

Stroke of Genius:

Gesture and Brushstroke in Postmodernist Painting

by Susan Post



"Rose near green and sky blue gives both honour and life." Leon Battista Alberti *Della Pittura* 1436



"Every day I look at the sky to capture the colour of the day" Sean Scully 20

Top: Sean Scully *Arrest* 1987 oil on linen; Bottom: Jonathan Lasker *Fachwerkwald* 2005

PREFACE

Priming is my favorite part of preparing a canvas for painting because, after the physical exertion of stretching the canvas, applying gesso puts me in an almost meditative state. I start by wetting the whole thing down, dipping my palm into a bucket of water. When the water first hits the taut dry cotton duck, it forms glistening disks that dance across the surface, breaking up and then coalescing again, in picture plane parties of mercurial oblate globs. It looks very spacy and hyperreal, and I think about making a painting of *that*. But then I rub my warm hand against the cool water, and it melts through the surface and is absorbed into the canvas which, once wet, will be able to draw the gesso deep into its weave, forming a protective seal. It feels so soft, connecting me with each canvas in such a physical, sensual way that I know that, really, *this* is what I want to be painting about. This kind of presence cannot be simulated.

Some paintings are like the water-soaked canvas, full of remnants of a human touch, and for me these are far more interesting and approachable than those that resemble the beautiful, shiny beads of water sitting on the surface of the canvas. I no longer want to make paintings that look like something else; instead, I want to make ones that look like I have been working on them, that I showed up. More and more I agree with painter Sean Scully, who said: "Abstraction's the art of our age ... it's a breaking down of certain structures, an opening up. It allows you to think without making oppressively specific references, so that the viewer is free to identify with the world" [Kennedy].

How I leave my mark in my paintings is intimately tied in with how I make my marks. I wanted to figure out why, by the time I completed a painting, it would often have lost the free and assured gesture with which it had begun, and which I was overly reliant on to infuse the picture with spirit. Over the past year I have heard the same critique, over and over again: "Vary your brushstrokes more", but I suspect that it is ambiguity of intention, rather than uniformity of brushstroke, that may really be the issue vexing me. I have been conflating gesture with intuition, and brushstroke with gesture, and not giving enough thought or attention to the application of paint. A comparison of the works of two painters – Sean Scully and Jonathan Lasker – will show how both planning and spontaneity, accident and control, are used to make a convincing painting.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of style, technique or material, a work of art that rises above the trivial to become convincing is one that is imbued with meaning, often embodying truths recognized as universal. Authenticity is one standard by which art can be measured, and for some artists it has become its subject, as well. Though relegated not long ago to secondary status as an outmoded, irrelevant practice, painting has recently regained its primacy among artistic media, due to its ever-expanding capacity to convey authentic human expression. Expressionism was rejected by minimalists for its dependence on subjectivity, a position that called into question as well any kind of privileging of one material over another for purely historical or aesthetic motivations, in what LeWitt described as “making the physicality of the materials so important that it becomes the idea of the work.” With their strict limitations of what was considered acceptable artistic practice, Judd and LeWitt only proved the point that every movement has drawn on an aesthetic that determines the parameters of what is considered necessary to, and therefore definitive of authenticity in artistic output.

Two contemporary abstract painters whose work differs greatly in appearance, but who can nevertheless both be classified as proponents of a neo-Romantic abstraction are Jonathan Lasker and Sean Scully. Lasker is a singularly articulate American conceptualist whose “figural” abstractions were moderately influential during the 1990s in Europe and New York City, and Scully, an Irishman living in the United States, currently has a major retrospective of his paintings – spiritually infused grids made from painted and repeatedly repainted stripes and rectangles – making its way across the United States. Both of these painters are interested in analyzing what occurs when we look at a work of art, and in endowing their own paintings, insofar as possible,

with the distilled essence of that interaction. They also share a conviction that paint is a uniquely haptic medium, which can take us beyond the prolonged search for meaning in postmodernist art, to a place where life and art no longer imitate one another, but where, instead, life is full of art and art is full of life.

