

GREEN ART GALLERY, DUBAI

MONOCULTURE

A selection of handsome new monographs hit the shelves during Art Dubai. Christopher Lord takes a look through a tome dedicated to Kamrooz Aram's continuing adventures in abstraction

Can an abstract painting be social? – that's the question posed by art historian Media Farzin in the opening text for *Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors*, a new monograph dedicated to New York-based artist Kamrooz Aram. The question, she goes on to elucidate, is whether abstraction can ever really engage with and interrogate the current state of the world. Simply put, is abstract painting really all that relevant anymore?

Over the course of the next 80 pages, Aram and a band of writers set out to wrangle with that question, presenting works that are part palimpsest, part studies in the un-tethering of the 20th century's grand tradition of abstraction. The monograph includes writings by Farzin, Eva Díaz (Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art at Pratt Institute, New York) and an insightful conversation between critic-curator Murtaza Vali and Aram. Along with a healthy selection of the artist's recent works, the pace of *Unstable Paintings* is interspersed with details from the canvases that really show off the new direction that Aram has taken in this batch of work.

Back in 2012, Aram exhibited a selection of canvases at Green Art Gallery, Dubai, (*Brute Ornament*) that attempted to depict the crisis of abstract art – a process of unhinging that began with modernism's rejection of ornamentation and has culminated in a general distrust of anything that has even the patina of being 'decorative'. While abstraction was the medium, painting as a practice was the subject in these works, which questioned whether painting could survive in an artworld more hostile than ever to ornamentation in contemporary art.

If the works in *Brute Ornament* were questions, the images in *Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors* appear to hint at tentative answers. In his search for a language of painting that can still enter into a conversation that's relevant outside of the tradition, Aram has turned to that master of immediacy – Cy Twombly, who, he tells Vali, '[P]ushed the expressionistic mark to engage social, historical and mythological content.'

Throughout these works we see short, breathlessly scribbled flashes of writing, such as dates with some unstated significance for the artist, that hum with Twombly's influence. Each work records the steady deconstruction of a single motif of a flower repeated in uniform rows across the canvas. These little flowers are being engulfed in encroaching chaos, with broad sweeps of paint, flat black geometric shapes (hinting at Kazimir Malevich, an early messenger of the limits that abstract art would face) and

seemingly-spontaneous marks in wax pencil. More strikingly, there's a palimpsest effect here, with sections of the canvas appearing to have been scraped-off and reapplied, in some cases leaving a subtle residue of what was once there.

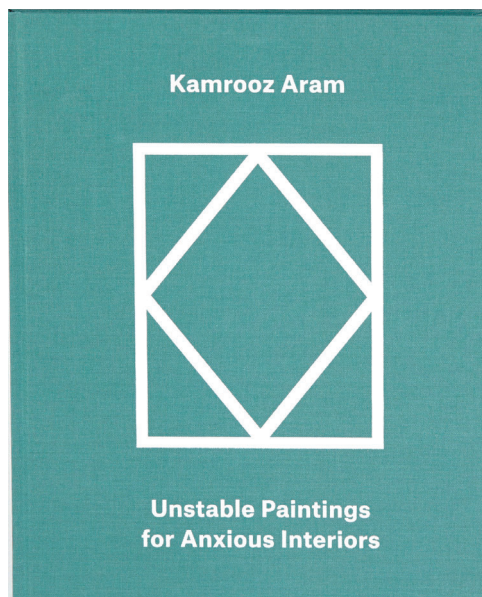
The monograph includes a number of Aram's photographs taken on the streets of Brooklyn, Queens, Beirut and Istanbul. These images show the municipal efforts to erase graffiti from these urban environments: Shop shutters, the walls of buildings and even statues have been covered in a nullifying black or grey smear, reminiscent of the censor's black marker.

In his own essay 'The Cover-Up', included in the monograph, Aram reflects on these obscured incursions into the urban landscape. 'And here is where the Department of This or That has attempted to take that mark away,' he writes. 'But erasure always leaves its own mark. The evidence remains and the youth's mark is not gone, but altered, enhanced even.'

Using canvas as his own personal graffiti wall, Aram appropriates the cover up to lay bare his process of insertion and deletion. The works become, in this way, history paintings of the artist and his thoughts in the act of creation. Coupled with the rapidly-inserted writings on their surface, the canvases are a visual record of the artist at a precise moment and use abstraction of a single motif as their organising principle.

There's a lot going on in Aram's work: his practice has evolved into a sophisticated exposition on art history and the future of the medium of painting itself. But with accessible voices throughout, this monograph remains a resource and timely meditation on the artist's work.

Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors is published by Green Art Gallery and Anomie Publishing London. The monograph is available from Green Art Gallery, priced AED150. www.gagallery.com



Kamrooz Aram, 'Backdrop for a Seasonal Revelation (Palimpsest #19)', 2013. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery

