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"Bad" Painting

Great art is personal



Joan Brown, *Woman Wearing Mask* (1972).

By Allan Schwartzman

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One of the first exhibitions I worked on was called “‘Bad’ Painting”. It opened at the [New Museum](#) in early 1978 and was the second show we presented at the museum’s original location at the [New School for Social Research Graduate Center](#) on Fifth Avenue and 14th Street. The exhibition was controversial, and its title—considered so provocative at the time—has since gone on to embody an attitude by artists of rejecting the status quo and seeking to redefine for themselves the terms by which their work is to be experienced and measured.

The art in “‘Bad’ Painting” was recklessly and unapologetically aggressive (intentionally or not), in its defiance of notions of taste and skill. It was art that abandoned the “good” in favor of being more expressive, eccentric or esoteric, even mystical. Clusters of artists from different parts of the country like Northern California, Texas, and Chicago were included in the show—at a time during which “regional” was akin to “provincial”.

Much of the work intentionally and awkwardly distorted the figure even though, in that period, figuration was shunned as too traditional by most vanguard thinkers, apart from in [Pop imagery](#) or conceptual art (such as the reintroduction of the figure within a [Minimalist](#) grid, best encapsulated in the early paintings of [Chuck Close](#)). [Photorealism](#) was viewed mostly as a garish fad and nobody in America knew anything of European artists working with figuration, such as [Georg Baselitz](#), [Gerhard Richter](#), [Sigmar Polke](#), and [A R Penck](#).)

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I remember an especially heated panel discussion about the show during which several artists in the exhibition spoke of their work as “personal”. This so offended one New York artist that he stood up and stated loudly that “no great art is personal”. The audience, mostly artists, agreed with him. Everyone seemed to believe that the only legitimate painting was one built upon a formal language that was exclusively abstract and mostly geometric. I was just a kid, still in college, and didn’t know enough about art to have a grounded opinion, but I instinctively felt that this belief didn’t make sense. Or if it in some way it did, it shouldn’t.

This was an era when [post-Minimalism](#) reigned supreme within the core of the New York art community. [Pattern and Decoration](#) was considered a raucous world of its own and the [Pictures generation](#) was just beginning to emerge with the namesake exhibition staged at [Artists Space](#) just a couple of months before the opening of “‘Bad’ Painting”.

Of the 14 artists in “‘Bad’ Painting”, about half were young and unknown. I vividly remember the potency of the work in the show and the dynamic, singular presence of each of the artists. For the most part, the artists did not develop what by today’s criteria would be considered successful identities. But the point here is not fame or success: these artists were mostly disinterested in those often fugitive or fleeting measurements. They were committed instead to defining his or her own unique direction within the kind of art-making that could occupy a lifetime of personal and artistic exploration.



Marcia Tucker, the legendary founder of the New Museum, and others at the studio of artist William Copley

“Bad’ Painting” was pure [Marcia Tucker](#), the legendary founder of the New Museum, who was also my mentor (I had been her assistant at the Whitney when she was fired in 1977, after curating a controversial show of work by Richard Tuttle). The rallying cry of this rebellious and raucous frontline feminist from Brooklyn was to buck the mainstream.

Every single artist in that exhibition made work that was compelling and curious in spirit, from [Eduardo Carrillo](#)’s dynamic mythic giantesses—futuristic in spirit, conjuring both the grand tradition of Mexican mural painting and the low-rider popular culture tradition of truly bad paintings on velvet—to [Shari Urquhart](#)’s contemporary versions of [Velázquez](#)-esque grand narratives—made by the same process as hooked rugs, often with bits of plastic protruding from their surfaces—or the charmingly metaphysical grisaille re-examinations of the images and conventions of early Renaissance painting in intimate scaled paintings by [Joseph Hilton](#). (I was reintroduced to Joe a few years ago at an event at [MoCA Los Angeles](#) by his old friend [Jeff Koons](#), with whom he had gone to art school; Joe now runs the Tom of [Finland Foundation](#).)

The reigning figure of the batch was [William Copley](#) (aka CPLY), who never achieved all that much respect through most of his decades of working, despite his passionate association with some of the most important artists from Surrealism forward. Perhaps the two most famous artists were [Neil Jenney](#), represented by his eternally and potently simple reimaginings of figuration in his 1969 black-framed canvases, and [William Wegman](#), represented by a group of lesser-known drawings from the early 1970s that were childishly direct, and as hilarious as his most famous videos of the same period.



Neil Jenney's eternally and potentially simple reimaginings of figuration in his 1969 black-framed canvases were featured in the exhibition, including *Girl and Vase* (1969)

Another artist, [Judith Linhares](#) (who at the time was a major figure in the San Francisco art scene but mostly unheard of on the East Coast), did not come to be recognized in New York until 30 years later. Gloriously prominent in the exhibition were the bold, [Matissean](#) and diaristic paintings of [Joan Brown](#) (1938-1990), a critically important artist in the history of Bay Area figuration, who still today, more than 40 years later, has yet to receive the national and international recognition she is owed.

What that exhibition captured, and what I think has been missing from art ever since, was a total abandonment of conventions, which generated total freedom for the artist, a perpetual celebration of nothing to lose. While that phrase has been used so liberally in relation to contemporary art, I think that may have been the last time the art world and the artists within it truly had nothing to lose. It was just before the dawn of a new era, in which there was a subtle shift from artists just making art to artists making exhibitions. It was just art. Just art.

That feels like a liberating thought: one that could once again empower artists, like it did those 42 years ago.