Special Topics: Abstract Presence In Painting

Course Information
Course Title: Abstract Presence In Painting
Course Section PNTG 3307
Course location: Fox Fine Arts, Room A455
Course Meeting Times: T/R 1:30-4:20 pm

Instructor Contact Information
Instructor's Name: Tom Birkner
Instructor's Office Hours: M/W 11am - 12pm and by appointment (Prospect Hall 130)
Instructor's email: tabirkner@utep.edu
Instructor's Phone: 917-902-2059 (mobile)

Instructor's Introduction

Tom Birkner, B.A. Rutgers University, M.F.A. The Pennsylvania State University, is an Assistant Professor of Art and a five-year member of the Department of Art faculty. Tom previously taught at Drew University, Madison, NJ and at Parsons The New School for Design in NY and Paris. His work is widely exhibited and he is represented by Paul Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, and Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe.

Course Description

A hardly acknowledged fact is that all painting is a form of abstraction. Everything in a painting is seen through the paint itself. So how something is painted is just as important as what's being painted. An Impressionist sky is fundamentally different from a Hudson River School sky. A face by Vermeer and a face by Picasso show two different views on the human condition. Abstraction is present in all painting; this class is where that presence becomes something you can find, experiment with and direct toward more powerful paintings.

There are two ways to approach this endeavor. 1) Completely detach painting from representational imagery, and make the paint itself the subject. Or, 2) Manipulate representational imagery to such a degree that the paint is more prominent than the thing represented. We will be doing both. Some paintings will be completely devoid of imagery. Others will use imagery as a foundation for abstract transformation. Regardless of the strategy, however, the focus of this course is the creation of paintings that show the expressive power of paint itself.

Course Methods

To get you started, there will be class-wide projects assigned. However, and as usual, you are all free to take any direction you like. In fact, you will have to do that because abstraction is most powerful not when it's simply a technique to be followed, but the result of an outlook on life. **Experimentation and the development of paintings without the fear of failure is one primary concern of this class**. To that end, you will work quickly on groups of six small paintings that we'll call mini-series. Each mini-series

will be due every two weeks. After mid-term, you are welcome to take more time developing these works or creating new ones.

Weekly demonstrations will be standard. These demos will be developed over time so students can see their evolution and the possibilities inherent in reworking a painting past its early stages. **New tools and media** will be incorporated into the class. Some of these will be made available for everyone to use. However, it's imperative that you also think cleverly about the tools and media you use and look for new ways to apply paint. Suggestions are at the end of the supply list below.

Another major concern will be the search for a philosophical attitude you want to convey visually. To help with this, you will be required to write commentary that answers some basic questions that will be given to you in the first week of class. Also, below is a brief list of conceptual dichotomies to help direct your thinking. Which side are you on?

Perfect/Imperfect
Pleasant/Unpleasant
Beautiful/Crude
Good/Evil
Light/Dark
Unified/Disintegrating
Simple/Complex
Technical/Primitive
Sleek/Rough
Purposeful/Accidental
Stillness/Movement

Gallery Walks

On Tuesdays, classes will begin with a presentation of images. This is a mandatory aspect of the course. We will look at the major historical trends of abstraction in painting from the birth of Modernism on. These trends include: Expressionism, Formalism, Minimalism, geometric abstraction, abstraction in POP, and the 'process' and 'complex ' abstraction in contemporary times.

Course Goals

1. To direct paint itself into visually captivating form. 2. To explore painted "style". 3. To learn how different tools and media can impact painted imagery. 4. To transcend the constraints of representation. 5. To produce a group of abstract paintings that are convincing to you and viewers.

Objectives toward these goals include:

- Recognizing that abstraction is a vital aspect of any painting
- Producing multiples that refine one's approach to painting
- Heightening your awareness of complex visual possibilities inherent in painting
- Use constant experimentation as a strategy

Course Outcomes

With the successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Understand that how a thing is painted is always of great significance
- Apply paint in ways that suit your intentions
- Paint in a manner that highlights paint's formal potential
- Think past typical painting tools and techniques

Course Requirements/Assignments

At semester's end, four six-painting mini-series and four larger works will be due. A statement that focuses on some of your beliefs about art, life and things in general will also be required.

Class Critiques

There will be three critiques. Peer group critiques will occur at Week 5, one on one critiques at Week 10 and the final group critique will be during finals week.

You are expected to have new paintings for each critique. Paintings must show enough progress to be discussed and taken seriously. Also, to encourage you to develop paintings throughout the semester, all grading will be informal until your final grade. However, any student may privately ask for a verbal assessment, which will also be given during the Week 10 critiques.

Grading Guidelines

Grading will be based on effort, improvement and quality. Because skill levels vary, evaluation will be influenced by improvement on an individual basis. A basic outline of grading priorities is as follows:

Mini-series	50%
4 final paintings	50%
Statement	10%
Total	**110%**

IMPORTANT NOTE: Your production must equate to approximately 135 hours of work. That's 90 hours of in-class time and 3 hours per week of work outside of class.

