

The Death of Painting Is Dead



Image: Detail of a collaborative painting between Jacob Heustis & Thea Lura. Photo by Laura Hartford.

Denise Burge
Sean Garrison
Darren Haper
Jacob Heustis
Steven L. Jones
Thea Lura
(in collaboration with Jacob Heustis)
Mark Masyga
Kim Piotrowski
Letitia Quesenberry
Carole Silverstein
Joe Vajarsky
Curated by Bruce Linn

Hite Galleries-Schneider Hall
January 14 – February 14, 2010

UNIVERSITY OF
LOUISVILLE
HITE ART INSTITUTE

In memory of Don Baum and Ray Yoshida.

To Ray: for teaching that authenticity is the best guarantor of originality in painting and the reason it can aspire to be more than a vanity project.

To Don: for showing that intuition, discovery and a good laugh are not only assets for an artist, but for a curator as well.

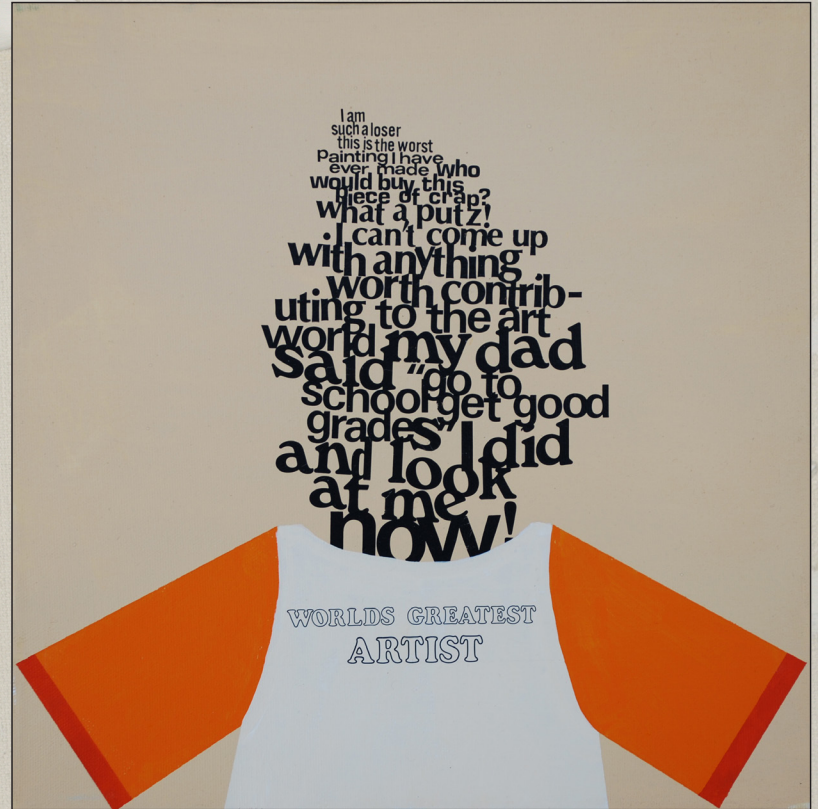
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PROVING THE OBITUARY WRONG

As legend has it, when the 19th-Century French history painter Paul Delaroche encountered a daguerreotype, he declared, "From today, painting is dead," seeing the challenge photography posed to the role of the painter.

Today, many of us face a similar crisis, where strict adherence to our training and our assumptions about our professions place us at risk of becoming the blacksmiths or buggy salesmen of our times.

The work in this exhibition demonstrates painting did not die and that the emergence of photography revealed only the limited assumptions of what a painting was, or could be, and what the artist's role is, or could be. This exhibition includes paintings by eleven contemporary painters from around the United States. The artists are Denise Burge (*Cincinnati*), Sean Garrison (*Louisville*), Darren Haper (*Dayton*), Jake Heustis (*Louisville*), Steven L. Jones (*Chicago*), Thea Lura (*Louisville*), Mark Masyga (*New York*), Kim Piotrowski (*Chicago*), Letitia Quesenberry (*Louisville*), Carole Silverstein (*Los Angeles*), and Joe Vajarsky (*Chicago*).



