



## John Yau: Observation and abstraction

February 8, 2012, By Sharon Butler

I mentioned [a while back](#) that John Yau, poet, former arts editor at [The Brooklyn Rail](#), and one of the masterminds of [Hyperallergic Weekend](#), was in the process of curating a painting show, and I just received the press release. The inspired final roster for "Broken/Window/Plane" includes Andrea Belag, Paul DeMuro, Lois Dodd, Joanne Greenbaum, Marc Handelman, Merlin James, Olav Christopher Jenssen, Nicholas Krushenick, Judy Ledgerwood, Sangram Majumdar, Catherine Murphy, and Gary Stephan.

As usual, Yau writes eloquently about painting in the curator's statement:

*The idea for this exhibition came from a conversation that I had with [Gary Stephan](#) while we were looking at the newest paintings in his studio. He began talking about "pressure being applied to the picture plane," but didn't specify whether this force came from the artist, history, or nature. And, to compound matters, I also realized that there is the pressure on the artist as well, from authorities and institutions, not to mention gravity.*



Judy Ledgerwood painting from [Chromatic Patterns for Chicago & Blob Paintings](#) at Rhona Hoffman in Chicago, 2011. (Not in show)

*In order to clear a space for yourself, you have to ask a basic question but defer the solution: couldn't the picture plane be both solid and transparent, layered and punctuated, there and not there, something we see even when it is invisible? Why would you want to confine painting's identity to a narrow set of conventions? Why not try and find fresh ways to distinguish it? Stephan's observations confirmed a long-held suspicion. Painters - the best ones, anyway - have long found ways to supersede the received wisdom regarding painting's identity.*



Catherine Murphy's *Comforter*, 2007. (Not in show)

*The reasons are obvious - why would you want to spend your days thinking of a painting solely as a two-dimensional surface upon which to apply paint? Might not a more challenging goal be to bring everything back into play - from discredited illusionism and the figure/ground problem to allusiveness and association - without being nostalgic, sentimental, ironic, or coy? I was reminded of conversations that I had had with Lois Dodd, Sangram Majumdar, Catherine Murphy and others. A space for reflection had opened up, and I thought it was worth exploring.*



Paul DeMuro, 2011. (Not in show).

*The sole motivation for my selections was the work itself - the paintings are in dialogue with others in the show. They speak across generations. They don't recognize the borders separating abstraction from observation. They are free spirits. Speculation and play have replaced claims to being factual. Or, to put it another way, the artists in this exhibition recognize that what you need - if you wish to pull a rabbit out of a hat - is a rabbit and a hat.*

After visiting Lois Dodd's show and [writing about it](#) for the Rail, I've been thinking about the the role observation plays in abstraction. The impossibility of looking carefully enough (at the world around us, at photographic images, and at our own work) to fully apprehend the visual is something I've been thinking about in my new [work](#), so I'm looking forward to seeing the individual pieces that Yau has selected for the show.

**"Broken/Window/Plane,"** organized by John Yau, Tracy Williams, Ltd, New York, NY. February 16 through March 17, 2012.