

In the Abstract

11 artists tackle sociopolitical realities through new works of contemporary abstractions



Sarah Braman, *In Bed (how do we sleep when the planet is melting?)*, 2016
 Steel bunk beds, mattress, glass, aluminum frame, storm door, acrylic sticker, hand-dyed bed sheets, acrylic and enamel paint
 103 1/2 x 108 x 98 in.
 ©Sarah Braman; courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS — *In the Abstract* brings together a mix of multigenerational artists whose works represent a potent and muscular approach to contemporary abstraction that adopts and adapts various formal strategies of painting — from hard-edge geometries and dense color blocks to gauzy color fields and expressionist marks — with that of sculpture, photography, digital processes, and video. This selection of artists engages the formal language of abstract painting in various mediums, along with more representational strategies. Color, gesture, and geometric form join with recognizable imagery and objects, as well as references to the figure. *In The Abstract*, which opens in MASS MoCA's first-floor galleries on **Saturday, May 6**, with a reception for the artists from 5:30 to 7pm, will remain on view through March 2018.

The exhibition includes the works of Doug Ashford, Aidas Bareikis, Sarah Braman, Tomashi Jackson, Rosy Keyser, Eric N. Mack, Rose

Marcus, Rodney McMillian, Matt Saunders, Letha Wilson, and Brenna Youngblood. Many of the artists — including Ashford, Jackson, Keyser, and Saunders — have made new works for the show. The presentation features the U.S. debut of an 80-foot long painting by Rodney McMillian — created for the 12th Sharjah Biennial and which visitors experience as a tunnel — as well as an installation of tempera paintings and related photographic images by Doug Ashford, previously presented at Documenta 13.

For these artists, the abstract vocabularies act as a metaphor for a way of thinking, or as an emotional, psychological, or spiritual lens through which to understand our everyday social and political realities, including issues of gender inequity, racial injustice, and the state of the environment. The references to intangible states, forces, and systems are as significant and as real as the more concrete or representational elements in the work.

Abstraction has been a dominant force in the art of the last century, though it has waxed and waned in significance and popularity, and in its relationship to representation. Since its beginnings in the early 1900s, abstraction has taken various forms and positions — drawing lines and defining territories



Letha Wilson, *California Concrete Ripple Tondo*, 2016
Emulsion transfer, concrete
24 x 24 x 2 inches

between “non-objective art” and works that are abstracted from or rooted in reality. *In the Abstract* looks to artists whose works confirm the significance and potential of abstraction as a form of communication beyond language that can both convey inner states and make manifest the abstraction of exterior realities that shape daily experiences — and as a vehicle for social and political change.

As its title suggests, *In the Abstract* points to a connection between ways of thinking and visual strategies of representation. Without a rigid thesis dictating the meaning of the works themselves or the relationships between them, the exhibition points to the potential of abstraction to evoke ideas and emotion — and make manifest the digestion of reality — with a nod to abstraction’s historical associations with social,

political, and spiritual transformations, reminding us that the Constructivist, Bauhaus, and Neo-Concrete movements, for example, were deeply imbued with political and social aspiration.

About the Artists

Doug Ashford (b. 1958, Rabat, Morocco) is known for his pedagogy and his participation in the artist collaborative Group Material, whose projects and exhibitions in the 1980s and ‘90s were concerned with participation, social potential, and forms of display and public expression. Recently, Ashford has turned to painting, pairing images sourced from the news with abstract forms and color that the artist proposes as a reservoir for individual and shared emotions that function as instruments for political resistance and reform.

Aidas Bareikis (b. 1967, Vilnius, Lithuania) creates condensed but unruly assemblages of ready-made objects that he fuses together and transforms with splatters, pours, and thick layers of paint. Trained as a painter, Bareikis uses muddy browns, tropical blues, and acid oranges — both applied and within the components themselves — to simultaneously animate and disguise the lurid, sometimes humorous combinations. These shape-shifting products of the Anthropocene age take on both anthropomorphic and geological appearances, along with art historical allusions. Sneakers, hats, broken chrome chairs, out-of-date globes, suitcases, and trash suggest the digestion and detritus of everyday domestic life, as well as larger economic, ecological, and even geopolitical systems.

Sarah Braman (b. 1970, Tonawanda, NY, lives in Amherst, MA) repurposes scavenged objects such as cars, bunk beds, and screen doors in large-scale geometric assemblages. Incorporating glass and plexi panels in pinks, purples, and oranges, she suffuses her works with the range of color and emotion embedded in our everyday experience. With titles such as *In Bed (how do we sleep when the world is melting?)*, they often point to the intersection of the domestic sphere and the issues troubling the world at large.