1. Darren Haper, *World's Greatest Artist*, acrylic and press type on canvas, 12 x 12 in.

STEP-BY-STEP: PAINTING AS A COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOR

In 2008, when Jacob Heustis and Thea Lura were collaborating on paintings, they took an incremental, step-by-step approach (see cover image and image 2). As Heustis describes it:

We did work on the pieces in each other's presence. Basically, taking turns making marks. Discussing as we worked. We were very interested in paint. Making paintings that were simply the medium in itself.

While collaborative painting is not unprecedented, it runs counter to prevailing assumptions and myths about the medium as a solitary pursuit. And while it is true that few artists actively collaborate on individual paintings, collectively painters must contend with a vast history of works in the medium that span a wide-range of techniques, styles and philosophy. In this, they cannot be seen as working “alone.”

Instead, like Heustis and Lura, they are “taking turns making marks,” observing the steps made before, and looking for new steps forward.



2. Jacob Heustis & Thea Lura, *untitled (red)*, 2008, oil & graphite on canvas, 43 x 50 in.



3. Letitia Quesenberry, *Union of Opposites 3*, 2008, plaster on six panels, 48 x 96 x 4 in.

NEW APPROACHES TO PAINTING

When Jackson Pollack began his drip paintings, he challenged assumptions about painting: that it needed to be made with a brush, or palette knife; and that it needed to be worked on vertically — on an easel, or wall. There was no question that this was technically possible, but there were cultural assumptions about what was a worthy painting, which Pollack changed. Innovation — even, one as absurdly simple as not using a brush, had trumped, or at least rivaled, other measures of creating a successful painting.

Much of this exhibition focuses on shifting formal assumptions and how changes in the process of painting expand the vocabulary and terrain of the art form. In this light, we might see the grid of panels that compose Letitia Quesenberry's paintings asserting themselves like architectural elements, rather than simply as pictures (image 3).

But, we notice something different in how multiple panels are used in the work of Steven L. Jones (see image 5). They allow him to suggest extensive narratives with his imagery. Then there are Darren Haper's works, which use paint applications more associated with abstract or process painting to suggest absurd figurative narratives (images 1 & 4). Other works introduce new materials (Mylar, acrylic ink, synthetic paper, etc.). This gives artists like Kim Piotrowski (images 7 & 13) and Carole Silverstein (image 6) a whole new set of options.



4. Darren Haper, *A Talking Head Blows Chunks*, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 in.



5. Steven L. Jones, *Wet (Dreamscape with Fall of Icarus)*,
Acrylic ink on dyed paper with wooden frames,
5 panels: 9.75 x 10.75 in., 11.25 x 20.5 in.,
26.5 x 26.5 in., 25.5 x 11.25 in. & 9.75 x 18.75 in.



6. Carole Silverstein, *Nothing Disappears*, acrylic ink on Mylar, 24 x 52 in.

NEW CULTURAL ALTERNATIVES

But, artists also have another avenue to expand and renew the vocabulary of painting: They look to cultural expressions outside of Western high-art traditions. Japanese prints influenced the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists. African sculpture gave Picasso a road map into Cubism. Carole Silverstein shows that finding inspiration in other cultures still offers fresh possibilities. Her work gleans motifs and patterns from a wide range of traditions from around the world, including Japanese screen paintings, Persian miniatures and Islamic architectural tiles (*image 6*).

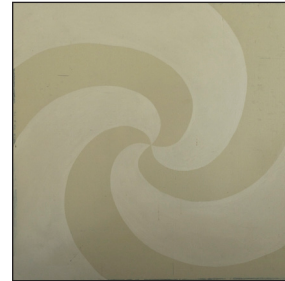
After World War II, when the U.S. assumed a larger role in the art world, artists looked to popular culture, as well, to create new content, styles and forms in their work. And, more recently, folk art and other vernacular visual materials have become recognized as valid influences. Denise Burge (*image 10*), Sean Garrison (*image 11*), Darren Haper (*images 1 & 4*), and Steven L. Jones (*image 5*) show popular culture is no longer feared as a tainted and corrupting influence. Instead, their work embraces it as a means of reaching an audience who are as at home with popular culture as they are.



