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‘PAINT THINGS’ is off the wall

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Painting is the linchpin of art history. That’s why some thrill and some bristle when artists paint outside of the lines. We expect a painting to hang flat on a wall, to have a discrete rectangular surface, usually framed. We expect a picture. That format invites a particular interaction, in which we imaginatively enter the space it offers us.

In “PAINT THINGS: beyond the stretcher” at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, the paintings spill out of bounds into our space.

They

peel off the wall, they slither up corners, they hang from the ceiling. They don’t even necessarily utilize paint, although they all deploy the rubric of painting.

This sprightly exhibit with deep theoretical roots blurs boundaries — between painting and sculpture, painting and performance, painting and architecture. Genre busting is nothing new. Artists habitually push at edges and rewrite definitions. Think of Robert Rauschenberg’s combines, which positioned collaged paintings more as objects than pictures, or of Anne Truitt, who was as much a colorist as she was a sculptor. Sculpture spawned installation art. It’s all constantly changing.

But the ideas behind “PAINT THINGS,” while brewing for decades, have lately hit a boiling point. Dina Deitsch, the deCordova’s curator of contemporary art, points out in her catalog essay that no fewer than seven gallery shows on this theme have appeared in the Northeast in recent years. These include a fresh and nervy show at Steven Zevitas Gallery in 2011, “Not About Paint,” organized by Evan J. Garza, which was the inspiration for this exhibit, which Garza co-curates with Deitsch.

They hang their circus of an exhibition on two artistic tent poles, Jessica Stockholder and Cheryl Donegan, and art they were making roughly 20 years ago. Stockholder’s painterly sculptures explode notions of flatness and space. Donegan’s feminist performance art confronts what it means to be the object of the viewer’s gaze. Both, to be fair, took cues from Lynda Benglis, who was spilling paint on the floor and making art of her sexuality long before they came along.

Stockholder saw sculpture through a painter’s lens with works in her 1988-1990 “Kissing the Wall” series, one of which is on view here. Traditionally, paintings hug the wall; sculptures stand

free. Not here. Yellow and gray paint coat skeins of yarn and sheets of newspaper piled on a chair. A light bulb behind the chair lights up the wall. Painterly, composed on a human scale, it's confrontational in its three-dimensional assertion that it's as much painting as sculpture.

There's a natural progression from Stockholder to younger artists such as Sarah Cain, whose terrific "killing me softly" installation careens over walls, around a corner, and onto the floor, swallowing canvases whole with razzle-dazzle wall paintings, looping chains, and neon string. Or Franklin Evans's "paintthinks," a room that pulses with colorful stripes on the wall and suspended from the ceiling like Barnett Newman's zips stepping out to dance, and an immersive collage of texts and images that represent the lively cave of Evans's mind.

Then there's Stockholder's most direct descendant. Katie Bell's smart, disturbing "Blind Impact," made with paint and the rubble of a gutted room, hangs on the wall like a canvas, but also creeps up onto the ceiling, with shards of wood and blots of gunk dotting the upper expanse like shrapnel after an explosion.

Donegan sets a defiant tone with her 1993 performance video "Kiss My Royal Irish Ass (K.M.R.I.A.)." Dressed in a green bra and thong, Donegan dips her rear in a puddle of green paint, then plants it on paper to make paintings of a clover, all to the sappy trilling of "Danny Boy." At the end, she sits and consumes a pint of Guinness. Talk about action painting! She politicizes the painterly gesture by using her body as a brush.

Her acolytes here include Kate Gilmore, whose performance video "Like This, Before" follows the artist, in her pretty skirt and kitty-cat heels, as she repeatedly climbs a ladder onto a black platform to fill cylindrical vases with white paint. Then she kicks them all over, down black gullies that empty into round vases at the bottom.

You can't miss the sexual metaphors. Gilmore, too, thumbs her nose at the action painters, an especially macho group of Abstract Expressionists. Then, her black-and-white palette also recalls Frank Stella's much cooler black paintings, striped with white. The black platform, sodden with white paint and strewn with shattered glass from the broken vases, makes an imposing painting itself.

In an exhibit about painting as an object, videos present a special problem: They're far less material than a traditional painting. The curators address that in part by including Donegan's paint-stained chair, and Gilmore's sculptural remains are part of her process. But other videos here, such as Allison Schulnik's poignant and comic claymation shorts, cannot alter the passive viewing experience.

When painting pops off the wall into a viewer's space, we respond with our bodies as well as our eyes. We may feel engulfed, drawn in, or commandeered. Expecting to look at a picture, we may find ourselves inside one. "PAINT THINGS" prods us to leap over gaps in our own perception and understanding. Go ahead and jump.