

NEW EDITION

What is Paint- ing?

'Bold and brilliant ... a modern
intellectual classic' Jonathan Jones

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Thames & Hudson



Frank Auerbach, *Head of J.Y.M.*, 1981

Morris and Donald Judd (even if the former happened to be playing with ideas raised by Merleau-Ponty) – all these were meant as breaks with expressionism in general. Most particularly, with the Abstract Expressionists, a generation deemed self-indulgently melodramatic by its juniors.

This stand-off then got replayed in the 1980s, when an international cohort of 'Neo-expressionists' – which ranged from Europeans such as Anselm Kiefer and Sandro Chia to American apostles of 'bad' painting such as Julian Schnabel – swung into view with claims to reanimate the languages of oil paint and of myth; only for this loud version of postmodernism to be faced down by wised-up, cooler-headed operators such as Jeff Koons, the 'Neo-geo' artists including Peter Halley, and Koons's disciples in London, the so called 'yBas' or young British artists. The art historian Julian Stallabrass, explaining how things looked in Britain at the turn of the 1990s, conveys the flavour of the party politics. During the previous decade, he writes, highly regarded, old-fashioned painters such as Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach,



Glenn Brown, *The Day The World Turned Auerbach*, 1991

required the viewer to believe in the artist's integrity, and in the idea that a temperament could find expression in paint...Between angst-ridden expressionist painting and calm, latter-day-hippie melding with nature, and strivings for metaphysical significance, the contemporary world was largely passed by. It was the soft humanism, so convenient for consensual politics, that made British art seem so worn out, for consensus had long since passed away (at least from the election of Thatcher in 1979)...

So the new generation of British artists had a strongly sceptical attitude towards the dominant art of the late 1980s...Among the statements sent up by the new work are the following: 'art is good for you', 'art has an ethical content', 'art illuminates the human condition', 'art reveals deep inner truths that cannot be expressed in words'.

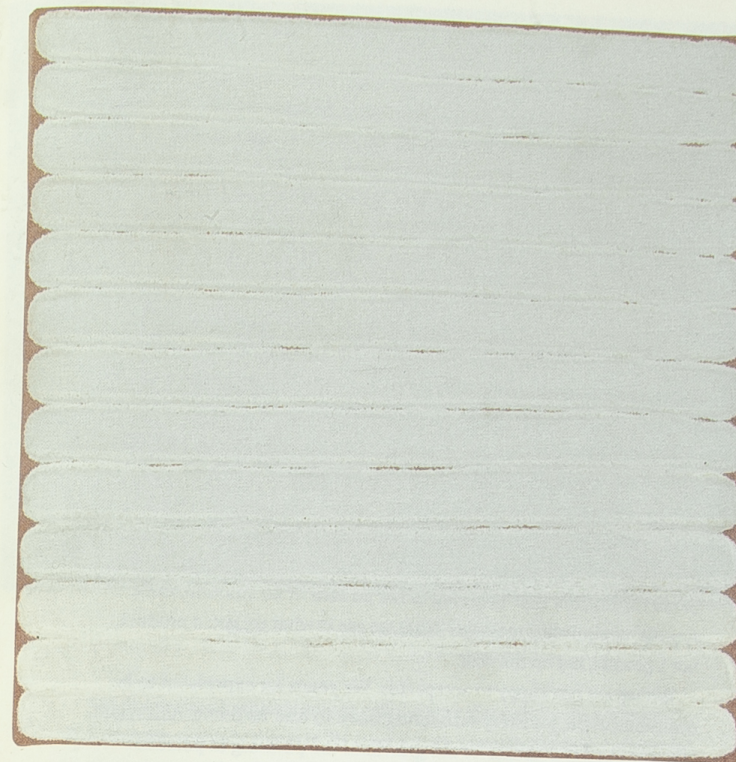
Stallabrass instances Glenn Brown's remaking of Auerbach's paintings – he simulated their very thick impastos in trompe l'œil paintings done with a fine sable brush – as 'a specific attack on painterly touch as a vehicle of personal expression'.

If these productions of Brown's had any sort of value, it was as laboriously sardonic individual pranks, piggybacking on another artist's high individual standing. To be *anti-expressionist* is not the same as being *non-expressive*, as the more substantial oeuvre of Jasper Johns bears out, with its forcefully truculent and also very hard-worked statements of attitude.

Non-expressive works – exhibits that do not point back to the individual who produced them – undoubtedly are possible. While I am obliged to mention names in order to talk about a Blinky Palermo 'fabric painting' or a Robert Ryman 'white painting', the works in question draw my attention to what the stuff is like, of which they are composed. They quietly encourage contemplation. But this is to say that these more or less minimalist pieces have made rather little noise on the art scene, compared to the loudly coloured, workshop-manufactured canvases of Warhol or Koons. And it is not primarily for the sake of their searing lemons and magentas that the latter items have commanded high prices. It is for the names.

For anti-expressionism is another persona, yet another mode in which the artwork expresses the artist and hence acquires value. This principle – an idea developed from the Romantic era through the values of authenticity, spirituality, sublimity and, more recently, through appeals to the corporeality of persons – has had incalculable effects on the development of painting in the last two centuries. No doubt most pictures in circulation continue to get valued for what they pictorially represent – that is why most photographs are taken. But it is probably true that most *paintings* are valued as personal expressions – they are priced by the signature, even by people who care nothing for the ideals of expression I have been discussing. We tend to think that that is the value of paintings, as opposed to photographs.

Personal expression has, in effect, opened up the world of painting we see today: its whole repertory of colours, textures and forms has grown up through that ethos. It underpins the common intuition that if painting nowadays has a social function, it is to provide therapy and respite from



Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1965

fractured and distorting conditions for living. Focused on flat surfaces and on the pleasure of playing with pigments and markers, damaged persons may find some wholeness through creative expression.

They may. We all may. Within charmed circles of belief, urbanized painters may play out the unlikely role they have liked to claim for themselves after the modern rediscovery of palaeolithic cave art: that of the shaman, drawing on supernatural resources to heal the community. But let me put it brutally: expression is a joke.

Your painting expresses – for you. But it does not communicate to me. You had something in mind, something you wanted to 'bring out'; but looking at what you have done, I have no certainty that I know what it