7. Kim Piotrowski, *You Mother*, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 60 x 48 in.

A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

Today, painters are often sensitive to their medium's place, function, or role among other media. They face common questions. What can a painting do that a photograph can't, or a television, or a book?

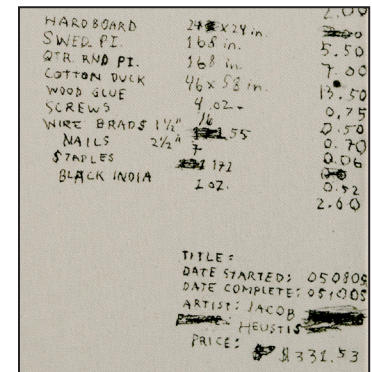


8. Joe Vajarsky, *Scope*, 2006, oil on linen, 18 x 18 in.

When asked to discuss his work, Joe Vajarsky uses a quote often attributed to musicians, including Thelonious Monk, Frank Zappa, and Elvis Costello: "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." Vajarsky implies the same is true for painting. His paintings employ a range of motifs and designs that are painted in earnest, but seem to brush aside attempts to impose heavy-handed theoretical interpretations (*see image 8*).

Jacob Heustis' paintings stress the economy of his gestures. For example, his work frequently features small ink or pencil marks on a vast field of unprimed canvas that heighten our awareness both of the marks and of the canvas itself, often, making worthy photographic reproductions of them nearly impossible (*image 9*).

Increasingly, painters expect their paintings to defy translation beyond the gallery, including published writing about and photographs of their work. Only by seeing it can one experience it.