Tomashi Jackson (b. 1980, Houston, TX) merges color and pattern with historic and contemporary images in exuberant collage-like abstract paintings that grapple with the systems that foster racism. Influenced by Barnett Newman’s writings on the sublime, Jackson’s research-based practice draws parallels between formal and social issues related to color, while embracing the transformative power of art. Painting on humble materials, including gauze, she asks questions about both value and beauty in art and society at large, while her dynamic and colorful videos confront viewers head-on with gut-wrenching visions of violence and systems of power.

Rosy Keyser (b. 1974, Baltimore, MD) is best known for gritty, large-scale paintings that are as metaphysical as they are physical. Incorporating evocative objects and materials that include sandbags, sawdust, spray paint, and beaded car-seat covers, the dense works obliquely suggest the figure and explore — in the artist’s words — “our compulsions, scope of awareness, and stamina straddling the strange worlds of mind and matter.”

Eric N. Mack (b. 1987, Columbia, MD) combines clothes, blankets, rugs, and other found objects and textiles into painterly assemblages that are often precariously hung or draped in architectonic compositions. Mack integrates the everyday into these layered, expressionist “canvases” adding pages torn from magazines and newspapers along with washes of color, paint splatters, and dots of paint pushed through pegboard in a DIY screen-printing process. Adapting jackets, jumpsuits, and shirts with grommets, safety pins, and visible stitching, Mack harnesses the energy of both fashion and the street, while powerfully evoking the body and its vulnerability.

Rose Marcus (b. 1982, Atlanta, GA) uses multiple materials to transform matter-of-fact photographs of New York City locales — including Central Park and the John Lennon memorial — into layered abstract compositions. Influenced by the work of Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, Marcus applies a variety of marks and gestures to her photographs with cuts through the support, as well as colorful overlays of fabric that suggest the many invisible relationships, emotions, and narratives embedded in these spaces and how they are used by the public.



Rodney McMillian, *a beckoning:*
We are not who we think we are, 2015
Latex on fabric and canvas painting, 312 x 960 inches

Rodney McMillian (b. 1969, Columbia, SC) works in multiple modes, from sculpture to video, performance, and painting, including compositions on bedsheets that engage ideas in abstraction yet simultaneously invoke representations of the body and the landscape. Incorporating objects such as couches, refrigerators, and carpets into many of his works, as well as references to current and historical political events, McMillian makes connections between the domestic and the public spheres as he manifests the maze of legislative, linguistic, and visual strategies that construct race and class in America.

Matt Saunders (b. 1975, Tacoma, WA) is best known for process-based works that merge painting with photography, video, and animation. Projecting light through “negatives” painted on linen and mylar, Saunders produces moving collages of image and abstraction. Often working from found film sources, the artist manipulates and disrupts narrative fragments to produce colorful, abstract reveries. For MASS MoCA, Saunders creates a new iteration of his multi-channel video installation *Reverdy / King Hu* (2014).

Letha Wilson (b. 1976, Honolulu, HI) merges images of the American landscape with poured concrete in multi-layered photo-based works that are both ecstatically colorful and rough and raw. Using printing techniques as well as sculptural processes, Wilson confounds not only nature and industry but also image and object. For MASS MoCA, Wilson is creating several new works, including her largest tondo date.

Brenna Youngblood (b. 1979, Riverside, CA) incorporates her own photographs, representational fragments, and found objects, such as wallpaper and book pages, into her textured, atmospheric paintings that read between pure abstraction and a slice of life. Using a mix of bright colors and more muted tones, as well as thin washes and thick layers of paint, Youngblood builds up complex, spatially ambiguous surfaces that in her words “mimic objects, materials, and things from the real world.” Iconic images and forms such as light switches, tree-shaped air fresheners, and pyramids recur in many works, creating an archeology of objects and symbols that hover between the existential and the everyday.

Sponsorship

Principal exhibition support is provided by Greg and Anne Avis. Major exhibition support is provided by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Barr Foundation, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Images

A collection of high-resolution images is available here: bit.ly/In-The-Abstract.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is one of the world’s liveliest (and largest) centers for making, displaying, and enjoying today’s most important art, music, dance, theater, film, and video. MASS MoCA will nearly double its gallery space in spring 2017, with artist partnerships that include Laurie Anderson, the Louise Bourgeois Trust, Jenny Holzer, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and James Turrell.

Gallery admission is \$18 for adults, \$16 for veterans and seniors, \$12 for students, \$8 for children 6 to 16, and free for children 5 and under through May 21, 2017. Members are admitted free year-round. The Hall Art Foundation’s Anselm Kiefer exhibition is seasonal and reopens on April 15, 2017. For additional information, call 413.662.2111 x1 or visit massmoca.org.

Hours

11am to 5pm, closed Tuesdays
(open Tuesday, April 18)

Summer Hours (beginning June 24)

10am to 6pm, Sundays – Wednesdays
10am to 7pm, Thursdays – Saturdays