

Debra Brehmer, "50 Paintings Invites Viewers to Think Like an Artist," *Hyperallergic*, March 10, 2024

HYPERALLERGIC

50 Paintings Invites Viewers to Think Like an Artist

With its hands-off approach, the Milwaukee Art Museum's survey is a reprieve — an intimate place to wallow in mark-making.

Debra Brehmer March 10, 2024



Maureen Gallace, "August, Blue Shack" (2022), oil on panel, 9 x 12 inches

MILWAUKEE — Survey exhibitions of contemporary painting generally take place in urban power centers and often generate debate. In 2014, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at the Museum of Modern Art sparked discussions about how the digital world has affected art practices. And while the Whitney Biennial is not exclusively about painting, this much-ballyhooed survey becomes a bi-annual battleground.

It is perhaps a little audacious then that the Milwaukee Art Museum has initiated its own survey called 50 Paintings, joining other fraught attempts to wrangle contemporary art.

The hinterlands are not often arbiters of style, but curators Michelle Grabner (an artist, academic, and one of the 2014 Whitney Biennial's curators) and Margaret Andera (the Milwaukee Art Museum's senior curator of Contemporary Art) stepped in with a different approach. Turning its back on issues of identity, content, narrative, or context, *50 Paintings* invites viewers to think like an artist rather than a curator.

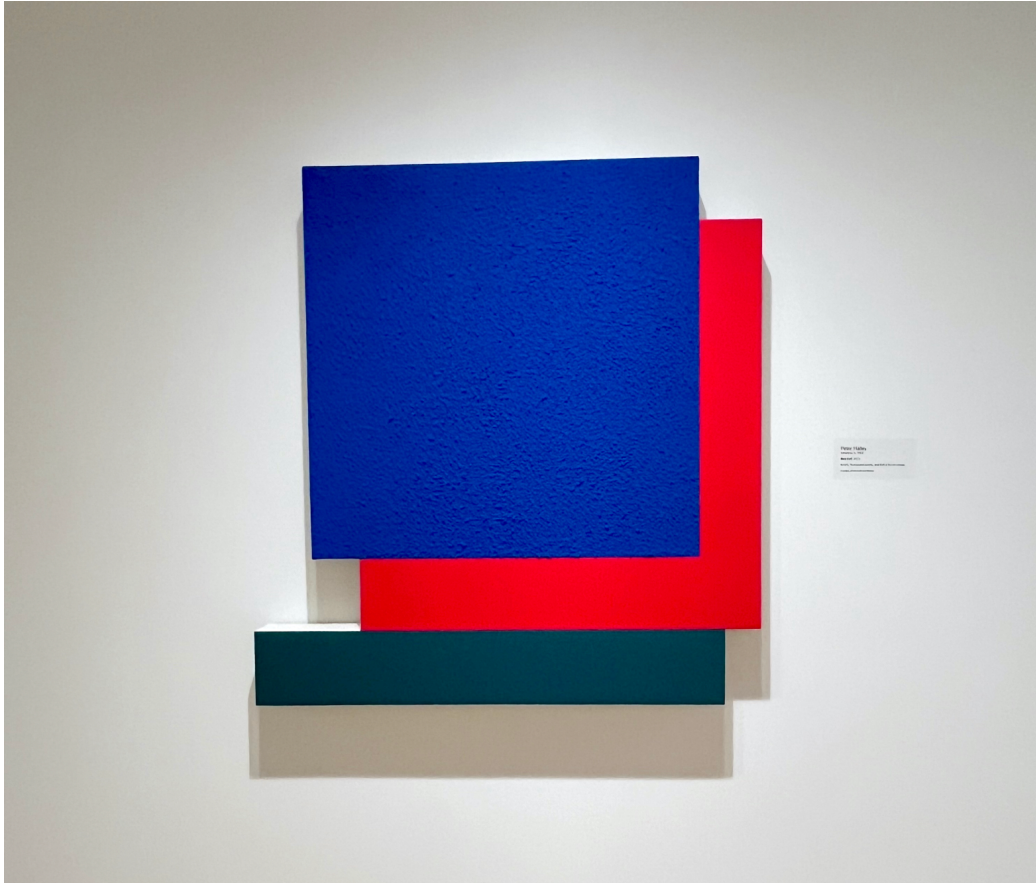


Amy Sillman, "Untitled (blue, black)" (2023), acrylic and ink on linen, 59 x 55 inches

The show sports no theme or thesis, has no underlying ordering principle, shares only the most basic criteria for selection and inclusion, offers no statements or biographies of the artists, and presents only brief introductory texts to orient viewers. *50 Paintings* is what the title states: a selection of 50 paintings by 50 artists. The show is a disrobing — void of explication and thus devoid of the things museums tend to do. But rather than undermining institutional authority, it seems to clarify the way museums frame experience. The missing context of this show, the curators suggest, sprawls outside its doors throughout the permanent collection. If you want context, go wade in it.

