

## On Paint, Painting and Painters

The recent discovery of the group known as the New New Painters has prompted me to examine where I fit in relationship to this group of artists. More fundamentally, am I a painter or some other form of animal in the art world?

If we wish to determine what a painter is, one possible starting point is with an understanding of paint and the painting process.

### ***Paint Considered***

In its simplest form, paint is a system consisting of a pigment and a binder. The pigment's role is to supply colour. The binder's role is to carry the pigment and provide adhesion to the painting surface. In addition, modern paints have a host of chemicals added to control other desirable properties such as viscosity, workability, consistency, shelf life, bacterial and fungal resistance and freeze-thaw cycling.

From the artist's perspective, the two properties of concern are colour and body, the latter equivalently considered as viscosity or plasticity. Colour is provided by the pigment and the working characteristics of the paint, by the binder.

Traditional pigments had natural sources such as minerals and plant materials. The variability of different sources of supply created a problem of consistency of appearance. In addition, some materials such as lead-based flake white, were toxic, a fact unknown to early painters. Plant materials had the additional problem of often being fugitive with extended light exposure. The range of available colours was extremely limited and high-chroma colours rare and expensive.

Advances in organic chemistry in the nineteenth century first brought us the vivid aniline dyes. Later, many of the brilliant colours we use today were created, such as the quinacridones and phthalocyanines. We gained access to a range of new metallic salts such as the cadmiums, through developments in inorganic chemistry.

This revolution in pigment creation continues today with emphasis on lightfastness, purity of colour, safety and extended working properties. Even traditional, inexpensive earth pigments, such as the iron oxides, are synthesized rather than mined to provide consistency of characteristics between batches.

Starting in the 1960's, beginning with mica-based pigments, a new class of "special effect" pigments has been developed that provide an exciting array of spectral interference colour and luminosity properties.

In terms of body or viscosity, acrylic is the most extensive and versatile painting system devised to date. In particular, a broad range of acrylic mediums has been developed whose primary property is not a carrier of colour but expression of sculptural or textural effect. For acrylics, the binder is an acrylic polymer and water emulsion.

The traditional impasto nature of oil paint imparted by its binder, linseed oil, has been extended in acrylics over a wide range of viscosities, density or openness, and inclusion of other materials. While materials like sand, mica flakes and industrial minerals may be mixed into oil paint by the artist, they are available off the shelf to the acrylic painter as a growing selection of products.

Other painting systems include watercolour and gouache in which the binder is gum arabic dissolved in water, and casein in which the binder is egg yolk.

All of the above paints are characterized by the fact they are applied in a liquid form of viscosity appropriate to the artist's needs. Other mediums consisting of a binder and pigment are applied effectively dry, including crayons, pencils, pastels and chalks. These are usually classified as drawing rather than painting materials.

### ***Painting Considered***

The technical advances in the last century and a half have given the artist a broad selection of new materials to work with. This has resulted in part, in work that combines a mixture of different media.

The application of colour to a surface can be accomplished by other means than paint. Collage and mixed media artists affix coloured elements that in fact may contain no paint. Within certain technical limitations, any of the painting and drawing media can be combined in a single image. The only major issue is the compatibility of oil-based and water-based media.

When a painting ceases to be a painting and becomes a mixed media work is an arbitrary point. A purist approach might define a painting as one that employs paint and no other materials or media, ruling out collage and the use of drawing materials. A more accommodating stance might be to consider a painting to be a work in which paint is the predominant material used.

Some painters apply acrylic mediums as texture first. They then apply thin transparent colour over top to add the image's colour. Whereas traditionally, texture and colour were applied together through the paint, now the two properties can be applied separately through different components of the paint system. I find, in fact, that this is the way I work. Textural property is as important as colour property and is an entirely separate consideration for me.

A painting then is a work of art executed primarily with a paint system in which two properties, colour and body or texture, provide the dominant characteristics of the image.

### ***The Painter Considered***

If a painting is a work that consists predominantly of paint, then a painter must be a person who uses paint as the primary material for constructing her work.

Ultimately, to be effective, the artist can't be concerned with being true to some dogma of what painting is conceptually. The true artist is one who abandons rules and faithfulness to definition for faithfulness to a personal vision created with whatever materials best contribute to its expression.

So where do I place myself in the scheme of things? I would call myself an acrylic painter since the acrylic media is the fundamental one that I work with. Everything else, collage, markers, charcoal, I view as adjuncts for creating the image I desire.

Where do I place myself with respect to the New New Painters? My sense is that these people are very much married to paint. Although paint in itself, has a sensual appeal to me, and the application process actually causes a "high" on occasion, I see my work in terms of colour and texture and not in terms of paint. Paint is an incidental means of giving me the colour and textural properties I am looking for. Call me a painter rather than a Painter, and likely not a New New Painter.