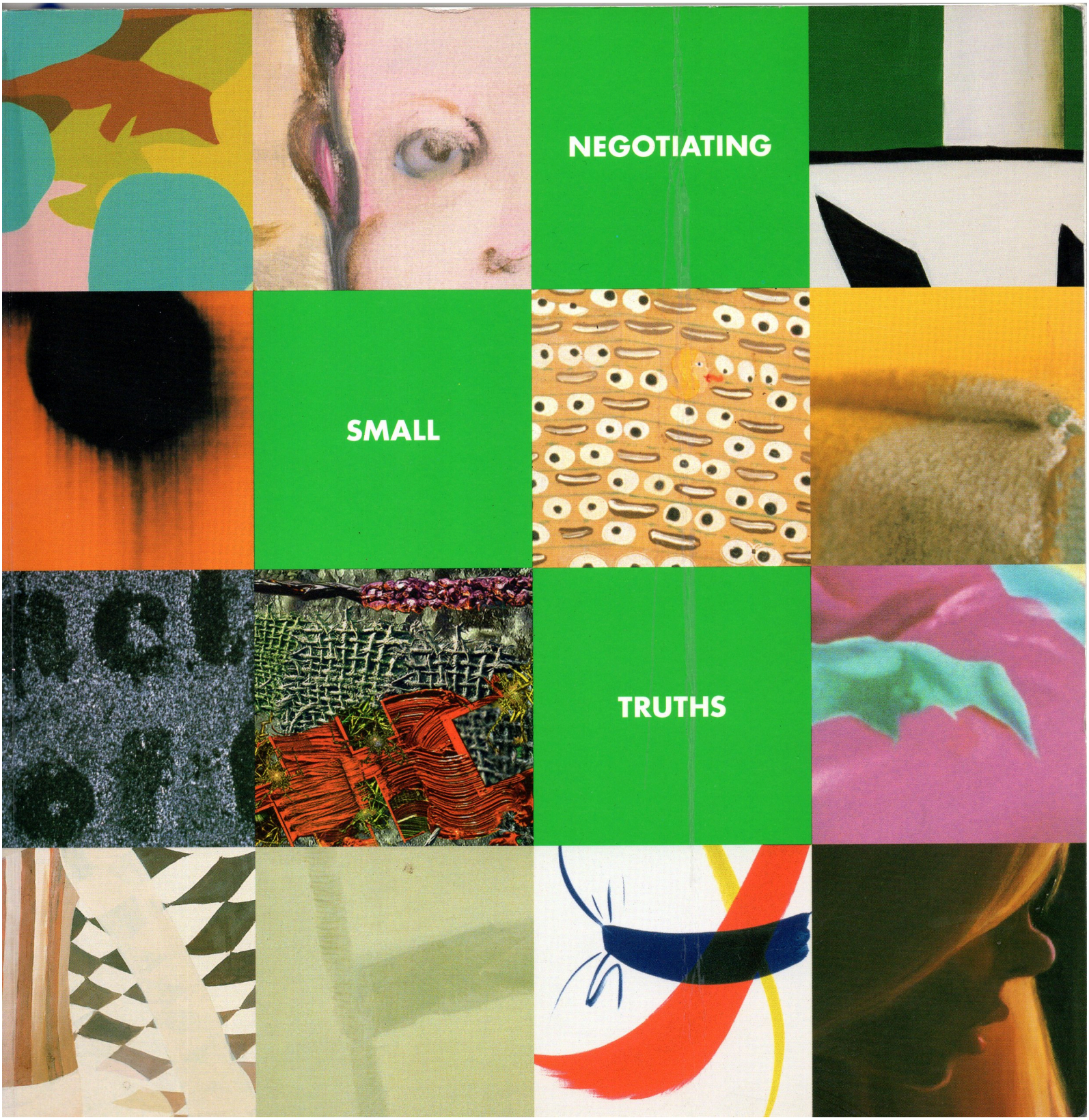
NEGOTIATING
SMALL
TRUTHS

An Exhibition Curated by
Annette DiMeo Carlozzi

September 2–October 24, 1999

Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art
The University of Texas at Austin

