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FRONT
ROOM

SETH ADELSBERGER



Seth Adelsberger. *Untitled (Large Submersion 8)*. 2014.
Courtesy of the artist and Horton Gallery

SETH ADELSBERGER (American, born 1979) has pursued a variety of approaches to painting in the work he has produced over the past five years. In some cases, his monochromatic canvases have such a strong glow that they appear to be illuminated electrically from within. In other examples, he treats a painting's surface as material to be cut away, transforming a two-dimensional image into part of a sculptural form. In still other pieces, wood or textiles replace paint and canvas as the media from which a "painting" is made.

Adelsberger's experimentation with materials and techniques recalls the painterly investigations undertaken by artists working in the late 1950s and 1960s. Earlier Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko created pictures that were considered highly individualistic, emotive, or

psychologically charged. Some examples of this type of painting can be seen in galleries 15 and 16 on the third floor of the BMA's Contemporary Wing.

In contrast, the artists associated with the next stages in the evolution of abstract painting were recognized for producing technical, non-emotional, and even critical responses to the poignant stretches of color and exuberant splashes and brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism. For example, the mid-century American Color Field artists (featured in gallery 14 of the Contemporary Wing) are best known for the innovation of staining acrylic paint directly onto canvas. Several of their contemporaries, including Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, are celebrated for rigorous geometric compositions flatly painted from a carefully defined palette and canvases fabricated in a panoply of shapes that challenged the assumption that a picture must be rectangular. This rethinking of shape and surface was not limited to the United States. In Italy, artists affiliated with the Arte Povera group made works from unexpected materials like metals, fibers, and even mechanically generated frost. Members of this loose movement also turned paintings toward the wall so that tacks, stretcher bars, and trimmed canvas edges were highlighted as visual content.

Although works like these encouraged subsequent artists to continue to break rules—whether by blurring boundaries between genres or letting evidence of the production process remain visible in the final artwork—individual painters of the later 20th century rarely undertook such diverse modes of constructing supports and building up textures. As a young 21st-century painter, however, Adelsberger actively returns to this sixty-year-old history to reexamine the many ways in which one can physically interpret painting. He also raises questions about whether the intervening decades have turned once avant-garde artworks into purely decorative objects or commodities for sale rather than intellectual contemplation.

In one of his most recent projects, Adelsberger probes the historical relationship between abstraction, meaning, and

value, using an image of a commercially-produced carpet that he discovered while browsing online. The carpet's abstract design was likely inspired by painting from the first half of the 20th century, but as a mass-produced, mundane object, it lacked the philosophical underpinning or personal investment of the art of that period. Using a computer, Adelsberger manipulated the color of the digital image to heighten the carpet's pile and patterning. He then had several of his digital manipulations printed onto rectangles of actual carpet, which he presents as paintings. He displays these fragments in meticulously fabricated cases to heighten their relationship to other precious objects, including those installed in protective vitrines throughout the BMA. Yet the meaning and value that is being safeguarded is left intentionally ambiguous. Not only is the abstract design devoid of any of the expressionistic content of early 20th-century art, but the textiles also no longer have a functional use as floor coverings. These works seem to comment on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of making an emotional or spiritual statement using an abstract vocabulary that over time has been co-opted by commerce.

Unlike the machine-fabricated carpets, Adelsberger's *Submersion Paintings* require his physical engagement in a subtle process. Following in the footsteps of the Color Field painters, the artist stains his untreated canvases with either rich turquoise or rose-purple washes of paint. He then subverts the method of these earlier artists by reintroducing gesso, which they had eliminated entirely from their stained works. In Adelsberger's hands, this thick white base or barrier paint is unorthodoxly sandwiched between initial stained layers and a final wash of rich color to insert texture and dynamic form into each monochromatic expanse. Within a historical context, these paintings appear to be compelling hybrids of chaotic, pulsating Abstract Expressionist gesture and the flat color fields that replaced them. From the vantage point of today, the *Submersion Paintings* are studies of the standard cyan and magenta hues used in industrial printing. Their striking luminosity, which shifts in intensity depending on whether one views a work from straight on or at an oblique angle, is likewise an evocation of the optical effects of contemporary digital screens.

Adelsberger's *Border Paintings* and stretcher bar constructions are also represented in his BMA exhibition. In the former, he removes the central portion of each painting, leaving only a painted and wrapped edge to frame the void where one would expect to find the most important part of a picture. For the latter, the artist employs the standard wood bars around which canvas



TOP TO BOTTOM: Seth Adelsberger. *Untitled (Border Painting: Rustica)*. 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Horton Gallery

Ellsworth Kelly. *Diagonal with Curve II*. 1978. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from Gift of Edith Ferry Hooper, BMA 1979.32. © Ellsworth Kelly

is normally stretched to create a support for a painting. In Adelsberger's reconfigurations, the stretcher bars themselves are cut and joined to build an image from the regular widths and standard 90-degree turns of the typically hidden substructure. One such example is wittily identified as *Untitled (Stella Artois 3)*, drawing an association with a popular Belgian beer but also playfully invoking Frank Stella, a preeminent figure in the story of abstract painting that Adelsberger so thoughtfully reconsiders.



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Curated by Curator of Contemporary Art Kristen Hileman

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