

At EXPO Chicago 2019, An Abstract Dialog Hosted by Maus Contemporary That Shouldn't Be Missed





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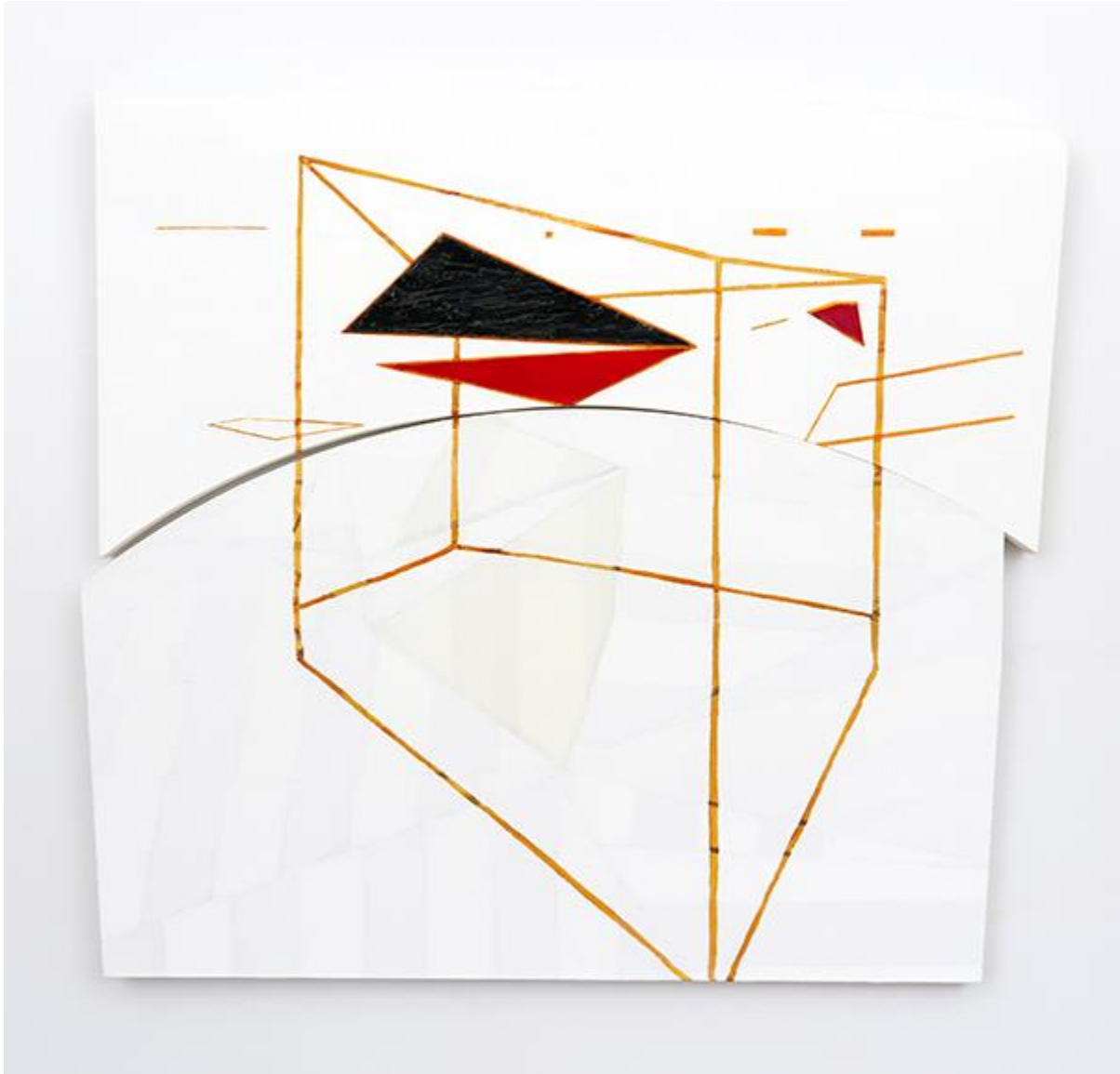
At the **2019 EXPO Chicago**, there will be a special section dedicated to solo and two-artist presentations by young galleries. Titled **EXPOSURE**, it will feature a selection of emerging artists worth paying attention to, curated by the Vice President of Education and Public Programs at the LACMA, Naima J. Keith.

Among the works on view, one can find an interesting dialog between two contemporary abstract artists with distinct practices spanning decades, courtesy **Maus Contemporary**. On one side we have the historical paintings by the late **Yoshishige Furukawa**, created during his time in New York after he moved there from Japan in 1963. On the other, the intriguing pictorial plans by the young Maryland-born **Leslie Smith III**.

Many instances, beyond the common abstract approach to painting, is shared between the two artists. Both Furukawa and Smith seem to be inspired by the things they see around them, to be reacting to different experiences on a daily basis. They also went through a kind of a shift in their respective art-making: while Furukawa's traditional, paint-based works turned into more process-based, minimalist ones, Smith moved on to paint shaped canvases in 2012, changing his perception of the space in painting. There is also this sense of movement found in Furukawa's 1970s "object paintings" and Smith's recent work alike, each testifying to the tendencies of their time, but also the artists' own brilliance and innovation.

There is a conversation to be found within Leslie Smith III's work itself. In paintings like *The McCarthyte* or *Redacted*, the images are composed together using canvas parts, different blocks of color and subtle geometric shapes. They evoke a sort of tension that is both strong and inexistent, inviting the viewer for contemplation. And once we find out that Smith's paintings also function as pages from a visual diary of lived experiences, we are all the more drawn in.

Ahead of Maus Contemporary's presentation in the *EXPOSURE* section of EXPO Chicago 2019 between September 19 and 22, we talk to Leslie Smith III about his understanding of his own painting and abstraction at large, and the unique connection between realism and the non-representational that he depicts delicately yet successfully.



Leslie Smith III – Locus of Control , 2017. 50.5 by 51.5 in. Courtesy Maus Contemporary

Delving Into Abstraction

Widewalls: You mention “the duality” of your artworks “functioning representationally and abstractly simultaneously”. I’m curious to know what led you towards abstract art in particular, as a means of expressing ideas, encounters and experiences – something that’s not typically linked to this kind of painting.

Leslie Smith III: There are many ways artists arrive to abstraction; I’ve always envied those who started there at first. My scenario, however, has much to do with running away

from representation and slowly finding abstraction. Abstraction felt like home. As if I was supposed to be there all along. It offered and continues to offer a freedom representational painting did not for me.

That being said, I've always attributed this shift to becoming more sensitive to perception's role in our ability to feel and to viscerally identify something real. In this sense, I consider abstractions potential in functioning both representationally and abstractly. Perhaps its individual parts can be seen as dealing with the traditions of abstraction but the sum of those parts have to evoke an experience that beckons us to feel something real. Something we've felt before. A feeling we've unconsciously shared with someone else.

Narrative and representational painting do this. My challenge is to achieve this through abstraction. Something that's not typically linked to this kind of painting inspires me to explore it.

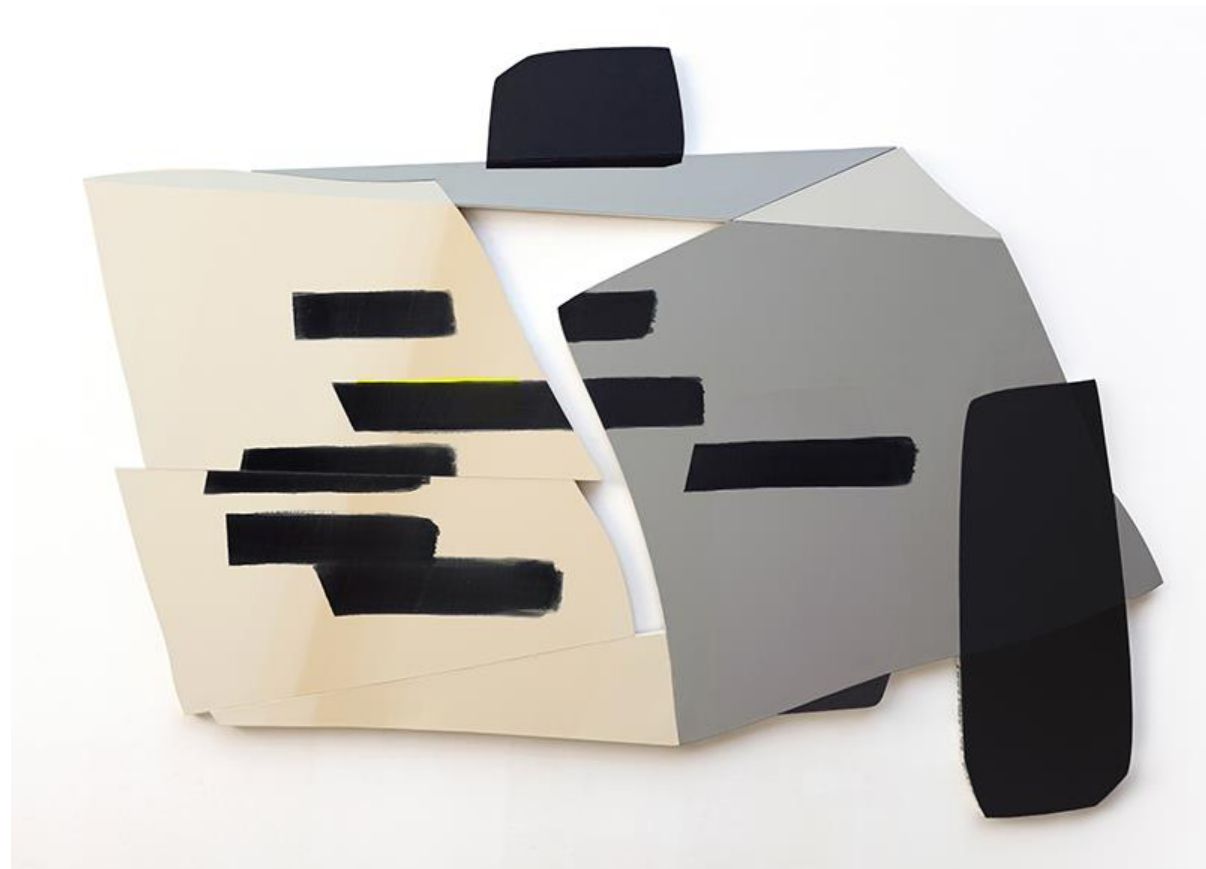
Widewalls: Are the works titled after these experiences?

LS: At times yes and others no. I use titles to help contextualize my paintings for the viewer. We all know it's impossible to impact every viewer in the same way, where they walk away with an exact understanding of the artist intentions. My titles are to encourage a more cyclical dialogue with the audience. A type of follow-up to whatever is deduced from the viewing experience.

Typically, my paintings are set into series that deal with conditions evolving one experience, where each painting dives into a particular set of circumstances. For example, the paintings exhibiting in *EXPOSURE*, they utilize a visual language similar to

text editing: highlighting, underlining, redacting etc. The concept for these paintings reference the frustrations associated with self-doubt. Particularly in heated verbal exchanges. The likes of those where you find yourself holding back for the sake of clarity or the feelings of someone else.

The painting *Redacted* comprises of two primary shaped canvases tethered to each other by adjoining canvases on top and bottom resulting in a void between the two primary canvases. The void opens directly to the blankness of the wall the painting hangs on. It illustrates the complexities of a two-sided exchange stifled with redactions. *Redacted* seemed appropriate as a title to reemphasize the stasis of an argument.



Leslie Smith III – Redacted, 2017. 70 by 96 in. Courtesy Maus Contemporary

Exploring the Pictorial Plane

Widewalls: In your interview with Peter Halley, he calls your paintings “musical”; to me, on the other hand, they seem statically animated in a way, calling to mind Calder’s mobiles at times. How much of a role does movement play in your painting?

LS: The anticipation of movement is important to me in painting. It stems from a need to suggest that every shaped canvas is coming from somewhere and/or on its way to somewhere else. In the last three years I’ve gotten used to these descriptors, musical, lyrical, movement, animated etc. I think they coincide with a major shift in my work.

In 2016, I began thinking differently about the actual size of my paintings surface in relationship to their perceived size. Not in terms of depth but in terms of their width and height. I wanted to create the illusion of there being more information rendered than could fit on the actual canvas surface. This was an attempt at creating a different sense of depth. One that expands space within the framework of flatness established by first-generation geometric abstractionist. As a result, I began fracturing the picture-plane. This was inspired by crumpling sheets of paper with drawings on them. The facets become shaped containers across the surface of the paper. Because I’d never entirely unfold them, certain facets overlap others creating shadow and shifts in the drawing.

When this occurs as an illusion in a painting, abrupt shifts in color, line and paint application happen. I refer to these moments as shifts in energy, and believe this is what’s often referred to as musical. I think it’s due to the formation of pattern that occurs. The repetition of shape and form set expectations for the viewer, when those are subverted, it parities rhythmic shifts and perpetuates the illusion of potential movement. I think of this similarly to the slow shifts between positive and negative shapes found in Calder’s mobiles. A few weeks ago I had two great studio visits with friends of mine. They both

referred to my shapes to tectonic plates, in motion, slowly moving apart, aside, or against one another.

Widewalls: Given that you progressed from plainly rectangular canvases to less restrictive ones, and having in mind my previous question, would the third dimension be something you would consider leaning toward?

LS: When I painted on rectangular canvases, I would have never considered shaped canvas until the notion of a shaped canvas provided a solution to an issue. In light of that, anything is possible.

However, at the moment, I'm committed to expressing myself with paint. There is enough on the horizon to sustain my practice for a while and I'm all about fleshing it out. I will mention that my most recent works for upcoming solo and group projects are more dimensional both pictorially and structurally. I've gotten more involved in how my paintings function as wall hanging objects that straddle an interesting dimensional line.

Widewalls: What do you expect from the "EXPOSURE" exhibition, and the juxtaposition of your work with that of Yoshishige Furukawa? What sort of dialog can we anticipate? How do you perceive his work?

LS: I anticipate a compelling viewing experience. I understand Furukawa's, paintings as dealing with material and process. He fuses materials together, in so doing wonderful painterly passages occur.

There is an interesting overlap between his works and mine. What I find most interesting is how his work appears minimal except it isn't and that's something I address in conversations about my painting as well.

Featured images: Leslie Smith III – Redaction; Furukawa – Untitled, 1971. Acrylic and canvas collage on \ Maus Contemporary.