I’m too cynical to think that the current wave of enthusiasm for trendy work made by the young and unformed is going to subside anytime soon, but it’s worth noting that the fall-winter season in New York was distinguished by a remarkable number of serious, ambitious painting shows by artists who’ve been around long enough not only to have distinguished histories, but also to know what they’re doing. There was no lack of more predictable exhibitions, but the amount of thoughtful, mature painting on view was positively heartening—not, I hasten to add, only because it was painting; not only because it was made by adults, but also because it seemed to indicate renewed confidence on the part of artists and dealers in the ability of works of art to communicate wordlessly, through the specificity of their materials and the way those materials are manipulated. It’s always reassuring to be confronted by hard evidence that painting isn’t dead, despite the value placed on “alternative media” and “contemporary materials.” I should point out, however, that one of the most provocative exhibitions of the past season was a multi-media effort that included both sculpture and two-dimensional work, by a young Indian artist. (More about that later.)

Marjorie Minkin, Ronnie Landfield, Johnnie Winona Ross, and Jill Moser’s exhibitions at Jason Rulnick, Heidi Cho, Stephen Haller, and Lennon, Weinberg galleries, respectively, provided compelling proof that abstract painting is still a flourishing genre. For some years, Minkin, who started as a “traditional” abstract painter, has worked on transparent Lexan, warping the thick sheets of plastic, and rippling their edges, to create a kind of three-dimensional drawing. She paints, selectively, on both sides of the molded sheet, accenting and/or canceling bulges and bends with sweeps of color that seem suspended in the air. Since the panels project from the wall, the color strokes cast luminous shadows, while more delicate tonal notes are struck by the way light is deflected by the irregular surface and by bubbles and imperfections created by Minkin’s manipulations. The panels occupy an interesting zone between painting and sculpture, equally dependent for their impact on purely optical, disembodied effects, on “seeing-through,” and on real articulation of form. Oddly, for all their abstractness, some of the best also evoke classical torsos in their scale, frontality, and voluptuousness.

In her recent show, Minkin showed paintings, wall-mounted panels, and—what was newest—a couple of small freestanding constructions,
one transparent and aggressively worked, the other, essentially a painted panel in the round. The paintings seemed slightly familiar in their exploitation of the different surfaces yielded by modern acrylic paint technology; I preferred the wall-mounted panels, with their fluid, hovering touches of color and subtle shadows. I was most interested in the painted freestanding piece, which offered provocative possibilities for Minkin’s ongoing exploration of how color may be detached from surface and of surfaces that are at once transparent and physical.

Landfield’s exhibition, “Toward Monochrome,” organized to coincide with the retrospective “Ronnie Landfield: Five Decades” at the Butler Institute of American Art, brought together recent works from 2000 on. Since his precocious debut in the mid-1960s, at an age when most of his contemporaries were just entering art school, Landfield has always explored the potential of large expanses of thin color. For the past decade or so, he has constructed his pictures with arcs of lush hues, piled and layered as if they were elemental landforms. The paintings at Heidi Cho were first and foremost about the way someone in love with the liquidity and chromatic richness of paint moves his chosen medium across a canvas, but they also evoked idyllic landscapes—a vision of the Golden Age extrapolated, perhaps, from Matisse’s *Le Bonheur de vivre* and translated into pure color and gesture. Broad zones of radiant blue or saturated black could suggest times of day, even qualities of weather, along with all the concomitant associations such suggestions elicit, yet the pictures remained wholly abstract. While many of the paintings in “Toward Monochrome” demonstrated Landfield’s ability to orchestrate jazzy color contrasts, some of the most compelling were, as the title of the show suggested, dominated by a single resonant hue: black, deep blue, violet. The intensity and singularity of these works set them apart. It was as if, having convinced us that colors could be equivalents for emotion in his polychrome images, Landfield decided to narrow his focus and make that emotion more naked.

Johnnie Winona Ross’s meticulously crafted minimal abstractions are, in many ways, the diametric opposite of Landfield’s. Where Landfield’s paintings are demonstrative, loose, and chromatically lush, Ross’s are reticent and guarded, geometric, and restrained in color. But both artists are clearly fascinated by the expressive possibilities of process and both obviously trust work that addresses the eye to stir up deep feelings. Yet the obvious artist to invoke in connection with Ross’s work—and one whose name he must be heartily tired of hearing—is Agnes Martin, not only because of their shared insistence on repetitive mark-making and on all-but-imperceptible nuances, but also because of their common residence in New Mexico. No matter. Pay enough attention and Ross’s fragile networks of pale hues are rewarding enough to make comparison beside the point. From a distance, his works at Stephen Haller were pulsing, radiant grids of silvery, creamy off-whites; from a close view, improbably labor-intensive layering revealed itself, along with the hand-drawn quality of the grids. Rigor and humanity vied
for dominance. Severity, formality, and obsessive discipline kept giving way to pure optical delight—and back again.

Moser’s exhibition of recent paintings at Lennon, Weinberg was testimony to both her single-mindedness and her ability to invent. The pictures were populated by energetic, looping scrawls of line, now tightly wound and pushed into a corner, now more relaxed and expanding across the entire field; now lean and spare, now dense and seductive. Moser’s tangles become animated protagonists in silent narratives. Each configuration suggests a different personality, a different mood, a different emotional temperature, at the same time that it declares the presence of a very specific individual through the evidence of her distinctive touch and handwriting. Some of Moser’s loops and whorls are deeply serious characters; some are elegant, some explosive, and some, a little histrionic.

A first impression is that the images are so pared down—the series at Lennon, Weinberg was limited to smoky indigo lines on off-white grounds—that they might properly be described as drawings, but longer acquaintance makes it plain that these lean works are as richly and subtly inflected as any more “traditional” painting. Moser incorporates her pentimenti into her finished images, as Matisse often does in his charcoal drawings—which she admires—and cumulatively, these traces of readjustments create a delicately inflected field. This evidence of thought-processes sets up a dynamic relationship with the final generation of lines, slowing down their speed, trapping them at the same time that it provides a sympathetic setting; variations in the density of the lines themselves add to the complexity. In the recent past, Moser often grouped her images in pairs or quartets, so that her lively knots played against each other, as well as against the clean boundaries of the support. At Lennon, Weinberg, each individual painting stood alone, more self-sufficient than ever. Each image demanded that we become involved in the particularities of Moser’s fluent, exuberant gestures, even as we succumbed to the spell of her arcane storytelling.

If this constellation of shows by ambitious abstract painters served as assurance of the continuing vitality of what Kirk Varnedoe has called “pictures of nothing,” William Bailey’s exhibition at Betty Cuningham was proof of the health of mature, intelligent figurative painting. Bailey, despite the apparently tight focus of his field of inquiry, continues to challenge himself and his viewers. The still lifes in the show made it clear how much they have changed recently. Bailey’s habitual cast of characters—cups, bowls, and pitchers that we come to recognize, like members of a repertory company—remains unchanged, but the scale of the paintings has altered, distancing us from the dramas enacted before us. The familiar objects are more widely spaced on the tabletops than before and seen from a higher viewpoint, in contrast to earlier versions in which the objects were tightly packed and seen head-on, making them as confrontational as a wall of buildings. Now air comes between Bailey’s well-known domestic accoutrements. We gaze slightly down on
them, as if we were watching people move through a piazza from a second story window.

The highlights of the show were a pair of the figure paintings, one a large image of a slip-clad woman gazing out a window, grasping a window ledge, that quietly invoked all those Renaissance madonnas with babies perched on stone sills. The real subject, however, was light. The woman’s torso, forearms, and hands were bathed in a warm glow while her head remained in shadow and the room behind her was filled with cool, diffuse radiance. The play of light created space and mass, defining the solidity of the woman’s body, fusing the fictive wall surrounding the fictive window with the plane of the canvas, and making the hands gripping the ledge project into our space. Still, contemplative, and complex, the painting is among Bailey’s crowning achievements. A small painting of a seated nude ran a close second, with its angular pose and its enigmatic setting: a sparsely furnished room, a window open to an idyllic Italian landscape, luggage stacked on the floor. Adding to the pleasure of the show was its accompanying catalogue, with an illuminating essay by Terry Teachout.

Down the street from the Bailey show, at Lohin Geduld Gallery, a much younger figure painter, Kyle Staver, showed recent images of bikers, sometimes (pace Richard Prince) with their girlfriends, and women in interiors, sometimes with their boyfriends. The best way to describe Staver’s approach might be to say David Park meets Pierre Bonnard. In some of her strongest works, Staver, like Park, evokes the figure and the accoutrements of the ordinary world—in her case, motorcycles, dogs, cats, and furniture—with broad sweeps of paint and abrupt shifts of scale, collapsing space to suggest a kind of quasi-photographic immediacy. At her best, Staver exploits the tension between this mechanical association and her forthright handling, using loose, gestural drawing and wristy swipes to distill bold, graphic shapes from—say—the slump of a biker chick riding behind her guy or the slouch of a mustachioed, superannuated biker, leaning back on the seat of his hog, cigarette in hand. The generous scale of her images brings everything close to us and heightens the sense of presentness of the figures.