The criteria for the exhibition was defined in the press release as work made in the past five years, either with oil or acrylic, on a rectilinear surface, roughly easel size. The curators said they each made lists of artists, then parsed a selection based on size, availability, and diversity. What might appear free-form, however, is actually tied to the invisible filament of primarily Grabner's history. She knows or has worked with most of the artists and, like herself, they are primarily mid-career and around her own age (born in the late 1950s through the 1970s).

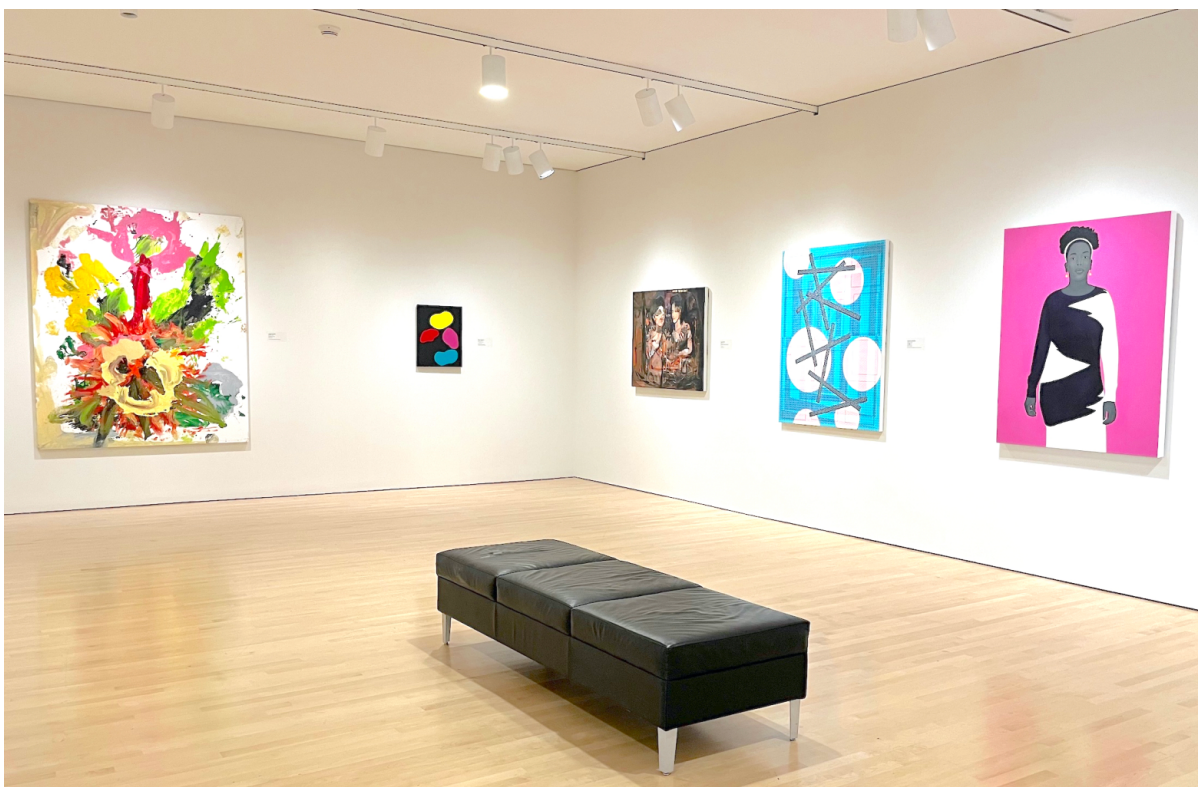
The exhibition feels physically light and bright, nearly gleeful. White walls, ample spacing, no overt pairings or bifurcations such as "figuration" or "abstraction." The mechanics of painting — the edges, shapes, colors, collisions, ecosystem — reign unfettered. The object is the essence.