CONTENTS

NEGOTIATING THE TRUTH IN PAINTING

Annette DiMeo Carlozzi

What does it look like, in the flesh, what can you see, what kind of visceral response do you get from it? Does it have a conceptual agenda, is its agenda obvious or sly? Does it ask a question and can you understand what that is? Does it make you feel uncomfortable, is it beautiful, does it remind you of some thing or refer to some other art, does it make you want to challenge it or does it give you pleasure or both? Does it have to do with paint, how and why, and does it describe or reflect in a way that only a painting can? How many ways can we interrogate a painting? How many ways should we or do we need to?

Negotiating Small Truths is an exhibition featuring recent works by thirteen artists who, I daresay, believe that a painting can be both self-reflexive and descriptive, play simultaneously with image and language, be topical and politically attuned, psychologically resonant, theoretically sound and sensorially confounding. While they are a heterogeneous group and don't usually find themselves linked in thematic group shows, these artists do share a particular viewpoint: an interest in navigating the intersection of abstraction with social meaning, albeit from a uniquely indirect, non-hierarchical perspective. In contemporary theory, pure abstraction is seen as a devalued utopian strategy; conversely, overt social content, post-1980s, represents what most would agree is a self-conscious and contaminated realm. Mindful of this rock-and-a-hard-place construct, the artists in *Negotiating Small Truths* (*NST*) contradict absolutes—the big truths—in their paintings, focusing instead on mundane details—the unremarkable, the overlooked—which represent, or stand in for, larger political and philosophical issues. Always mediated, these details are transformed by lighting, layering or a particularly refined touch of the brush into images of enormous import or perverse exoticism—a constant shift from the macro to the micro and back again. Using contemporary conceptual strategies, the artists negotiate a connection between their paintings and painting history, quoting freely from the techniques of previous masters, though with different intentions and values, knowing that, for now, originality is subordinate to interpretation and presentation. Through multiple layers of translation, the works are distanced from a direct, incontrovertible reading; simultaneity is valued over stasis, tension over harmony. I don't mean to suggest that these women and men are aligned in intentions, methods, vocabulary, or ideas, for their work is really various. But I do think that through these thirty complex and rigorous paintings, they have forged a relationship to the viewer that is aggressive, provocative and reflective of the time.

Why is painting a bold choice now? As always, meaning derives in part from context, so

we must look to the dilemma of painting in the late 1990s. At a time when international political debate still revolves around opposing cultural agendas, when the neo-liberal system of global economics and politics sees culture only as mass entertainment and profit-making opportunity, how does art, especially the most privileged and intimate of all art mediums—painting—retain its integrity? Artist Gerhard Richter said it succinctly: "No Paradises,"[1] when discussing what painting could rightfully comment on in a skeptical, fragmented, digitized era. Avant-garde painting of this moment is no longer about faith or even loss of faith in absolutes. Yet this is an exhibition about a kind of truth and about belief in the capacity of even the humblest bits of evidence to generate new directions. Two years ago, *documenta X*, within its admirably stringent political/aesthetic investigation, assayed international art in the mid-'90s and nominated only three painters to the ranks of those addressing the most urgent cultural issues of the time. Filled with art forms that breached media, that were film- or photo-derived, and installation- or text-based, and conceived for performance or use in the public realm, *dx* tacitly asked the question: is painting bankrupt? I would answer "no," but its currency has been devalued and the rate of exchange is subject to interpretation. Which makes the proposition all the more interesting, the risk-taking more intense.

Instead of viewing painting through a lens of political theory, what if we were to think about a mediated, compromised, transferable *social* process—negotiation—and relate it to the process of painting a picture, viewing a picture, evaluating a picture and its apparent awareness of history, presentation and context? Homi K. Bhabha writes: "Concerned primarily with the disclosure of the human subject as agent, negotiation is the ability to articulate differences in space and time, to link words and images in new symbolic orders, to intervene in the forest of signs and mediate what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities."[2] Negotiation as a metaphor for painting—does it work? Rather well, I think, in the case of these assembled paintings, which maneuver through, conflate, and subvert our notions of large and small, in the process redefining meanings and priorities.