Finding divergent resolutions to a common set of important aesthetic principles, Lasker is more interested in painting's phenomenology, its "unique capacity to illuminate how objects in the real world are experienced,"¹ while Scully is more concerned with its ontology: "The whole point of painting is that it has the potential to be so humanistic, so expressive."² For both Scully and Lasker, though, the locus of the materiality as well as the potential for expressiveness in a painting lies in the brushstroke. Lasker intends his paintings to "support the position of the human hand, and thus the integrity of human identity ... In no other art medium is creation more permanently and intimately bound to the movements of the human body."³ Scully adheres to a similar notion, though based on a more spiritual foundation:

Painting is incredibly enduring, because it's an activity where the hand and the spirit and the mind combine together in this gesture, and it's compressed into movement, the making of something ... It's important to remember what you're doing, and what you're doing is trying to make a subjective, poetic reality by simply putting paint on a surface.⁴

Before looking at the differences between Jonathan Lasker's and Sean Scully's use of gesture and mark, a brief survey of some of the ways in which the brushstroke has been used and referenced in art since modernism may provide some clues as to why gesture is so significant to them. It will be helpful to try to understand why they have each chosen to paint abstractly, and the systems that underlie their methodology, before examining in more detail the role of specific formal attributes, in their effort to make paintings that contain essential truths. Informed by theoretical and historical

contexts, gesture and brushstroke will emerge as a major factor, not only in the work of Lasker and Scully, but in the restoration of painting as a viable activity in contemporary culture.

Because it is at once both line and color, sign and signifier, the problem of the painted mark has created controversy throughout the history of art, erupting notably in Italy during the 16th century with the debate over *disegno et colore*. Until chiaroscuro and perspective were introduced as part of the Renaissance, the dominant and unconvincing method for representation was through line and unmodeled color. Leonardo and Michaelangelo exemplified the revolutionary developments that were possible once oil-based paints allowed transparent layers of color to be applied over a carefully drawn grisaille. This system for painting prevailed for over 400 years, and was not supplanted until the Modernists began to investigate the capacity of optical mixes of pigment to represent the impression of light and color. Since at least the time of Goethe, the visual and psychological impact of color has been studied with increasing detail and understanding by artists and scientists, including the groundbreaking work of the textile chemist Chevreul in the 19th century, and well-known treatises on the interactions of colors by Itten and Albers, members of the Bauhaus school, in the first part of the twentieth century. The birth of modernism has been traced to Edouard Manet's appropriation of the pose and the flawless skin of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* for his odalisque, *Olympia*. In Manet's painting, the "relationship to its art-historical precedents was made shamelessly obvious ...[and] to its sources self-consciously problematic."⁵ With the advent of the modernist movement in art in the late 19th century, content in Western (European and North American) painting began to swing between representation of an objective reality and presentation of subjective truth. A rapidly

cascading avant-garde relentlessly redefined the function of art in society, as pictorial space entered into a period of analytical deconstruction.

No sooner had the capacity of gesture to convey the dueling forces of accident and control been established by the Abstract Expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, than it was deconstructed by the Minimalists and Pop artists -- Roy Lichtenstein, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Chuck Close, among others. They, and postmodernists like Robert Rauschenberg and Gerhard Richter, turned their attention outward, away from subjective individuality toward a more objective viewpoint, the better to critique the realities of modern life. When Phillip Guston, formerly an abstract Expressionist, mounted a show of figurative paintings in 1970,

De Kooning realized that Guston had found in painting, idiomatic and unsettling as the imagery was, a means of making vital what was most important to him. At a time when Modernist culture had retreated into rarefied theoretically-driven realms, and when Formalism had evacuated subjectivity under the aegis of essence, Guston swerved toward the social, confronting an America that was plunged into protest and scarred by self-assassination. Guston changed painting.⁶

Guston became a pivotal figure in the reassertion of authentic personality and symbolism in painting in America.