Where does Bonnard come into this cheerful, vernacular American imagery? In Staver’s reports on peaceful domesticity, in tranquil, inhabited interiors such as a tall, vertical painting of a lingerie-clad blonde, reflected in a bathroom mirror, her showering male companion a vague presence off to one side. An agile cat replaces Bonnard’s dachshund. There are no broken surfaces—apart from scribbled touches and emphatic strokes that suggest the particulars of place; there’s no shimmering color, but Staver’s casual, inventive orchestration of the anecdotal details of the setting, as well as the mood of relaxed intimacy, has unmistakable affinities with the celebrated paintings of Marthe, grooming herself in the bathroom. I wish Staver’s surfaces were juicier—there’s a tendency for paint to look inert and sunk-in, despite the vigor of her touch—and I wish her color was a little less predictable,
but every time I encounter her work, I admire its energy and freshness. Staver’s recent exhibition made me eager to see what comes next. Uptown at Knoedler & Company, “Jules Olitski: The Late Paintings,” aptly subtitled “A Celebration,” paid homage to this master of radical abstraction, who died early in 2007 not long before his 85th birthday. The dazzling, crotchety, exuberant paintings in the show, all dating from the last seven years of Olitski’s life, boasted a youthful energy that contradicted the painter’s age, but their risk-all inventiveness could only have been born of long experience. The paint in these gorgeous, uningratiating pictures is piled on with abandon; sometimes the surfaces are so densely loaded that they’ve cracked, creating a particularly tough kind of drawing. The color is brilliant, sometimes a little acidic, indifferent, as Olitski’s touch itself is, to the requirements of conventional taste. Every time I’ve confronted these paintings, I’ve felt I have been shown something immensely important and arcane: the formation of the universe or the end of the world or the invention of painting itself. Olitski’s discs and swoops of full-throttle pigment seem cosmic, even visionary. It’s as if, at the end of his long and productive life, he had discovered what a painter’s afterlife might look like, through his deep engagement with paint itself, and presented us with the records of that discovery. Like the Bailey exhibition, the Olitski show was accompanied by a handsome, elegantly produced catalogue with an informative essay, this time by Norman Kleeblatt.

And what about that multi-media show? The New Delhi-based Bharti Kher’s exhibition, “An Absence of Assignable Cause,” at Jack Shainman Gallery. Kher showed two-dimensional wall-hung works, assemblages incorporating found objects, and large fiberglass sculptures. Her “signature” unit is the bindi, the symbolic representation of the third eye worn on the forehead by Hindus. Kher uses the bindi the way Seurat used the dot, often employing not the usual red circle, but rather a rare white sperm-shaped configuration. Kher drew you into her exhibition at Shainman through the repetitive elegance of the bindis and the charm of her animal sculptures, but then the alarming associations provoked by the title began to declare themselves. A life-size sculpture of a collapsed elephant, one ear distressingly curled, paved with spermatic bindis to create a kind of symbolic skin, became a heart-wrenching tribute, while an installation of a spreading, bare-branched tree festooned with small animal images and other mysterious forms, read as an ambiguous memorial. The combination of richly associative imagery, eloquent forms, and the evidence of labor expended signaled by the incredible number of bindis, was strangely alluring and disturbing. I was far less moved by the “paintings”—more pavé bindis—which looked like enlarged slides from a haematology clinic, and unaffected by the life-size whale heart, but the overall, disquieting mood created by many of Kher’s images, along with their unexpectedness and visual lushness, made the show hard to forget. It’s not just a matter of anecdotal interest that Kher’s husband is the rising Indian art star Subodh Gupta, also a
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT


ABOVE  The Denver Contemporary Art Museum, designed by David Adjaye, Adjaye/Associates. Photograph by Ed Reeve.

BELOW  Extension to the Denver Art Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind, Studio Daniel Libeskind. Photograph by Bitter Bred.
maker of mixed media installations, whose work also investigates what are called in academic circles “issues of identity” through different means but to equally good effect.

Coda: At a moment when new museums by brand name architects seem to be almost as ubiquitous as Starbucks or Duane Reade stores, the new Denver Museum of Contemporary Art by the British-Nigerian David Adjaye stands out as one of this year’s best. The façade is straightforward and handsome, the progression through the building is rational, and the elegantly proportioned, beautifully lit, neutral but varied galleries respond well to the multivalent needs of present-day art. There’s even a delightful roof terrace and café, not to mention LEED certification as a green building. The spaces designated for video could use sound isolation and the execution of details and finishes could have been more exacting, but overall, Adjaye’s modest, intelligent museum deserves loud applause.

That would be true in any context, but the virtues of the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art are particularly notable because of its location. The clarity, logic, and restraint of Adjaye’s building, conceived expressly for the art of the moment and wonderfully functional, stands in ironic contrast to the Denver Art Museum’s new addition by Daniel Libeskind. When angling for the commission, I’m told, Libeskind maintained that “white box” spaces, designed for twentieth-century art, were passé; his irrationally angled galleries were what was needed for twenty-first-century art. Denver obviously bought into this typical piece of Libeskind rhetoric, but I remain unconvinced. From what I’ve seen, some site-specific projections can look OK in the cramped, disorienting galleries, but that’s about it. The slanted walls virtually defy use, even though the museum is proud of inventing, of necessity, a way of hanging paintings on projecting brackets, which works but looks dreadful. The arbitrary collision of slanted walls creates pockets of completely inexplicable space and projections that require ad hoc barriers to keep visitors from tripping or impaling themselves. Everything other than Libeskind’s signature angles and slanting window slots seems unconsidered. The ceilings, with their rows of outmoded can lights, suggest a 1970s convention center, and circulation is wretched. In the category “outstanding museum buildings opened in 2007,” Denver can boast two inclusions: Adjaye’s Museum of Contemporary for excellence, Libeskind’s addition to the Denver Art Museum for pretentiousness and arrogant disregard of function.