

## Jean-François Lauda

### *In Praise of the Indeterminate. On the Paintings of Jean-François Lauda*

---

In a time of wide-spread digital experimentation and immersive installations of augmented and virtual reality, in an era of increasingly complex computer-generated animations and images produced at an unprecedented level of detail and resolution, what can abstract painting still mean in the field of visual arts?

In recent years, art criticism has tried—with more or less success and often a fair amount of derision—to describe “provisional painting,” “casual” painting, and even “zombie formalism.”<sup>1</sup> At minimum, critics agree on the difficulty of situating abstract painting today, at a time when it is no longer spearheading the aesthetic and visual arts revolution that evolved from the early 20th century to the glorious period of New York modernism in the 1950s and 1960s. Lacking its historical and critical mandate, might abstract painting be doomed to be nothing more than a minor, even decadent, genre, good only for decorating the mansions of the rich or stoking the speculations of the art market?

Since the early 2000s, Jean-François Lauda has been producing work that encourages us to take a more nuanced approach to the issue. Presenting ten recent large-format paintings, the current exhibition offers the opportunity to examine Lauda’s remarkably consistent research into what I would call the *indeterminate*. This similarly imprecise term hardly seems preferable to “provisional” or “casual.” Yet while these qualifiers serve only to include abstract painting in the attitudes particular to the current zeitgeist, it would seem that the *indeterminate* is precisely what our overdetermined, overregulated, and overprescribed world seeks to abolish—the certainly vague and even anachronistic place of improvisation and intuition.

But first, what is there to observe in Lauda’s paintings? The answer is unavoidably subjective given the deliberate

absence, on the part of the artist, of any clue or explanation. I for one see a series of gestures that are not unidirectional and that shift from scraping to stamping, from spraying to rubbing to lightly brushing the paint on the canvas. These gestures are nebulous at times, at times precise, in one area loose, in another defined, and sometimes shaky on a life-size canvas. In successive layers, they construct a body of paintings that are in turn stroked, scratched, stained, and that reveal their textures and moods *veil by veil*: areas of humidity and dryness, powdery effects and liquid rushes, the depletion of paint on raw canvas and the swell of material that leaks and bleeds as though by happy accident.

The method is resolutely experimental. No organizing principle seems to guide the painter’s interventions, other than perhaps a vertical line that structures and divides most of the works in the exhibition. For a long time, Lauda has been using lines to emphasize the paintings’ boundaries, their edges or angles. Here, the line begins to shift the frame to the interior of the image. Better still, it drags in its wake a horizontal movement, like the pole of a flag fluttering in the wind, making the painting’s entire surface more dynamic and simultaneously propelling the observer’s gaze to move laterally from one painting to another. The result is paradoxically both atmospheric and sedimentary: a balance of tension between transparency and opacity, between improvisation and accumulation, between plane and movement, understood through this mobile vertical line and a few scattered anchoring points (small dots of colour placed, sometimes in a line, along the edges of the paintings).

Corresponding to the varied gestures outlining a possible field of indetermination is the artist’s curiosity for what can be found under the visible surface; his curiosity for the *underneath*. This *underneath* can be understood in several ways. Needless to say, it involves the coats of paint that precede the coat still to come with which the artist must compose,

endeavour to transform, and also renounce in order to be able to continue making the painting. But the *underneath* can also designate every new coat that appears on the painting, over the others but deeper, as the result of the pictorial exploration. Either way, Lauda's paintings offer us layers of different times assembled on the same surface just like a palimpsest.

In contrast to modernist abstract painting's striving for invention and aesthetic renewal, Lauda's painting style does not claim to break with the past. Instead, it intuitively seeks to relate heterogeneous times and make these times co-exist in a single image by including traces of prior gestures—those set down on the canvas as much as those set down by predecessors. Yet the paintings do not leave me with an exact memory of them. They escape my eyes' grasp; they resist my attempts to capture them in words, as though everything in them conspires to prevent me from clearly identifying or individualizing them. To complicate matters even more, the artist indiscriminately titles his paintings *Untitled*, placing them in an indefinite collection of images without hierarchy. Herein, no doubt, lies the freedom of the painting that is so important to the artist, a field that remains open to any possibility, and is therefore *indeterminate*.

So then, why make abstract paintings today? In a world in which it has become increasingly difficult to escape oneself, one's identities and sociopolitical context, Lauda bids us to enter an indeterminate place, *despite everything*. He does so not in modernism's domineering way or in a melancholic, backward-looking manner, but with remarkable gentleness through an intimate, experiential relationship

with time, gestures, and bodies, carefully avoiding to *grasp* any one thing and always ensuring a certain *buoyancy*. Such an attitude could be seen as escapist in the face of the injunctions proliferated by everyday news, but might not such a sideways step and anachronistic breath be precisely the attitude that will safeguard our potential to actually be contemporaries of our time?

Ji-Yoon Han

*Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei*

---

1. Sharon Butler, "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists", *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2011 (online).  
Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting", in two parts, *Art in America*, 2009/2012 (online).  
Walter Robinson, "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism", *Artspace*, 2014 (online).