By the mid-'70s, Neo-Expressionists like Baselitz and Kiefer and New Image painters (including Susan Rothenberg, Lasker's teacher for a brief time at Calarts)⁷ were churning out emotionally charged surfaces *in combination* with personal allegorical content, tapping a wellspring of feverish activity among painters bolstered by newfound interest from critics. In 1990, Carter Ratcliff looked back at that time of transition: "By banning metaphor and discouraging empathetic impulses and projection, '60s artists imposed an astonishing degree of neatness on art. That is not what we want today, or so our empathetic readings of abstract art suggest. ... [We pay] attention to Cy

Twombly's scrawls, the irregularities of Jasper Johns's hatchmark and the Johnsian way that line branches over Brice Marden's recent canvases." ⁸

BRUSHSTROKE

Personal gesture has been synonymous with brushstroke in painting for only brief and intermittent moments. For centuries, great care was taken to achieve homogeneous surfaces without texture or trace of brushstroke, in compositions made up of lines with shapes varying only in hue and value. Though a master draftsman, Leonardo used sfumato almost exclusively to give form to the *Mona Lisa*'s features. Romantic like Turner and Delacroix emerged in the 19th century, acting as a tonic to the mannered, overwrought historical tableaux that typified art of the Salon. In addition to rejecting the Academic notions of tightly composed allegorical content, early modernists like Manet and Courbet began to retain overt gesture in their paint, no longer blending together every individual brushstroke as was *de rigeur* for inclusion in the official exhibits of their day, in order to better promote the heightened emotional content they wanted to bring to their paintings.



Jean Désiré-Gustave Courbet
L'Eternite

© Bristol Museums & Art Gallery

[P]ainting was transformed when artists abandoned the transparent glazes and blended brushstrokes of the past and turned their attention to life around them. ... Courbet retained a forthright and physical connection to the world. He painted the concrete, he said, and he gave what he saw actual physical dimension on his canvas ... our eyes are drawn by the sheer tactile mass of the pigments.⁹

But the subjective truth that Manet was expressing was still tied to a narrative outside of himself, as in his almost reportorial paintings of the execution of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, for example. To capture sensation through increasingly subjective, direct observation, Impressionists and the painters who directly followed them began to use marks of discrete colors that combined optically, on the surface of the canvas, rather than blending tones on the palette, a technique most rigidly observed by Seurat. As epitomized by van Gogh, whose directional mark-making was an essential component of his compositions, the high emotional impact of the daring, experimental paintings at the end of the 19th century was due as much to the manner in which the paint was applied as to the explicit color of the paint.

Abstract Expressionists like de Kooning and Joan Mitchell embedded gesture in the brushstroke itself, which had finally come to be a true sign of authorial uniqueness and the spontaneous activity that occurred while painting a picture. Throughout the 20th century, gesture continued to make the transition from being considered the trace of intuitive action meant to express emotion in a painting, to becoming the subject of the painting itself.¹⁰ For example, in the work of the groundbreaking Action painter Jackson Pollock, the gesture of his drip (standing in for the brushstroke) was at once the motive and the motif, a quality to highlight, not hide. The act of painting has arrived at subjective status, but soon both originality and spontaneity would be called into question by Pop, Minimalism and other forms of conceptual art.

Roy Lichtenstein, in his series of Brushstroke lithographs and sculptures renders a comic, simulated gesture in his cartoon versions of brushstrokes, meant to critique the fallacy of purely spontaneous, autographic mark-making, in much the same way that Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II* did with paint and collage. This ironic outlook has itself been gradually superseded by a more complex investigation into authenticity, and a renewed interest in personal expression.



Roy Lichtenstein *Brushstroke* 1996

Even within the oeuvre of a single artist like Chuck Close or Sol LeWitt, the brushstroke has evolved as a subject. Close began by airbrushing pixels of either shades of grey or primary hues to optically resolve into a cohesive image at the proper distance, but his later paintings became much more personalized – both in mark (the thumbprint portraits) and in color – when he began using multiple, blended tones in almost “posterized” blotches within each square of his grid.

