



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Paint, canvas, action!

Why artists are (messily) expressing themselves in oil and acrylics again

By Julia Halperin. From [Frieze daily edition](#)

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Snapped up: Paul McCarthy's *She He Enis Penis cut*, 2013, was on show at Hauser & Wirth

"Painting is meant to be dead; every five years, painting seems to die," says the dealer Eva Presenhuber, who is showing paintings by Josh Smith and Joe Bradley at Frieze London (FL, C7). If the scores of other expressionist canvases on show at the fair are any indication, reports of the death of painting have been greatly exaggerated—again.

The Los Angeles-based sculptor Paul McCarthy has returned to painting for the first time in 20 years. His large-scale canvas *She He Enis Penis cut*, 2013, which was on display at Hauser & Wirth (FL, B11) until Friday, sold to a European collector during the fair's VIP preview on

Wednesday for \$750,000. The New York-based artist Rachel Harrison has also taken up painting after decades focusing on sculpture. Two works from her new series, including *Add to Cart*, 2013, sold at Galerie Meyer Kainer (FL, A6) for €55,000 each.

Several London galleries have mounted shows of paintings to coincide with the fair, including Sadie Coles HQ in Mayfair (“Ryan Sullivan”, until 2 November) and Gagosian Gallery in Britannia Street, King’s Cross (“The Show Is Over”, until 30 November).

Digital backlash?

What attracts artists to painting at a time when digital technology offers seemingly limitless options with less art-historical baggage? “There is something to do with the inherently expressive nature of pressing paint on canvas—it’s why painting still has a place amid all this digital media,” says the artist Fiona Rae, who is also a professor of painting at the Royal Academy of Arts. Her canvas *Boo Boo Bear*, 2013, is on offer at Timothy Taylor Gallery (FL, D16) for £65,000.

The intimacy of painting also appealed to McCarthy, who began his new series after completing three complex sculptural exhibitions in New York. The artist’s return to painting “was empowering on an individual level”, says the curator Paul Schimmel, who is a partner at Hauser, Wirth and Schimmel, Los Angeles. “It gave him a sense of ‘all I need are my paints and my canvas’.” The medium is also more economical than complex installations, which can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to produce, Schimmel says.

Practical concerns also contribute to collectors’ desire for paintings. They are often easier to transport than sculpture, simpler to install than video art and more manageable to conserve than photography. “We’re in recovery mode; the mentality is still not experimental,” says the art adviser Wendy Cromwell. “Painting is construed as safe.”

Sales this week reflect collectors’ faith in the medium. *Das Hemd ist nicht gelb*, 2012, by Georg Baselitz, sold for €450,000 at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac (FL, F8), while *Jindy*, 2013, by Charline von Heyl, was among the first works to sell at Galerie Gisela Capitain (FL, C3), for \$120,000. An abstract still-life by Joe Bradley from 2013 sold at Eva Presenhuber for \$130,000, while two abstract landscapes by Uwe Kowski sold at Galerie Eigen + Art (FL, H7) for €28,000 to €38,000.

Collectors who spent years buying high-gloss neon sculptures are now looking for something different. “People may be fed up with the blingy stuff,” says Nicole Hackert, the co-founder of Berlin-based Contemporary Fine Arts (FL, C14), which presented a group of large paintings by Julian Schnabel from the 1990s and early 2000s (\$270,000-\$800,000). The gallery brought the works to London because so many young artists are working in a similarly expressionistic style.

Paradoxically, the variety of media available to artists may explain their continued interest in painting. In the 1990s, when the medium was slightly out of fashion, to pursue it was to take a very clear stand, say the Tate curators Clarrie Wallis and Andrew Wilson, who are organising “Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists” at Tate Britain (12 November-9 February 2014). Artists now feel that they can experiment with the medium without being pigeonholed: painting is one tool among many.

New take on an old style

Some artists are using this new-found freedom to put a non-traditional spin on the medium. The US artist Nathan Hylden prints paint onto aluminium without touching the surface. Five of his untitled works from 2013 sold at Johann König (FL, C5) for \$35,000 each, including one to the British collector David Roberts. Heimo Zobernig, an Austrian artist whose untitled 2013 canvas sold at Galerie Meyer Kainer for €38,000, creates expressionist-style lines by peeling tape off the canvas. “There will always be something new to do with painting,” says the dealer Tim Blum of Blum & Poe (FL, H3; FM, C12).

Wandering the aisles of Frieze London, it is difficult to imagine a time when the future of painting was in doubt. But leading artists from the 1960s and 70s, such as Dan Flavin and James Turrell, “genuinely felt that the nature of art would change radically”, says Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “Talking to artists now, sometimes there is a sense of resignation that it didn’t.”

Additional reporting by Charlotte Burns and Melanie Gerlis