

## Variations: *Conversations in and Around Abstract Painting*

**A**RICH HISTORY OF EXPERIMENTATION AND dissension in art throughout the twentieth century paved the way for today's artists to explore a wide variety of approaches to artmaking. Contemporary artists have used this freedom to both embrace and reject traditions associated with creating art. The artists included in LACMA's exhibition *Variations: Conversations in and around Abstract Painting* all share an interest in working in an abstract manner, a style that initially gained traction around 1910. Working in an abstract mode means these artists prioritize formal elements, such as shape, form, color, and line over recognizable subject matter. However, beyond this commonality in emphasis, there is much diversity within the artworks in the exhibition. The media of the artwork (painting, sculpture, installation, video, etc.), the wide-ranging processes by which the objects were made, and the ideas the artists explore in their work reflect the dynamic and varied terrain of contemporary art.

These curriculum materials provide an introduction for teachers and students to learn about and discuss just a few of the many approaches that living artists utilize in their creative processes. Two of the artworks featured in the packet, one by Amy Sillman and another by Analia Saban, can be viewed primarily through the lens of formalism, meaning the way they are made and their aesthetic qualities. The remaining artworks, by Mark Bradford and Rachel Lachowicz, are also concerned with the formal aspects of artmaking, but their work is conceptual as well. They employ the ambiguity of abstraction to explore complex issues like community, identity, and gender. All four works were made within the last five years and are recent additions to LACMA's growing collection of contemporary art. Contemporary artworks like these can be effective tools for exploring current topics with students, as well as cultivating their visual analysis skills.

The paintings by Sillman and Saban are notable for their composition, texture, color, and other formal aspects integral to abstract art. In the case of Sillman's *Untitled (Purple Bottle)*, viewers are compelled to appreciate the cool palette of blues and purples and how the brushstrokes serve to document the artist's gestures rather than lend themselves to a specific interpretation of the artwork. One of the reasons artists were initially drawn to abstraction was because they felt that no matter how realistic the technique, the imagery created on the surface of a canvas was a mere representation. Rather than focusing on the illusion of representation, these early artists emphasized the only actual things involved in a painting—the canvas itself and the physical qualities of the paint on the surface. Saban's *Erosion (Geometric Cubes within Circle: Two-Pint Perspective with Guidelines)* acts as a contemporary example of this idea and takes it one step further. Rather than applying paint to the surface of the canvas in a way that would simulate depth and texture, Saban gives the work actual depth and texture by using a laser cutter to slice into the canvas.

Bradford and Lachowicz also work in an abstract manner, but with a more conceptual approach. Looking at their artwork only in terms of its visual qualities would neglect another important aspect of their work, the meaning or commentary it conjures. Bradford's *Shoot the Coin* is visually stunning in the way it evokes an aerial view of a cityscape through layers of paper collaged onto the surface, but the ideas behind it are equally critical to appreciating the work. Inspired by maps, the artwork comments on the way the U.S. highway system has cut through neighborhoods like Bradford's Los Angeles hometown, creating forced divisions that ultimately shape the way communities evolve and are sometimes perceived. Similarly, Lachowicz's sculpture *Cell: Interlocking Construction* (2010)

uses blue eye shadow in place of paint to create art reminiscent of an iconic artwork made by a male artist. By using a material associated with femininity to reference this famous work, the artist alludes to the exclusion of women from art history and the continued inequities that women experience in the art world and society at large.

These four artworks are explored in greater detail in the following essays. *Variations: Conversations in and around Abstract Painting* and its related resources cover only a fraction of the practices and concepts explored by artists today. However, these curriculum materials provide a starting point for teachers and students to begin to engage with a contemporary art world in which no idea, topic, or art form is off limits.

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### **Credits**

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