as a critic, to a provisional work of art? Can one practice provisional criticism? What would this look like? Given the way that every judgment, evaluation and interpretation is subject to revision—if not total rejection—by the passage of time, isn't every piece of criticism provisional? Maybe. But at the same time, doesn't every critic also try to offer something that will be completely nonprovisional, i.e., durable and confident? After a long period when painting was frequently dismissed as a complacent, indulgent, narcissistic medium in contrast to other modes (conceptual art, relational esthetics, etc.) that were supposed to be more faithful to the skeptical, oppositional



Right, Dana Frankfort: *LIFE*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 72 by 96 inches. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston.

Opposite left, James Bishop: *Untitled*, 2011, oil and crayon on paper, 8 inches square. Courtesy Annemarie Verna Galerie, Zurich.

Opposite right, James Bishop: *Untitled (Tuscan Series)*, n.d., oil and colored pencil on paper, 8 inches square. Courtesy Lawrence Markey, Inc., San Antonio.



character of historic avant-gardes, some painters have been rediscovering doubt as an aspect of their medium, reclaiming Cézanne as an ancestor and nominating as their tutelary spirit Samuel Beckett, a writer who favored paintings where he found "no trace of one-upmanship, either in excess or deficiency. But the acceptance, as little satisfied as bitter, of all that is immaterial and paltry, as among shadows, in the shock from which a work emerges."¹⁰

INTERLUDE IV: Words painted quickly over other words, some of which have been obscured by equally speedy painterly gestures. The letters, always uppercase, are neither crude nor graceful. They can be thick or thin, but always look like the artist was in a hurry to get from one edge of the canvas to the other. Along the way, spaces are opened and closed, flipped and flopped; color is summoned but with no more ceremony than when you switch on a light. The paintings contain ordinary words or phrases that, because they seem to point to no obvious external referent, sometimes ask to be read as descriptions of the painting in which they appear: "CUTE AND USELESS" or "DISASTER." Others might be admonitions to the viewer—"THINK"—and some could be both self-referential and the artist talking to herself—"PAINT!" If the painterly side of this work looks back to de Kooning's practice of hanging abstract compositions on letter shapes, and the linguistic aspect engages conceptual art, it's the apparent nonchalance of the paintings, their complete lack of pretense or fussiness, that marks them as belonging to NOW. ○

1 James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*, rev. ed., New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, pp. 9-10. 2 *Ibid.*, p. 44. 3 *Ibid.*, p. 79. 4 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York, Philosophical Library, 1948, p. 37. 5 Philip Guston, "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," *ARTnews Annual*, October 1966, reprinted in Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics, An Anthology*, New York, Abrams, 1990, pp. 62-63. 6 Philip Guston, "Public Forum with Joseph Ablow, 1966." The transcript appears in Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, pp. 63-75; my quotes from Guston appear in this source. 7 William Baziotis, transcript of Artists Session at Studio 35, 1950, in *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, p. 216. 8 Chang Yen-Yuan, quoted in François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn, Boston and London, Shambhala, 1994, p. 76. 9 Robert Ryman, "Interview with Robert Storr, Oct. 17, 1986," in *Abstrakte Malerei aus Amerika und Europa/Abstract Painting of America and Europe*, Vienna, Galerie Nacht St. Stephan, 1988. 10 Samuel Beckett, "Henri Hayden, homme-peintre," in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, New York, Grove Press, 1984, p. 146; trans. by Lois Oppenheim in *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 103.

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