

**T**oday we should be thinking about the artist Jo Baer (b. 1929, Seattle, Washington).

The reign of conceptual art has complicated life for painters. Things had been going pretty well for several hundred years, but ever since the 1960s, painting has fought to retain its urgency and bite.

From the start, Jo Baer rejected conceptual art. Working in New York in the 1960s and 70s alongside the alpha-male minimalist sculptors who called painting “antique,” Baer refused to back down, remaining firm in her convictions of the critical potency of painting. She didn’t hesitate to send a few sharp-tongued letters to Robert Morris and Michael Fried along the way. To be taken seriously as a woman in that context, she says, you had to be somewhat rude.

Marcel Duchamp liked the anti-retinal, but Baer prefers retinal phenomena. Trained in physiological perception, gestalt theory, and behavioral psychology, she is invested in how the eye works with the brain to provide the best approximation of the world.

Seeing a painting is seeing light, and her early hard-edged abstract canvases seek to remove all hierarchy, all ambiguity, and all illusion from the optical experience of light on a flat surface.

Painting is really real, she reminds us, and therefore has nothing to do with realism.

Sensation, you see, happens at the edge of things. The eye always looks for boundaries, edges, and contours, which Baer tests in an intuitive process of trial-and-error. She also turns to science and technology and the example of Mach Bands, an effect that occurs when the edge of one color meets the edge of another, and gives rise to a subjective visual experience that transcends its physical or empirical counterpart.

The eye is not a passive camera that records the world, but an active subject that experiences it—what you see is not necessarily what you see. As a nerve, the eye always distorts, invents, blurs, and bends, and its perception of the world is only ever an approximation that involves the body's imagination.



Therein lies Baer's radical syntax of painting: it has to do with calling people into action.

These paintings search for the limits and the roots of things as they are. Baer knows that a painting involves more than the sum of its parts, so she carries an image to its edge—the place where the eye is compelled to take over—pushing it to transcend its own silence, spill over, and go elsewhere.

It involves no direct message or narrative (“propaganda!”), doesn’t try to trick or steer its viewers in any way (“manipulation!”), but it activates the eye’s natural desire to go places, and doesn’t try to control where that might be. In a context where ART-AS-IDEA often supersedes ART-AS-EXPERIENCE, Baer invents another option that fully engages the dialectic and looks beyond the stalemate.

In 1975, the year her mid-career retrospective opened at the Whitney Museum, Baer left town and never came back. Instead, she lived in a 12th-century castle in Ireland until 1982, then for a time in London, and has been living in Amsterdam since 1984.

Her departure from New York was also when she abandoned abstraction, despite her widely acclaimed reputation as an abstract minimalist. She declared abstract art as being utopian, naïve, and, worst of all, a legitimized style—it had become decoration. No thank you, she said, and changed her approach completely.

Since 1975, Baer has been doing what she calls “radical figuration” or “image constellations.” She incorporates animals, figures, and common objects, but also ancient historical iconographies and references—Bronze-age Crete, Aztec emperors, Egyptian deities, the Greek Parthenon—and gathers them onto a single surface.

She begins with a subject, but avoids any narrative, and makes sure that no single image is allowed to dominate the space of the painting—fragments coexist alongside fragments and are organized in such a way to reveal that transitions from one to the other are what generate meaning in the painting. Just as with her early abstract work, it all happens at the edges, and it's all about balance, in the formal, sensual, physical, and metaphysical senses of the term.

The second season at The Artist's  
Institute, with Jo Baer, runs from January  
30th to July 10th, 2011.