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‘Conceptual Abstraction’

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Hunter College/Times Square Gallery

450 West 41st Street,

Manhattan

Through Nov. 10

Abstract painting is making one of its perennial New York comebacks. And an ambitious survey called “Conceptual Abstraction” at the Hunter College/ Times Square Gallery gives a good sense of where it’s coming back from.

The 20 artists in the show all helped shape abstraction’s previous revival in the 1980s. They all participated in an important 1991 exhibition, also called “Conceptual Abstraction,” at the Sidney Janis Gallery, documenting that florescence. And they all continue to produce characterful work today, as attested by the inclusion, in the Hunter show, of both vintage and recent paintings.

As conceived by the curators — Pepe Karmel, an associate professor of art history at New York University, and Joachim Pissarro, professor of art at Hunter College and director of the Hunter College Art Galleries — conceptual abstraction is a roomy term with a simple, basic definition. It is painting that exchanges the hermetic Modernist ideal of pure form for a different ideal, or anti-ideal: the real world, with its bodies and buildings, movies and messes, politics and pop culture.

The slick brush strokes in **David Reed’s** “#307” (1991-92) suggest unreeling spools of celluloid film. In **Mary Heilmann’s** “Violette” (1991) two painted panels are sensually interlocked. The spiky fleurs du mal in **Philip Taaffe’s** “Desert Flowers” grew from the 1991 Persian Gulf war. **Richard Kalina’s** jumpy red, white and blue “In Absentia” is a 1992 souvenir of the recession that preceded our Great Recession. **Lydia Dona’s** architectonic “Biochemical Topographies and the Gaps of Dislocation” from the same year is about rust eating metal and cities falling down.

By no means does everything here translate into a human drama. A lot of the work is hungrily and critically focused on channeling other art or art styles: Pop in the case of a little 1991 intestinal still life by **Thomas Nozkowski**; Minimalism in **Sherrie Levine’s** 1988 plywood puzzler, “Untitled (Lead Knot: 7)” and **Stephen Westfall’s** 1992 “Claremont” with its quaking grid; and pattern and

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decoration in the design-intensive “Social Contract” by Valerie Jaudon, who teaches at Hunter and gave Mr. Karmel and Mr. Pissarro the idea of revisiting the Janis show.

As for newer work, suffice it to say that in every case it emerges logically, if sometimes surprisingly, from what preceded it two decades or more ago. And in some cases it plugs neatly into the present. Bill Komoski’s galactic, holographic forms and David Diao’s paintings with tables and lists feel in sync with the some of the information-filled, digitally inflected conceptual abstraction that’s being done today and that will be lucky to find itself, 20 years on, in a looking-back-looking-forward historical survey like this.

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