At the beginning of his career, LeWitt issued a manifesto of conceptualism proclaiming his interest was not in particular form, but rather a “multiple, modular method” – his three-dimensional grids were deadpan diagrams of spatial relationships – and that his objective was to “eliminate the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible”.¹¹ But even the man who wrote the rulebook did not stagnate, and during the 1980s his work “saw a marked shift involving sensual color and surfaces, myriad geometric shapes and their permutations, and a more explicitly expressive overall character.”¹² He is best known for systematized, nuanced wall drawings and

opaque paintings completed by anonymous assistants, but his recent work is much more fluid and idiosyncratic, images of horizontal brushstrokes that seem to move through light and time, like the grooves on a giant vinyl record etched for color rather than sound.



Sol LeWitt Horizontal Brushstrokes 2003



#57, 1974
69 inches x 10 inches
oil and alkyd on linen

David Reed has made an entire career out of painting brushstrokes, first as literal records of swept paint, and later as complex interwoven effects such that his “marks seem more like pictures of brushstrokes than straightforward brushstrokes themselves.” Katy Siegel continues in her catalogue article for an exhibition of Reed’s work in 2001: “Because everything is relative, some of these marks seem to refer to touch and some to vision ...And, as Reed has himself noted, no matter how directly he worked, illusionism crept in:...In the early 1980s, Reed made a break with the look of the literal or factual in his early work. His new paintings featured brushstrokes not as demonstrations of Reed’s or paint’s physical properties, but as structural elements.”¹³

What links all these movements together is their focus on the dichotomy between control and chance, which lies at the heart of the creative process. This has been, and remains, a central issue in abstract painting.

ABSTRACTION

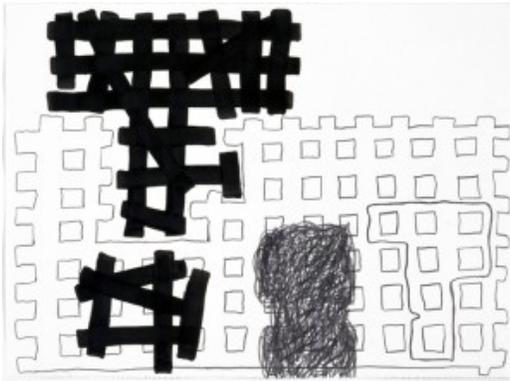
The *sine qua non* of paint as a medium is that it simultaneously presents (exists in) actual space, and represents (simulates) illusory space or its absence; that it has, according to Lasker, "a peculiar capacity to become a locus for an experience of the actual, the concrete, in opposition to the depicted, the imagined."¹⁴ His work "embraces the belief that abstraction is a visual language rooted within the referential systems of modernism.... [and distills] abstraction down to its primary ingredients: line, color, form and texture. He has simplified and magnified each component; kept gesture to a minimum in order to rigidly manage his spare vocabulary."¹⁵ It is not clear that Lasker has been able to resolve his dual preoccupations with gesture and formalism, either conceptually or on canvas. Lasker elaborates on the role of gesture in his work: "Johns and Rauschenberg were important to me, particularly in regard to how they treated gesture. Treating it, that is, in an analytical manner. Johns' method of codifying touch on a certain level--this was very interesting to me."¹⁶

On the one hand, he writes: "one goal of Modernism has been to bring objectivity to painting...I see this formal objectivity to be *critical* in creating a rigorous painting."¹⁷ But Lasker has also stated: "...I don't have literally reasons for why an image should happen. The process is imaginative and on that level it has to be intuitive."¹⁸ Kevin Power, the curator of a retrospective of his paintings and maquettes at the Museo Nacional in Madrid and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein – Westfalen in Düsseldorf in 2003, finesses the distinction between intuition and subconscious

behavior, as if Lasker is capable not only of rigorous thinking but an unnatural degree of control over his impulses as well. "Intuition is painstakingly realized, almost literally framed.... He trusts the intuitions behind his own mark making...the marks set the stage and provide the comfort of conventions. Lasker engages the subconscious in terms of given language, not as personal psychology." ¹⁹