I like the idea of small truths, even multiple and conflicting truths. I can see the sense in a new pragmatism, sustained through and despite contradictory impulses, elaborate systems, and oblique presentations. I think it is legitimate to ask if a painting has to be virtuous, or if its perversions can possess a richness that is, fascinating, even illuminating. I respect the grays of this body of work's meaning, the anti-absoluteness of the late youth/mid-life questioning of its makers. Roland Barthes' writings suggest that to be modern is to know what is no longer possible. *Negotiating Small Truths* poses the questions: Does the compromised position from which a late twentieth-century painting is born still

allow for innovation, recombination, quotations that can prompt creative thought? In its most subtle and dynamic manifestations, can painting celebrate the very ambiguity, the doubt and ambivalence, of its making and reception?

Grounded in theory that bridges several disciplines, Fabian Marcaccio's work is conceived as a sophisticated and incredibly dynamic synthesis that incorporates painting, printmaking and digitizing techniques, architecture, science fiction and social theory, among other phenomena. Rococo in their physical form, his "paintants" subvert the traditional conventions of modernist painting by representing dematerialized imagery on exaggeratedly materialistic structural supports. Their constellations of enhanced and invented images embody complex systems that interact in unpredictable ways. Thus, the vibrant, contaminated universe that *Total Paintant* depicts, and from which it seems to be constructed, confounds the logic of how we usually look at a painting and what we expect to find within it. It is simultaneous, fragmented and disruptive, yet it is also open to the penetration of macro and micro ideas from any realm. Marcaccio aims to create a new model, built from the refuse of old cubist theories, strategic use of new media, and an over-the-top exuberance for the rich possibilities of collaboration. The metaphors of his work suggest a broader responsibility and a greater test of vision for both the artist and the viewer.

Lisa Yuskavage works in oil on canvas or linen using superb realist painting techniques, but her bravura paintings are anything but conventional. Utilizing a three generations-removed study system (live model to plaster sculpture to photograph), she invents stunningly vacant nudes, young women made vulnerable by their undress, their unawareness, the absorbed blankness of the luminous color fields and clichéd sublime landscapes behind them. The paintings are queasily luscious, the images paradoxical, their effects equal parts seduction and repulsion. And the success of the work lies on that precipitous, psychologically charged/visually mesmerizing edge. Where is escape? Can we abstract our own discomfort as Yuskavage has abstracted and redirected the conventions of Mannerist painting—dramatically lit and distorted flesh, eroticized drapery, cold stares? Is the work's putative offensiveness to the sophisticated art viewer manipulative or just vulgar, and if it's vulgar, can we see the humor in it or must we take that offense as an absolute? While some of the artists in *NST* explore the parameters of intimacy, Yuskavage investigates the limitations of explicitness. Her fictional proposition yields an extraordinary one-on-one visual encounter, as forceful and confrontational as the abstracted universes of Fabian Marcaccio.

For her potent enamel-on-aluminum abstractions, Ingrid Calame negotiates what might be perceived as a difficult path. The creation of order from chaotic detritus is a time-honored artistic practice, updated here in a particularly

'90s, multi-media-based elaboration. On a relatively conventional two-dimensional plane, Calame painstakingly paints irregular color areas, frequently so closely hued as to cause a second look. Her overall field is dense and decorative and the hand of the artist is readily apparent. What is less visible—overlooked, in fact—are the sources for these color shapes: stains that Calame has traced on her hands and knees from the street, then analyzed and reorganized digitally on a computer screen, and copied in paint. Folk art meets Clyfford Still & Jackson Pollock meet Rauschenberg meets Andy Warhol meets Robbe-Grillet! This convergence of real life with studio practice, of the base and the beautiful, the disregarded and the redeemed, finds new expression in the hybrid narratives of a former film student. In her layering of distanced imagery, the specifics of time and space are collapsed, the privilege of painting and the value of originality are mocked. Calame's work subverts the romance of plein-air experience at the end of the century: here, beauty stems not from the sublime but from the mundane and discarded, and reality is unrecognizable for its resemblance to the illusory.