Peter Halley, "Blue Cell" (2022), acrylic, fluorescent acrylic, and Roll-a-Text on canvas, 44.5 x 42 inches

Not everyone will agree with this hands-off approach. One recent visitor, who didn't want to be identified, said it was disturbing that the show absolves any context within the contemporary world. "We have thousands of people being killed in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine," they said. "We have a climate that is rising, threats to democracy, government making arbitrary decisions, and you just put up two-dimensional works with pigment that have nothing to do with the human condition." Other viewers, myself included, thought of the space as a reprieve — an intimate place to wallow in mark-making as a kind of communication that exists beyond dogma.

The show opens with a modest 9-by-12-inch landscape by Maureen Gallace and closes with a Peter Halley geometric abstraction. The two paintings hover by entrance and exit. Gallace's plein-air-ish piece oddly echoes Halley's emphatic, blunt-end note. They are both compositions of rectangles. In Gallace's painting, a square white garage door holds smudgy blue gestures suggesting shadows. Representation dissolves into the language of paint as the door becomes a canvas. Halley's "Blue Cell" (2022) distills the base elements of color, texture, and shape. The show, thus, begins and ends with paintings about painting.



Installation view of *50 Paintings* at the Milwaukee Art Museum

Perusing *50 Paintings*, the ghost of Amy Sillman will not leave me alone. In her 2020 book *Faux Pas*, she writes, “Making a painting is so hard, it makes you crazy. Before the vicissitudes of color, you have to negotiate tone, silhouette, line, space, zone, area, layer, scale, speed, and mass while interacting with a meta-surface of meaning, thought, text, sign, language, intention, concept, and history” There is no better guide to the exhibition.

Within five rooms (none with overt ordering principles), affinities naturally emerge. In the first, the clarity of an Amy Sherald portrait, “Sometimes the king is a woman” (2019), with its flat, vivid pink background, meets Pat Steir’s “Untitled XXII” (2019), a poured abstraction that echoes the dress pattern in Sherald’s work. Both speak of process, one imposed, the other cultivated by chance. This pings off the bright blue background of Jake Troyli’s

“Self portrait as a country club legend” (2022–23); with its upward momentum, the Troyli nods to the downward weight of the Steir painting. Nearby, Cecily Brown’s “Pretty Stories and Funny Pictures” (2022), a luscious, dark, seductive tribute to court painting, meets Jorge Galindo’s painterly explosion “La Ultima Sed” (2021), an unfettered nod to the history of floral painting.

The second room makes me think about light. Tala Madani’s “Cave Interior #1” (2019) shows two small figures with flashlights in a cave finding their way in the dark. Maybe they are in the belly of a painting itself. Nearby is Torkwase Dyson’s blue/black painting “Memory (Liquid a Place)” (2023), with a shaped wooden swoop at the bottom that is coated with graphite. It acts like a trap for light that pools reflectively in its lap.



Fiona Rae, "Then whets, and combs its silver wings" (2022), oil and acrylic on linen, 60 x 50 inches

In the third room, Charline von Heyl's "Hotzenplotz" (2022) is a field of energy poised between shape and object. Boot or stocking forms don't quite coalesce but tap out a rhythmic abstraction. She has described her process as "...running with the painting, like it's a dog on a leash." Her painting brings out the compositional rigor of Nicole Eisenman's otherwise goofy "Keys, Phone, Wallet" (2022).

The final room, perhaps the messiest mix, presents Lesley Vance's remarkable "Untitled" (2019), a gestural whorl with red, white, and black clean-edged curves drifting among washy swirls. Nearby, Sillman's vibrant "Untitled (blue, black)" (2022) matches its ebullient pitch and the collision is intoxicating. By now, the haptic takes over. The physicality of painting becomes pure pleasure. The show invites discovery, associations, observations about technique. Sometimes, that is more than enough. With a nod to Peter Halley guarding the door, I'm ready to enter the adjacent galleries and take a fresh look at the timeline of modernism.



Jorge Galindo, "La Ultima Sed" (2021), oil on canvas, 78.75 x 63 inches



Nicole Eisenman, "Keys, Phone, Wallet" (2022), oil on canvas, 58 x 44 inches

50 Paintings continues at the Milwaukee Art Museum (700 North Art Museum Drive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin) through June 23. The exhibition was curated by Michelle Grabner and Margaret Andera. A related event, **Expert Series: On "50 Paintings,"** is scheduled for Thursday, March 14.