

REVEALING THE ESSENTIAL

BY MARCIA MORSE

Abstraction in art remains an enduring—and often enriching—challenge for artists, viewers, critics and historians alike. Rising to the opportunity to add to the conversation, Neida Bangerter, Director of the Schaefer International Gallery at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center, has invited three prominent Hawai'i artists to present their work in *AbstractionX3*.

Abstraction is an integral part of the history of 20th century modernism, but also a continuing pulse of contemporary artmaking. Abstraction is a thing, but it is also a process—a process that, as its Latin linguistic roots suggest, involves drawing out from an abundance of visual stimuli what might be set aside or discarded, in order to reveal and celebrate what is most essential. Simply put, abstraction invites us to consider the difference between depiction and distillation—between an image that corresponds with recognizable forms in the seen world, and a visual experience that has created a new space for things that may exist beyond what we see. Abstraction in art has meant a kind of liberation for artists, as well as offering

new ways to think about what we understand as real.

Painters Don Bernshouse of Maui, Debra Drexler of O'ahu, and Tom Lieber of Kaua'i have each cultivated a highly personal approach to abstraction. If realism privileges the eye, abstraction invites other ways of knowing—feeling, thinking, remembering. Painting provides a way into the multi-faceted, multi-sensory nature of human experience.

For Don Bernshouse, painting was a childhood avocation. Study of art and lives of artists remains a lifelong passion, although his medium of expression as an artist has changed significantly. Bernshouse initially studied architectural design in college, and moved immediately to New York

City for work in the early 1960s. Rather than painting, he began to create sculpture aligned with the formal rigor of Minimalism.

Bernshouse left New York in 1970 with his family and returned to Honolulu to start an architectural practice, subsequently moving to Maui in 1980. He continued to remain informed about current activity in mainland art centers, and found that he had explored all he could within the formal abstraction of Minimalist sculpture. In 2000, he began to paint again with new focus, moved more by narrative potential and intuition than by structural intention. Through his longstanding engagement with world art and literature, anthropology, and archaeology, Bernshouse has cultivated



Tom Lieber, *Contact*, 2019, oil on canvas, 76 x 142 in

a distinctive kind of humanism, in which his painting—like a meditative journal of reflection on the world and the self—serves to bring us face to face with our own mortality.

Debra Drexler actively bridges the two worlds of Hawai'i and New York, finding in each urban environment different issues and ideas to interrogate. Since 1992, she has been a member of the faculty of the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where she is Professor of Drawing and Painting. Since her early undergraduate study at Northwestern University in the late 1970s she has been drawn to abstraction, though figuration became more prominent in work created during her graduate study at Southern Illinois University as she explored its potential to address contemporary political issues.

The return to abstraction occurred in 2007-2010, when Drexler began a regular meditation practice, experiencing new and intense perceptions of light and color that continue to suffuse her work. During a sabbatical in 2007-2008, Drexler worked intensively to experiment with this new insight. She also acquired a studio in New York, which she still maintains. Drexler's work affirms her identity as a colorist, richly engaging a visual element that is at once so universal and so deeply personal, resonant with the capacity to activate the visual space of a painting and invoke complex nuances of feeling.

After receiving his MFA in painting and printmaking in 1974 from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Tom Lieber was on an ascendant path with his work, but mentors in an older generation of abstract painters in Chicago advised a move to New York or San Francisco for an environment more compatible with his own artmaking. Lieber moved to the Bay Area, where he remained until 1996, moving again westward to Kaua'i in 1999.

Lieber understood early on that he was more interested in abstraction than figuration, and explored several methodologies for making that transition, including a kind of intuitive drawing aligned with different meditative and therapeutic practices, coming to focus on a body-centered force that still propels his mark-making. Though inspired by the natural environment of Kaua'i (as he was by the old-growth forests of California), Lieber is careful to distinguish between painting the vision and painting the feeling, the energy with which both artist and environment are endowed. In Lieber's painting, as with the work of Bernshouse and Drexler, abstraction remains a vibrant mode of visual inquiry—intimating so many experiential worlds still to explore.



Don Bernshouse, *Head with India Printed Paper and Korean Calligraphy*, 2018, mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in



Debra Drexler, *Spark & Pool*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 90 in

AbstractionX3

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