Some insight into Lasker's rationale can be found in his essay about Piet Mondrian, whose intent, Lasker says, "was to find harmonic balance through painting ... by establishing rules determining the objectively real in a painting." Mondrian presents the effects of colors as "factual" and, as such, "objectified and neutralized" into a painting "devoid of metaphor." But the relationships between the areas of color set up a dissonance that counteracts that balance, to achieve a "beauty of the mind" in which "desire overwhelms truth". ²⁰ Elsewhere Lasker states that he paints "to support the position of the human hand, and thus the integrity of human identity... it contrasts that force against the random effects of gesture in order to render the latter more affecting in the context of the former. As such, my painting is intended as an image of quintessential conflict." ²¹ As Lasker describes it, his method of working is to "first to do a small sketch either with the ballpoint pen or markers or brush pens on small pieces of white paper and to come up with an image that *I think is interesting*...When I arrive at *an image that I think perfectly expresses the idea behind the image*...I take that study and I do a freehand version of it." ²²[italics added] So it would appear that, much as he would like to reduce touch, intuition and gesture to diagrammatic components and subject them to rules of operation, Lasker cannot actually explain the relationship between the conception of his paintings and their execution without resorting to nonspecific choices. "If reality is reflected in Jonathan Lasker's works at all, then it is

only on a highly mediated level, and certainly indirectly. Nevertheless, his works do offer the most subtle visualizations of how visual forms are generated, how intuition and consciousness productively interact.”²³



Jonathan Lasker
Untitled, 2003
graphite and India ink on paper
22 x 30 inches



CONSPICUOUS ABSENCE, 1999 oil on linen 63" x 84"

Lasker makes a distinction between a “sign” and a

“mark” that places the ultimate responsibility of decoding the picture squarely on the shoulders of the viewer:

[W]hen we use a sign we are referencing a known meaning. On the other hand there is an ambiguity in marks which cannot be clearly resolved. A mark is something about which the only thing you know is that it is a mark. It is neutral in the sense that it doesn't yet have a specially assigned meaning. I think there is a range between signs and marks in my work, a certain frontier where you exit the realm of the sign and enter that of the mark. You don't yet know what the signs are for those marks, so you're confronted with the task of determining them.²

For Kevin Power (curator of his retrospective in Dusseldorf), Laskers' paintings are “a form of conflict – conflict between our habitual readings of foreground and background, our inculcated view of the way in which space might be inscribed pictorially, ...and our acquired habits regarding the recognition of figure and ground. ... [and] can be seen as a cooling down process pushing intuition toward analysis.”²⁴ It would be interesting to see what Lasker's paintings would look like if he were less intent on making them

manifestations of logical or aesthetic precepts. By making analysis rather than intuition his mode of integrating marks onto the canvas - he does admit to introducing instinctive action when making his studies - Lasker exhibits his fear of the unknown and inexplicable, and a certain need to define and intervene. He might discover worlds outside of the reality he has been constructing and explaining for thirty years, worlds perhaps even beyond the limits of his own understanding.

Scully also explores the territory that Lasker so admires in Mondrian, the "perceivable gap between melody and tone".

What I am painting is a simple divisional structure, but you see the way it is painted, what color it is painted, and how many times it is painted in relation to that simple structure. ... I've re-established something that I think had been broken - that the abstractionists kept building on abstraction and I think they forgot what it was originally based on.²⁶

Scully believes strongly that his work is built on the most basic structure, "that its horizontals and verticals are "eternal", and that "abstraction is about a yearning for universality, qualities that place him in the dwindling Modernist line."²⁷ His paintings are dark and moody setpieces, yet somehow also full of light, which seems to have been pulled from within the canvas rather than painted upon it.