Like Ingrid Calame, Mark Francis begins constructing his abstractions with concrete, quantifiable evidence: forms that derive from microscopic images of cellular biology—spermatozoa, viruses—the very building blocks of life and death. But like all truths, even scientific truths, these are subject to interpretation. Francis undermines their veracity by reinventing them as abstract markers whose movements, or implied movements, create a multitude of associations. On the one hand, the imagery puns on the utopian aspirations of grid-based early modernists, but at the same time, the now-seemingly-frivolous formalism of color field and op art come to mind. Read another way, Francis's works reference photography and the quotation of digitized media in art, from Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dots to Richter's painting/analogs of the trace movements in photographs. Beyond recent art history, one can regard the marks as bodies, presences in a social constellation, whose interactions connote the sociology of the human condition. In this way the readings move from internal universe to external, micro to macro, a path traveled also by Marcaccio, but departing from the opposite pole. There is no expressionist impulse in Francis's work, just seductively polished surfaces, a minimalizing openness, an emptying out of authorial directives. The paintings may at first seem simple and straightforward, merely beautiful, but their meaning is complicated, ambiguous and, through Francis's manipulation of veritable form, slightly perverse.

A compulsion to doubt, to second-guess, drives Byron Kim's artistic process. He's been investigating how small the subject of his art can get: moving from negligible details that ironically imply the greatest social import, like the color of skin or the texture of waste products; to grand gestures, dramatic, performative actions, that in

fact have no external relevance, no universal impact, but resonate in the realms of the personal and the intimate. In this newest series of works, Kim retrieves old paintings that he made as a student, the work he couldn't throw away but knew he never wanted anyone to see. And he largely obliterates them by tossing high quality housepaint at them; he tries to redeem the immature work by "acting painterly"[3] with it. This performative act mocks its own false heroics by subscribing to a system that has unpredictable results. The final painting—a hybrid of old and new, tentativeness and rashness—erases memory and nostalgia, as well as critical judgment about the old work. It's a test of instinct, an improvisation, that aspires to the artistry of a late deKooning or early Baldessari. Kim's synthetic take on action painting and conceptual art is as elaborately influenced as Calame's work is distanced and Marcaccio's is intermixed. Kim doesn't claim the painting itself as his own Pollock-arena; he insists on remaining outside and questioning every move that he makes.

"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men."[4] Some say Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* marked the beginnings of modernist culture and consciousness, and the linkage between manifestations of anxiety and the imagination. A century and a half later, Luc Tuymans's imagery speaks to similarly transformative frames of reference. His tenuous depictions convey the self-consciousness of painting as an illusion of reality; like many of the works in *NST*, they address large social concerns from the most oblique perspective possible. Choosing an indirect conceptual approach, Tuymans focuses on almost abstracted fragments—the swimming pool grabrail, for instance—which stand in for the larger concept, in this case "Security," the theme of the exhibition for which *Swimming Pool* and *Passe-Partout* were first made. This fragmentation of subject is perfectly suited to his film-influenced preparatory techniques, and to the exquisite transparency of his marks and the disintegration of his forms. In response to this notion of security, Tuymans renders confounding spaces that suggest the dilemma of the exit, the paradox of escape. Derrida reminds us in his essay by the same name: "The passe-partout which here creates an event must not pass for a master key."[5]

Into his paint medium Glenn Ligon mixes a shiny black waste product, an abrasive granular substance used to sand-blast buildings to get them clean. Though just the leftover of an industrial process, in the paintings the substance renders the monochromatic surfaces uniquely fragile, their coarseness requiring careful art handling—quite literally, the paintings are difficult to grasp. The tiny faceted forms make the excerpted text that is Ligon's depicted subject more elusive, more optically challenging, certainly more difficult to read. This obscuring, metaphorical material and method are key to the meaning of Ligon's works.