SUPPLY LIST

PAINT (oil or acrylic)

Titanium or Utrecht White (150 ml)
Ultramarine Blue
Pthalo Blue
Cadmium Red Light (pure or hue)
Cadmium Yellow Medium (pure or hue)
Yellow Ochre
Raw Sienna
Burnt Sienna
Alizarin Crimson
Viridian Green (or a green green; viridian is expensive)
Dioxazine Purple
Burnt Umber
Ivory Black
(all tubes are 37 ml except white, Utrecht brand paint is recommended)

MEDIUM

8 oz. Galkyd Slow Dry (remains workable for a day) or
Galkyd Lite (dries less quickly, tacky in 6 hrs.)

PRIMER

Utrecht Artist Grade gesso (recommended)

CANVAS

2 yards minimum of CD-12 cotton duck canvas (available at UTEP)
4x8' sheet hardboard (cut to sizes of your choice)
Painting surfaces are based on your individual needs. Material for stretchers is available to you for free in the woodshop.

Note for the abstract class:
Some projects will require thick paint. Please try to find a very economical (cheap) paint that you won't mind using in large quantities. White plus one or two other that go well together will do.

Note on stores and brands:
Utrecht Paints and gesso available at: **dickblick.com** (no tax)
Lukas paints available at: **jerrysartarama.com** (no tax)
Nova color acrylics available at: **novacolorpaint.com** (no tax, not free shipping)

The paint brands to look at are: Utrecht, Lukas 1869 Oil Colors (at Jerry's Artarama), RGH Oil Colors (rghartistoilpaint.com), Nova Color (acrylic) (novacolorpaint.com)

Utrecht makes very good paint for the price, but their prices are getting high. Their Utrecht White is a very good value. Cheap whites make painting a miserable affair. Lukas paints are OK - better than Georgian or Winton colors. They are a good choice for earth colors like ochres, siennas and umbers, which are very stable and tint well

no matter how low the paint quality is. RGH is a place to buy handmade paints. If you buy them in containers, instead of tubes, their prices are comparable to the other brands but far superior on every level. Note: The above list is just the basics. It's always good to try new and exciting colors.

More Things You Need:

- 25+ small boards from 10”x 10” – 16”x 16”

- **USB flash drive (this is hugely important and required)**

- Odorless Mineral Spirits (not turpentine or regular mineral spirits)

- Two plastic jars with large-mouth screw on lids (for storing OMS)

- Single-edged razors (for cutting photocopied images)

- X-acto knife for cutting stencils

- Nitrile gloves for protection while painting and/or cleaning up (Harbor Freight)

- Small razor-blade paint scraper

- Masking tape

- Kitchen cabinet shelf liner (the kind with adhesive)

- Plastic wrap

- Clear glue (like Elmer’s)

- Carpet tacks or small brads

- X-acto knife or single-edged razor blades

- Sandpaper

Suggestions For Some Unorthodox Tools and Materials

Latex house paint, roofing asphalt, dirt, caulk, spray paint, string, rope, sticks, plastic wrap, food containers (to use as molds and to hold fluid paint), styrofoam packing blocks, etc, etc.

Things to imprint with: old shoes, jar lids, tire sections, anything with a dimensiopattern. The point here is to be clever and look for tools and media you think can give you new and unexpected effects. This is not an exhaustive list.

Course Policies

Grading Standards

F - Failing grades are given for required work that is not submitted and for incomplete final projects. Make-up work or completion of projects after missed due dates may be permitted only with the approval of the instructor.

D - Projects loosely adhere to the class learning outcomes and the minimum terms of assignments. Work receiving a "D" grade displays a clear lack of effort. These kinds of projects put forward obviously minimal efforts in exploring ideas and visual possibilities.

C - These are average projects. They will demonstrate some success in engaging with the assigned material or subject. The project will show that the student can identify and work with key concepts and has a nominal grasp of class instruction and basic painting principles. Projects will display some effort in the area of critical thinking. However, a typical C project does not succeed in pushing beyond average notions of effort and visual acuity.

B - These are good projects. The B project does everything a C project does, but offers a completed image that is visually interesting and displays clear effort. What also distinguishes a B project is the student's ability to offer a unique insight and ask questions of themselves. In short, a B project is a good rendition of basic class requirements.

A - These are exceptionally good projects that go above and beyond the expectations set forth in the requirements. They demonstrate substantial effort and achievement in the areas of critical thinking and art making. They also demonstrate considerable technical skill, originality and present something vital to the viewer. Basically, the A project is art.

Class Policies and Conduct

Attendance, punctuality, participation and appropriate class conduct are considered performance criteria for this class. Failure to perform to required standards will result in strong grade penalties and can cause failure of this course.

Attendance Policy:

- Each student is permitted 3 absences during the semester without penalty. Students with more than 3 absences should consider dropping this course and retaking it at a time when the student can commit the proper attention to the course.
- Each unexcused absence after 3 will result in the final course grade being lowered by 1 full letter grade. Absences after the first 3 can be excused only if the first 3 absences are excused.
- Excused absences are defined as documented illness or serious illness or death in the immediate family.
- Coming to class late or leaving early is regarded and graded as being absent. All students are required to attend class on time and to remain in the class the entire

time. Entering class late and leaving early is disruptive to the learning environment.
- Coming to class unprepared or attending class and not working is regarded as absent.
- Information missed during an absence is the sole responsibility of the student.