[There is an] unstable harmony [to] Scully's paintings. It is what gives them their independence from the tradition of romantic abstraction to which they belong, for the artists of that tradition find a mysterious unity in disunity, while Scully finds the unavoidable disunity in unity....The unsettling offness — inner oddness — of Scully's 'constructed paintings' calls attention to the oddness of the relationship between geometrical 'figure' and geometrical ground in them.²⁸



1 Sean Scully *Arest* 1987 oil on linen 213.4 x 274.3cm

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue for the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein – Westfalen show, the museum’s Director, Armin Zweite, attributes a disquieting effect to Lasker’s paintings, too, due partly to “the way contrasts and contradictions permeate all graphic levels in such a manner that they react back upon the viewer.”²⁹ He writes that

Discipline harnesses every extravagant gesture, if without extinguishing all traces of the initial impulse that may have set the creative impulse in motion. ...spontaneity is therefore subordinated to control, [yet] insertions of apparently crude or astonishing elements counteract rationality without eliminating it entirely.³⁰

This deliberately disturbing quality to Lasker’s painting is directly associated with the high contrasts of its intended subject matter: “the historically conditioned contradiction between spirit and sensuality.” He places a premium on the critical discourse, which infects his paintings with overwrought intellectualism. Zweite goes on to say that, in this respect, Lasker is emblematic of his generation: “The dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, between rationality and emotionality manifested itself repeatedly during the 20th century, and it had also left it traces on Lasker’s artistic trajectory.”³¹

As we have seen, both Scully and Lasker begin their painting process with distinctive compositional systems:

Lasker's paintings standardize gesture and geometry, reducing abstract painting to a tricky if ultimately facile design... Sometimes the pattern itself is a system of such "systemless" gestures, repeated as though the canvas were a gallery wall and the slightly different parts of the pattern "pictures" in their own right. This exhibition-within-a-painting effect is perhaps the most conceptually interesting aspect of Lasker's work. ³²

Despite all his intellectualizing, Lasker does acknowledge that some things cannot be codified:

If each element in a picture could be seen in this way as having an autonomous, physical presence, it would make possible paintings which created illusionistic space, yet always grounded the viewer with respect to what he or she was literally viewing. ...For about two years after *Illinois*, each painting I did was a means of understanding what was so compelling to me in this picture. It still remains ineffable to me. ³³

Scully explains that the dialectic he operates under combines simplicity with complexity:

I'm very attracted to simple or basic systems of ordering. ... the way I use and think in colour is complex and emotional. This is working in tandem with an ordering attitude that is direct and clear. But it is only direct and clear at the beginning, when it is an idea. As it is painted, it is given body and light so that the whole situation becomes complex and open to simultaneous experiences....A lot of my work is concerned with relationship and disruption. ³⁴

Scully's investigation, also, is rooted in formalist structure, but is much less



didactic than Lasker's, and impossible to separate from an inchoate sense of what it is to be a human being. "[T]he problem with a lot of abstract painting is that it doesn't really express anything. I think to express something you need some kind of pressure, you need a discourse. Fitting and not fitting, that's how relationships are made. That's another thing in my work, this battle between system and emotion, the need for system to be overcome by feeling." ³⁵

Sean Scully, *Small Blue Window*, 1999.

Unlike Lasker, Scully believes that the system is subordinate to the body and soul of the person who devised it, which animates his paintings in a way Lasker is not even trying to achieve: "If the spaces between the bars and the bands in my work gradually open, for example, the painting breathes differently. The background, signifying what was, becomes more forceful, as do the implied shifting relationships within the work. This is a way of transforming the content without changing the subject."³⁶

Neither painter feels the obligation to justify abstraction, indebted as we all are to those who came before us. Referring to de Kooning's work, Scully singles out

its relationship with the figurative. Even in his most resolutely abstract work the memory of the figure is embedded into the surface.... Scully learned from the Abstract Expressionists that, although he did not paint figuratively, he could embody human figuration within his chosen abstract style. The character of each of his paintings could be distinctive, just as each human being is individual.³⁷

Scully's sense of indebtedness is tinged with a practical matter-of-factness, as if he cannot wait to continue the journey that they began:

