

Q&A: Curator Barbara Rose on Melissa Kretschmer and Martin Kline

BY SARA ROFFINO | MAY 18, 2016



Installation view of "Inside Out: Martin Kline and Melissa Kretschmer" curated by Barbara Rose.

Barbara Rose has pulled it off once again. The most recent project of the curator, art historian, and critic, “Inside Out” — an exhibition of new paintings by [Melissa Kretschmer](#) and [Martin Kline](#) on view at [Paul Rodgers / gW](#) in New York through June 1 — proves that the stakes of painting are as high as ever. For decades, Kretschmer and Kline have explored material and process, while remaining deeply engaged with the history of their practice. An antidote to the quick and deskilled painting that is sweeping through galleries, fairs, and museums, “Inside Out” is a reminder of the depth and complexity of the medium. Rose spoke with Sara Roffino, a senior editor at Art+Auction who has worked as an assistant to Rose for the past two years, though not on “Inside Out,” about how and why the show came together, the importance of accidents, and beginning again.

You've known both Martin and Melissa for many years. Why did you decide to put them in a show together now?

I'm organizing a major exhibition, "Painting after Postmodernism," that opens in Brussels on September 14. Kretschmer and Kline are both in the show because their work deals with what I believe are the central issues of serious painting today: the relationship between chance and structure, the emergence of image from process, extreme attention to detail and craft, and above all, the realization that paintings are not addressed to eyesight alone but also to haptic and kinetic responses.

I'm curious about the significance of chance in the production of their works – what are the implications of this?

I think we live in a contingent world of constantly shifting and contradictory information and that if painting is important, it must reflect these realities. Both Kline and Kretschmer use wax as pigment. It is both an exceedingly material medium as well as a medium that is difficult to control because its state changes from liquid to solid state very quickly. Their ways of making the most of accidents instead of pretending they have total control is, I feel, a metaphor for how we have to navigate life today. And I think any kind of important art must have some form of content. As Rothko said, there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. Vacuity is fashionable today, but it is not interesting enough to be durable.

Kretschmer and Kline explicitly expand on the explorations of the Supports/Surface painters who were working in Paris in the 1960s and '70s, but they do so differently. How do they each deal with this legacy in their paintings?

I'm not sure either of them were aware of the Support/ Surface artists in France, who essentially deconstructed painting into its constituent elements. But their use of wood as a support and emphasis on the material properties of pigment and built up surface do carry that research further to the point of reconstituting the elements of painting in a new way that is conceptual without being based on any theoretical a priori or known outcome.

In the "Inside Out" catalogue you write, "The central issue [which] the evolution of art must be concerned with is what can be rescued and reclaimed from the past that continues to resonate in the present." How do Martin and Melissa accomplish this?

Kline and Kretschmer deal with the issues confronting painting today in a convincing manner. They produce images which arise from their processes. Their work is extremely

time consuming to produce as well as to be absorbed by the viewer because it is so detailed. It resonates because we live in a time of instant everything, so this slowness becomes an antidote to the fast food gratification culture that blights all serious endeavors and creates the utter inanity that shapes contemporary values. Their work is resistant on many levels: It is not a graphic flat image that is immediately communicated like any kind of media art. It is not based on recycled or appropriated or reproduced imagery but very clearly and intentionally hand made as opposed to fabricated. They deal with issues of drawing and figure/ground relationships in new ways that go far beyond the watercolor technique of Greenbergian color field painting that he also identified as “post painterly.” When painting becomes post painterly, i.e. effaces any evidence of the human hand or its own property as tactile matter, it is no longer painting. The problem after the postmodernist parody, pastiche, and irony is how to make art that is credible as part of a tradition without repeating what is no longer viable like academic illusionism, figure-ground opposition, or static hard edge Cubo-Constructivist geometry that was the bedrock of Modernism. Beginning is hard, but beginning again is even harder because not repeating the past means truly understanding its accomplishments. This is a time consuming task very few are able or willing to undertake.

How are Melissa and Martin’s approaches to material different from the approaches of the generation that came before them?

If we consider the preceding generation that of postmodernism, the most obvious difference is that they do not appropriate imagery or use reproduction in any way. Their images are not preconceived, but emerge out of the process of using materials to create complex surfaces. The idea that the process itself can be a form of content and a way to make images that are not depicted or preconceived is new. Both artists stress structure and are clearly especially aware of Newman and Rothko, and in Kline’s case Pollock and Still as well. They are also different in their attitude toward craftsmanship as a kind of moral issue that distinguishes humanism from technology or mass production. They work alone without assistants, spend most of their time in their studios and in museums, and are not involved in the marketing strategies that define most of what is seen today. Also, they are extremely self critical and are making constant adjustments over long periods of time to arrive at what they finally consider a coherent equilibrium of the various elements that go into making an individual work. I suppose if one were to make a video of them working, a lot of the footage would be of looking at what has been done and thinking about what to do next to get the right balance of color, light, space, surface, and structure. Theirs is not a casual attitude but a tough minded series of many decisions made over an extended time period which does create an intentional tension. Their work is difficult and demanding for both artist and viewer, not cute ironic Duchampesque puzzles or relaxing escapes from our increasingly complex and contradictory lives.