Course Participation:
- Participation in all discussions, critiques and class days is required for this course.
- Utilization of class time is required and necessary
- Projects executed solely out of class will not be accepted.
- Participation in the collaborative environment of the studio is essential to the successful completion of this course. It's also more fun.

Class Conduct:

• Sick Policy - **If you are not feeling well, or if you are sick, then you should not come to this class under any circumstances**. You should instead seek medical care, and/or recuperate at home. Email me or call me when you are able and let me know the circumstances, and I will help you to catch up in class when you are feeling better. . If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable. If a family member is ill, and you need to care for that person, please email me or call and let me know what your situation is.

• Guests - **Guests are not permitted at any time during class**. Please tell your friends, family members, partners, that they may see you before or after class time. You are expected to remain in class at all times, and may not step-out to visit with guests during class. You will be held responsible for adhering to this policy, and I will give you one warning. After that, I will ask you to leave class and you will be counted absent for that class period.

• Cell phones and tablets - **USE OF PHONES DURING CLASS IS NO LONGER ALLOWED.** Please turn off your phones during class time. No texting. You will be asked to leave if your phone goes off during class, and be counted absent for that class period. If there is some reason you must use your phone, please notify me BEFORE class, and or use your phone during break.

• Music - Ear phones are allowed while working, but not during class discussions. Music systems in the form of a boom box are not permitted in class. Anyone caught listening to emo-pop will be considered absent. Bruce Springsteen is recommended.

• Studio Hours - The studios will be open for your general use. UTEP police will have your name and student ID number. If the studio is closed, you may call them up and they will come to the studio and let you into the building/class rooms up until midnight. The UTEP police number is 747-5611.

• Studio Safety - Some aspects of painting can be hazardous if proper precautions are not taken. The most important thing to remember is to keep your hands clean. All safety

procedures will be explained to you throughout the semester, and every consideration has been taken to create a safe environment for you to work in. If you are pregnant, or have other physical issues such as allergies to dust, respiratory issues, anything that I should be aware of, please inform me of this immediately, and we will work to make you safe and comfortable.

• Cleanliness - You are required to clean up your work area when you are finished working in the studio. Please put all of your tools, materials, etc. away in your lockers, and wipe down tables, easels and sinks. Do not leave paint or mineral spirits on the floor. **Close all jars containing mineral spirits and put them in the flame retardant cabinet in Studio A457. Put all rags with solvent on them in the red, flame retardant trash cans with lids.** If you have difficulty cleaning up after yourself, then you will receive a special tutorial on how to clean up after class.

• Personal Safety - For both spirit and safety, it is highly recommended that you come to the studios with others from your class. If you must work alone, late at night, please be sure to let someone know where you are, and please keep a cell phone with you. If you feel unsafe for any reason, you should call the UTEP police immediately (747-5611). There is a studio phone for your use. Additionally, if you would like an escort to your car at night, please call the UTEP Police department, and they should accommodate your needs. Please inform me if there is a problem, and I will address it immediately with the proper authorities.

• Work Removal - Finished works must be removed by the date set by the instructor of this course. All works left in the studio after this date will be disposed of. All materials, canvases, etc. will become the property of the studio after this date.

Late Assignments, Make-up Work and Exams

Late assignments, make-up work, and make-up exams are only afforded in the case of an excused absence by arrangement and approval of the instructor.

Incompletes, Withdrawals, Pass/Fail

- Incompletes or "I" grades will be considered for students completing satisfactory or better work and having serious legitimate situations beyond their control requiring additional time to complete the course requirements. All "I" grades are at the discretion of the instructor and the approval of the Department Chair.
- Students hold full responsibility for withdrawing from this course if that procedure is elected. Withdrawals must be completed on or before the final date to drop a course with a "W". Students missing this deadline will be issued a grade for the performance in the course.
- PTNG 3307 is a grade-based course and is not available for audit or pass/fail options.

University Policy Statements

Cheating/Plagiarism: Cheating is unethical and not acceptable. Plagiarism is using information or original wording in a paper without giving credit to the source of that information or wording: it is also not acceptable. Do not submit work under your name that you did not do yourself. You may not submit work for this class that you did for another class. If you are found to be cheating or plagiarizing, you will be subject to disciplinary action, per UTEP catalog policy. Refer to **http://www.utep.edu/dos/acadintg.htm** for further information.

Disabilities: I will make any reasonable accommodations for students with limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities. Please see me personally before or after class in the first two weeks or make an appointment, to discuss any special needs you might have. If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, you will need to contact the Disabled Student Services Office in the East Union Bldg., Room 106 within the first two weeks of classes. The Disabled Student Services Office can also be reached in the following ways:
Web: **http://www.utep.edu/dsso**
Phone: 915-747-5148