I'm not fighting for abstraction. Those battles have already been fought. I'm using those victories to make an abstraction that is, in fact, more relaxed, more open, and more confident. I take it for granted I don't need to abstract reality anymore; that has already been done. ... I'm [trying] to make something that is more expressive and that relates to the world in which we live. In that sense my abstraction is quite figurative. It is not very remote.³⁸

Lasker, as well, locates himself in relation to abstraction as a movement that has already been fully incorporated into the culture. In contrast to Scully, though, Lasker feels that abstraction as a vehicle of information has outlived its usefulness. His goal is to make a lasting contribution, and he is determined to move the discourse forward :

I've puzzled over what this so-called return to abstraction [over the past two years] could mean. I still cannot imagine it. For me, abstract painting finished with the black paintings of Frank Stella. The goal of modern painting, which represented nothing but its own pure form, had been attained...To me, this

existential objecthood was now ready to be depicted as subject matter ... to use our experience of the elements of painting for their associative powers, in a poetics of painting. ...which could also embrace broad topics, such as memory and presence, materiality and transcendence, and the flattening of high and low culture. It is towards this end that I have painted unhappy marriages of the biomorphic and the decorative, the mark of the "loaded brush" and the geometric, the psyche and popular culture. I want a painting that's operative. I'm seeking subject matter, not abstraction.³⁹

Both Lasker and Scully choose to paint for many of the same reasons, to address many of the same aesthetic issues. Lasker could be speaking for them both, when he writes: "The greatest challenge that painting now faces ... is the challenge of technology. Our experiences are being increasingly mediated, pushed further and further outside the realms of phenomenal experience."⁴⁰ but he is far too caught up in placing and naming things to agree with Scully, that "the best way for me to represent everything in between is not to state it, but to capture it by stating the two ends, and somehow imply everything in between."⁴¹

The main difference between their outlooks is reflected in the qualities that distinguish their work. Regardless of his evenhanded rhetoric, Lasker clearly valorizes materiality and presence over transcendence and memory. In 1977, barely out of school, Lasker was determined to make a breakthrough, "a painting unlike any other I had seen", to "become a significant artist."⁴² He set out to analyze what happened on the surface of a painting, and then proceeded to combine the components in as many new ways as he could. Because his interest is in the particular, he cares about classification and codification, applying paint in one of a number of distinct methods, according to the effect he wants to achieve. He paints many beautiful and strange images, but fails to understand that they are most beautiful for all the ways in which they break all his rules. "Although my paintings appear to be almost quotational, like a

cartoon of themselves, they insist on their physical presence.”⁴³ If it is the viewer for whom he intends the painting to be an “actual experience., about an empirical relationship to phenomena,”⁴⁴ then in all his writing Lasker leaves out a crucial piece of the puzzle. He has very little to say about his own relationship to the pictures he paints – he literally does not see the handwriting on the wall, and that it is his own. Scully unabashedly promotes the individual, but insists that there be a certain degree of integrity to back it up:

I think what we need is an extraordinary humanistic assertion made by individuals and that is our great necessity at this point in time. The whole thing, as something that can be codified, as it was, let's say in the time of Clement Greenburg, has become unraveled. The only thing that can put it back together again is extreme individual action. That is why I am so comfortable in a time like this, because I am so much of an individualist. In a sense, it is my time. It's a perfect moment.⁴⁵

In an article in *Art Papers* called “According To What: On Abstract Painting Circa 1999” critic David Moos writes: “Regardless of painting's uneasy passage through the irony-driven, cynical cultural climate of the 1980s, when painting simultaneously flourished and was nearly extinguished, the priority of self remains relevant. While the modernist notion of selfhood is certainly no longer intact, the shadow of its presence consciously drives an understanding of abstract painting.”⁴⁶ Scully perfectly captures this consciousness of self, while Lasker seems intent on remaining self-conscious.