He says that the "Stranger in the Village" essay by James Baldwin, expatriate African American author, was a pivotal text for him as a young man; its words about the struggle to be recognized outside of one's own cultural context engulfed him with a power equivalent to the experience of viewing an abstract expressionist painting.[6] Ligon plays with visual/verbal juxtapositions, abstracting layers of image/language experience, taking early Jasper Johns and late Ad Reinhardt to a place of contemporary relevance, a space where, purposefully and ironically, abstraction and political concerns can coincide. The many contradictions offered by his work—whose is the authorial voice?; reading makes the "message" less clear; and so on—express the confrontational ambivalence central to the works of a number of the artists in *NST*.

Sue Williams's older works would not have been in *Negotiating Small Truths*. Large canvases bearing densely packed images of domestic violence, they expressed all the fierceness and directness of a wounded animal; they made you stare at their pain and cringe at its ugliness. They were declarative paintings, all about content and the line that described it, and their political intentions were heated and earnest. These newer works are subtle and filled with grace and whimsy: delicate drawings anchored by sweeping gestures of paint, bits of Miro, late deKooning, Gorky/Altoon. The lines in the new works have a chance to flow, move deeper, in and out of the picture's surface and the artist's subconscious. The paintings are still purgative and allude to disturbing moments and strange desires, yet those little segues of absurd activity are cunning, they remain concealed until you decipher them. There is no question that Williams has negotiated with the pain of her past work to achieve some pleasure in the process and in the reading. Her exploration of the formal concerns of the painting—the relationship of form to color and of the overall to the particulars—yields fast and slow passages, moments of collision and release, playful ways to create new truths. There are ways to avoid the grabby fingers, the new works seem to say: ask the sneezing man; he's got great shoes.

What's in a polemical painter's bag of tricks?: one mirror, two ears, a deliberately shifting perspective, piercing intelligence, verve, focus, and a brush that's not "afraid of red, yellow and blue," to paraphrase Barnett Newman, a member of the painters' pantheon. Rochelle Feinstein's "Love Your Work" series is the newest in her long-running examination and re-presentation of the conventions of modernist painting. Her capacity to generate complex, theoretical meanings—surprisingly, often seasoned with dry humor—from personally resonant combinations of text and form is without par among painters of this generation. *Love Your Work #3* and *Love Your Work #4* are binocular images that acknowledge the major theoretical issues that inform current painting—short-circuiting signs and signifiers, discursivity, issues

of beholding—even as these vivid works explore the pure pleasure of luminous color, gorgeous surfaces, and rigorously controlled scale, proportion and light. It's an ambitious undertaking—utilizing the trope of abstract painting as a representation in a painting—and it reveals the paradox of meaning, the layered fictions, of the art-viewing experience.

In Richard Patterson's *Minotaur with brushstrokes* a related linguistic/sensual dichotomy occurs: a conjunction between the theoretical understanding of an image, its associations and how they function, and the phenomenological experience of a painting. As Patterson describes it, the work illustrates the notion of a "palimpsest," or an object that reflects its own history, its own making. The painting's spatial ambiguities and quotations of gestural abstraction and photorealism show a technical bravado that at first seems heroic; but Patterson is not interested in heroes and twists the work so that it mirrors itself in a way that is distinctly narcissistic and anti-heroic. This mirroring, and the implied foregrounding of the main character and its play with scale, perspective and viewpoint as well, echo Feinstein's works in this exhibition, albeit with strikingly different stylistic vocabulary and cultural references. And as with Feinstein's talk bubble, Patterson pays homage to Roy Lichtenstein, both in his exploration of the figure/ground relationship and in the promotion of the brushstroke to a pivotal role in the image. But for Patterson, the eroticization and conceptualization of the paint medium itself is the subject. It's a small truth, distilled yet complex.