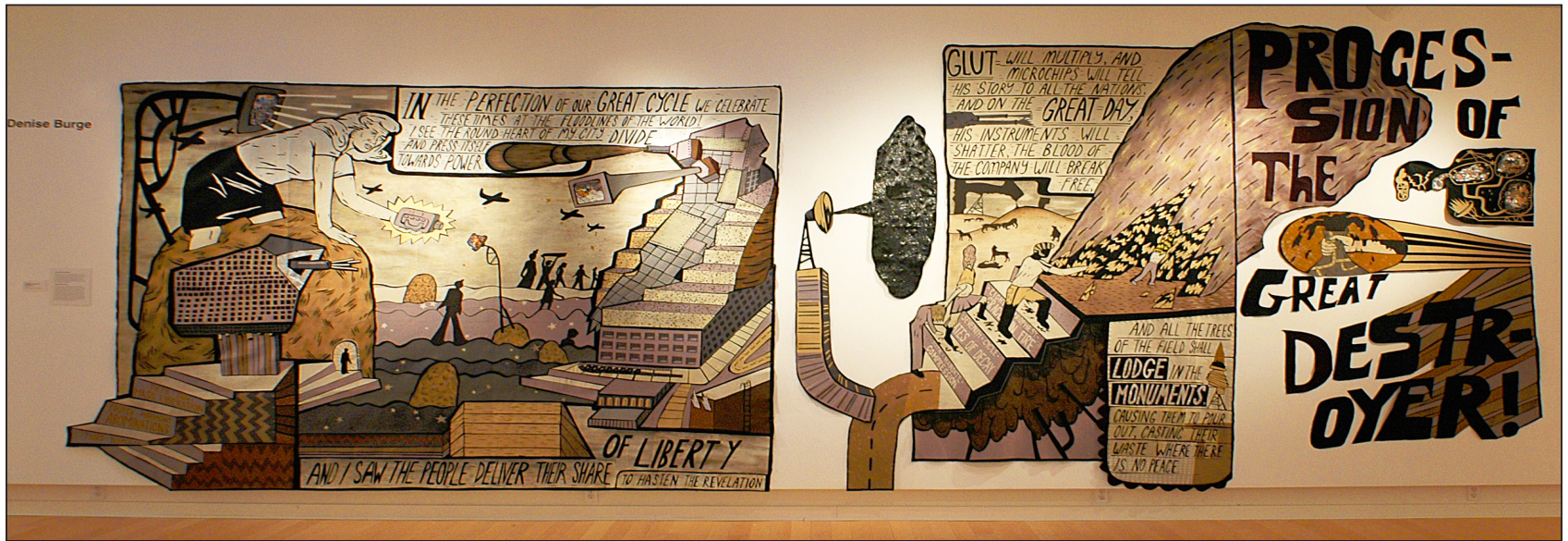


9. Jacob Heustis, detail from untitled (piece w/ labor and materials) 2005, India ink on canvas, 38 x 46 in.

WHAT IS A PAINTING?

Intermedia, cross media, and mixed media are par for the course these days. This makes categorizing art troublesome and debatable. When does a painting become a drawing, or vice versa? When does it become mixed media or a collage? Do such works lose their identity as paintings? For example, Denise Burge's "Procession of the Great Destroyer" (image 10) could easily be categorized as a textile because it's made from fabric. However, the artist considers it a drawing. Its style draws upon the visual vocabulary of drawing and graphic arts (such as comic books). In its format, it

reads much like a mural or fresco or even graffiti as it engages the wall as a large-scale image. The traditions of painting and drawing inform this piece more than those of traditional textiles. It also shares many of the attributes of other installation works Burge has made that are painted directly on the wall. And, finally, it occupies territory traditionally associated with painting: it includes pigments; is primarily two dimensional; and it works with shape, color and line.



10. Denise Burge, *Procession of the Great Destroyer* (first section), 2004, mixed media on fabric, 10 ft. 2 in. x 26 ft. 7 in. (dimensions vary with each installation)

PROCESSION OF THE GREAT DESTROYER - As the U.S. presidential election campaign went into full swing during the summer of 2004, Denise Burge made a road trip across the United States. She paid close attention to the political rhetoric of the campaign, and it reminded her of the fiery and apocalyptic messages she heard as a child attending church in North Carolina. As she was driving, she began to envision a large-scale work that would evoke the religious tracts (small comic-book-like publications with provocative and proselytizing content) of Jack T. Chick. "Procession of the Great Destroyer" was the result. The section on display is just over half of the overall work.

NEVER THE SAME RIVER TWICE

Even if the approaches and techniques of painting remained identical to those of the past, whether that past was the 19th Century or the Paleolithic era in which the Caves of Lascaux were painted, it would still feature content and subjects that reflect changes in the world and culture. In this exhibition, Sean Garrison probably represents this condition best. He is not an artist by training. And he's not particularly interested in pioneering the formal minutiae of painting. His biting satiric works play with emblematic and iconic imagery from a variety of cultures and historic periods, including our own popular culture. Each is thrown into the fierce blender of his temperament and comes out startling, absurd and fresh (*image 11*).



11. Sean Garrison, *Do Homage to the Gods of Blood*, acrylic on fiberboard, 24 x 32 in.



12. Mark Masyga, untitled, dated: 7.20.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.

COLLAPSING STRUCTURES

Mark Masyga's paintings, at first, appear to be abstract compositions focused on shape and color. But upon close examination, they are observations and ruminations on collapsing structures gleaned from observing demolition sites.

THE DEATH OF PAINTING IS DEAD

Because the expectations about art and painting are now so firmly focused on innovation and individual expression in the wake of the challenge the camera posed to the role of artists, some questions about the state of painting might as well be questions about the capacity of human imagination and of individuality itself. To give up on any medium as rich as painting as dead is a distressing notion. One might as well declare that we have become "Post-Human." And, for the increasing number of us who face personal and professional challenges prompted by technological change, the persistence and renewal of the practice of painting should be a lesson: that self-knowledge and openness are often the best guarantors of success and of a rewarding life. Like the numerous artists who changed our assumptions about the artist's role, we can discover that as the old world dissolves, we are free to make a new one — one better suited to our values and aspirations. After all, what is the alternative? Death?