The changing attitudes toward gesture and mark over the last century mirror and illuminate the evolving role of painting as it has been engaged in humanity's search for authenticity. We are encouraged by our painting teachers to find a gesture or image so personal and distinct it is irreplaceable. At first glance this impulse to be unique seems to ignore the critical discourse about appropriation and the myth of originality that consumes the attention of so many of today's artists and critics. When we look further

into these issues and begin to dissect what is and what is not authentic in a work of art, it becomes clearer that, in large part, it comes down to unavoidable personal autograph – to mark-making, and gesture. A white Ryman, or an On Kawara date painting are conceptual paintings that nevertheless are hand-made objects that embody the artists' intentions as well as their actions. This ability of paint – embedded within the color and quality of the mark - to convey attitude and provoke empathy (or alienation), supersedes not only symbolic content but all other formal elements of a painting, because of its constitutive nature. Scale, proportion, figure/ground relationships – all are secondary to the effect of the materiality of the paint, without which there would be no painting. Both Scully and Lasker understand that the irreducible qualities of a mark that an artist must choose while making a painting are its color, and how and where it will be applied, but out of the two of them it is only Scully who has the courage to bare his inner workings and share his authentic mark making in his paintings. His experience in the studio borders on the ecstatic, and he willingly declares his bias:

The whole point of painting is that it has the potential to be so humanistic, so expressive. To give that up is a tremendous mistake because then what you are doing is imitating forms of technological expression which can be manifested more directly, more efficiently, and frankly, more beautifully, in their original form. It's quite sad; artists, who are trying to, let's say, de-express the brushstroke. It is the opposite of what I am trying to do. I want my brushstrokes to be full of feeling; material feeling manifested in form and color.⁴⁷

Helen Frankenthaler once cautioned that “[g]esture must appear out of necessity not habit”⁴⁸, which implies that intentionality is key to arriving at an authentic painting, but that it must be motivated by sincerity. Lasker self-consciously varies his brushstrokes to illustrate gesture, with a calibrated affectation, whereas Scully’s marks, despite being fairly uniform, are unassumed and unassuming, clearly as much a part of him as his skin, servant to his high regard for integrity. Scully would agree with Lasker

that “[p]ainting is about actual experience., about an empirical relationship to phenomena,”⁴⁹ but he prefers to schematize the relationship, while Scully depends on his paintings to contain the evidence of the act of painting, which is also seeing, feeling, doing, living. In contrast to the qualified role that Lasker assigns to art, that it “must address issues relating to the conservation of meaning before it can address issues of revolt and renewal for the “advancement” of culture,”⁵⁰ Scully celebrates painting precisely for its capacity to promote and reinforce our humanity: “The more artificial the world becomes, the more one is forced to experience the world and the world of relationships through a TV or a computer screen, and the more extreme is the need for a human surface. Painting is uniquely placed to offer that.”⁵¹



Roy Lichtenstein *Brushstroke* 1996

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6. Moos, David. "According To What: On Abstract Painting Circa 1999"
7. Godfrey, Tony. "Jonathan Lasker: the dialectics of touch",
8. Ratcliff, Carter. "Notes on Line" p. 155
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27. Dixon, Glenn. "Sean Scully: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden"
28. Kuspit, Donald. "NUANCE AND INTENSITY IN SEAN SCULLY: Humanism in abstract disguise".
29. Zweite, Armin, *ibid.* p. 13
30. *ibid.* p.10
31. *ibid.*
32. Kuspit, Donald. Sperone Westwater Gallery review *ArtForum*, Dec, 1993
33. Lasker, *Illinois*. p. 56
34. Kennedy, Brian P. "Drama Abstracted".
35. Davis, *ibid.*
36. *ibid.*
37. Kennedy, *ibid.*
38. Davis, *ibid.*
39. Lasker, *Complete Essays*. pp. 20 - 21
40. *ibid.* pp. 41-42
41. Albright Knox wall text
42. Lasker, *Illinois*. p. 53
43. Lasker, *Complete Essays*. p. 42
44. *ibid.*
45. Davis, *ibid.*
46. Moos, *ibid.*
47. Davis, *ibid.*
48. see 10, above
49. Lasker, *ibid.* p. 41-42
50. *ibid.* p. 44
51. Davis, *ibid.*

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