The human figure, its face and sexual parts, and small gestures that communicate a world of meaning are the topics in Marlene Dumas's paintings. Working from memory and images, never directly from real life, she interprets the intimate and personal through provocative presentations that reveal disturbing undercurrents in the everyday. As with the work of her European colleague Luc Tuymans, it's the conceptualization of the fragmented image—its dislocation from the real world but implied commentary on it—and the almost tender touch with which it is painted that is unique. Many of Dumas's images, whether of children or adults, are unsettling, riveting in their suggestiveness; the subjects frequently seem touched by shame. Her talent is to suggest this while never depicting anything literal or absolute; she turns her viewers into psychiatrists, analyzing possibly aberrant or volatile behavior. Dumas's work was first celebrated for its exploration of identity issues; its greatest capacity is to engage the viewer in identification. In fluid paintings that seem to capture the most fleeting impressions, Dumas raises moral questions about individual and social behavior.

How far can you abstract narrative content and still retain—and communicate—its meaning? Can a social or political message be abstracted for heightened effect? These are questions asked by many of the artists in *NST*, and they are the central concern of Ellen Gallagher, who teases

the absolutism of the modernist grid with pointed black humor and the conviction of revised history. Her tools include a minimal vocabulary of blacks, whites and flesh tones; hand-drawn lines and doodles, usually in almost parallel or mutually responsive or clustered arrangements; and layered, crafted surfaces of paper, pencil, paint and sometimes industrial materials, like rubber, on canvas on board. While the paintings' compositional serenity and generosity of touch at first recall Agnes Martin, on closer inspection one finds that there's a whole other narrative imbedded here, a history told obliquely through small, subliminal details that pierce the so-called truths of abstraction. Gallagher infiltrates abstraction's lexicon while the senses are alive to the beauty and elegance of the work. She arouses the curiosity with depictions of uncomfortably cartoon-like lips and eyes and locks of hair that surprise and reward close inspection. Her references to cultural stereotypes, their effect on perception and communication, are sly, strategic and compelling for their off-handed intensity.

Like Ellen Gallagher, Shahzia Sikander subverts mainstream painting conventions; she "grapples with the relevance" in order to see how they can be reflective of larger manifestations of the world order. For Sikander, that means re-examining the traditions of her native east: the ways in which eastern art is read in the west; the freedom she has to manipulate the aesthetic codes of both realms; and the fascinating disjunctions that occur when references to high and low culture, Muslim, Hindu and western iconography are scrambled, made non-hierarchical and simultaneous. Exploring fluid attributes of identity, both her own and more generalized versions, she calls her investigation a "balancing act between the cultural and the personal." The two wall paintings made especially for *NST* exemplify this dichotomy and focus on the theme of "entering the space of womanhood,"[7] a transformation that is constant regardless of culture. Sikander works from an inventory of fragmented images that are layered and re-combined, abstracted and stylized, producing ambiguous, open-ended readings. Her works seek to prove the mutability of fact when fact is mythologized in images freed of nostalgia. They speak eloquently of possibilities and opportunities to reinterpret specific meanings when contexts change.

For the artists in *Negotiating Small Truths*, the canvas (or wall or support) speaks of the present, not the utopian future or nostalgic past. And if the present is complicated, fraught with doubt, fear and the demise of originality, these artists exploit those limitations, examine them with clear eyes, tease out the bits of truth that can outlast compromise. They negotiate their way beyond disillusionment by painting works that balance objective fact and carefully crafted fictions. And in these newly constructed worlds, relevance—even sometimes, beauty—survives.

Shahzia
Sikander

Using the highly stylized and image-oriented genre of Indian and Persian miniature painting as a platform for experimentation, my focus has always been to create a vocabulary that is neither personal nor cultural but somewhere between both. My work is both on paper and drawn directly on architectural surfaces. The shift in scale, from the miniatures to the murals, also breaks the preciousness of the small paintings, rendering the wall works confrontational and ephemeral. The murals have a performative aspect to them and are a result of my nomadic living situation at present. The dichotomy of both experiences allows me to explore and push the boundaries of drawing, resulting in an in-between zone where issues about space and time can be constantly redefined.