Bruce Linn, January 2010

Exhibition Checklist

Denise Burge

1. Procession of the Great Destroyer (first section), 2004, mixed media on fabric, 10 ft. 2 in. x 26 ft. 7 in. (dimensions vary with each installation)

Sean Garrison

1. The Taste Test, acrylic on fiberboard, 24 x 32 in.
2. Do Homage to the Gods of Blood, acrylic on fiberboard, 24 x 32 in.
3. Fidelity in Revenge, acrylic on fiberboard, 24 x 32 in.
4. Scis Quod Fecisti, acrylic on fiberboard, 32 x 24 in.
5. The Herald of Light, acrylic on fiberboard, 24 x 32 in.

Darren Haper

1. A Talking Head Blows Chunks, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 in.
2. Travelers, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 20 in.
3. Swallowing a Camel Before Dinner, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 in.
4. World's Greatest Artist, acrylic and press type on canvas, 12 x 12 in.
5. How Can This Be, acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 in.

Jacob Heustis

1. Untitled (piece w labor and materials), 2003, India ink on canvas, 18.5 x 22 in.
2. Untitled (piece w labor and materials), 2005, India ink on canvas, 38 x 46 in.
3. Untitled (Sold), 2010, oil on canvas, 96 x 103 in.

Steven L. Jones

1. Wet (Dreamscape with Fall of Icarus), acrylic ink on dyed paper with wooden frames, 5 panels: 9.75 x 10.75 in., 11.25 x 20.5 in., 26.5 x 26.5 in., 25.5 x 11.25 in. & 9.75 x 18.75 in.
2. Learn The Darkness, acrylic ink on dyed paper with wooden frames, 3 panels: 20 x 20 in., 34 x 23 in. & 23 x 34 in.
3. Mothman Took My Baby Away, 2009, acrylic ink on dyed paper with wooden frames, 2 panels: 27.75 X 21.5 in. & 27.75 X 16 in.

Thea Lura & Jacob Heustis

1. Untitled (red), 2008, oil & graphite on canvas, 43 x 50 in.
2. Untitled (white), 2008, oil & graphite on canvas, 43 x 50 in.

Mark Masyga

1. Untitled, dated: 7.21.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.
2. Untitled, dated: 7.20.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.
3. Untitled, dated: 6.26.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.
4. Untitled, dated: 6.20.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.
5. Untitled, dated: 6.18.09, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.

Kim Piotrowski

1. You Mother, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 60 x 48 in.
2. Collared, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 26 x 20 in.
3. Gold Digger, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 26 x 20 in.
4. Pucci Blowout, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 26 x 20 in.
5. Mumbai Holiday, 2009, mixed media on synthetic paper, 40 x 26 in.

Letitia Quesenberry

1. Union of Opposites 3, 2008, plaster on six panels, 48 x 96 x 4 in.
2. Union of Opposites 4, 2008, plaster on six panels, 48 x 96 x 4 in.

Carole Silverstein

1. Nothing Disappears, acrylic ink on Mylar, 24 x 52 in.
2. So Far Your Nearness, acrylic ink on Mylar, 24 x 52 in.
3. The Lowest Ebb, acrylic ink on Mylar, 42 x 30 in. (frontal view)

Joe Vajarsky

1. Coming, 2009, oil on canvas, 48 x 32 in.
2. Plot, 2004, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.
3. Circus Flap, 2005, oil on linen, 23 x 24 in.
4. Scope, 2006, oil on linen, 18 x 18 in.
5. Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in.



13. Kim Piotrowski, *Pucci Blowout*, 2008, mixed media on synthetic paper, 26 x 20 in.

Gallery Hours: M - F 9:00 - 4:30 (Thursday till 8)

Saturday 10 - 2

Sunday 1 - 5