

Painting game

Tate Modern's new exhibition shows how performance art's playfulness inspired artists to put themselves centre-stage



Painting as mask: LynnHershman's Roberta construction:

A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance is at Tate Modern, SE1 (020 7887 8888, tate.org.uk) from November 14 until April 1, 2013. Open Sun-Thurs 10am-6pm, Fri-Sat 10am-10pm. Admission £10 (concs available) 24 October 2012

Painting and performance art are not the most obvious bedfellows. How could the spectacle of Marina Abramovic repeatedly cutting herself, Chris Burden having himself shot in the arm or Gilbert and George standing on tables, painted

gold and singing Underneath the Arches relate to the painter alone in his or her studio? Indeed, when Allan Kaprow, a founder of performance art, wrote in 1958 about the vast works of Jackson Pollock, with their dripped and flung paint, he said artists had two choices: they could continue in Pollock's vein without taking the medium anywhere new, or "give up the making of paintings entirely" and turn to performance.

A new show opening next month at Tate Modern, *A Bigger Splash*, argues that, in fact, the two have long been intertwined. As part of recently arrived Tate Modern director Chris Dercon's plans to show the gallery's collection in a new light, the exhibition takes two well-loved Tate paintings as its launchpads — Pollock's elegantly weaved *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948) and David Hockney's sun-drenched masterpiece *A Bigger Splash* (1967). What follows shows the radical shifts in post-war painting. Artists in that era renewed the attack on painting that began with Cubism and abstraction in the early 20th century, but this time in more violent ways. The horror of the Second World War prompted artists to attack the canvas and bring it down from its elevated position as high art to engage more with everyday life.

Painting also became a stage set for performances and a mobile entity, wrested from the canvas and applied to the human body. Using the human figure as a canvas has thrust performance art from the avant-garde into the mass media — Madonna and Lady Gaga's visual stunts and identity warping would be unthinkable without the visceral shock of performance artists before them. But even after all the assaults and challenges, painting remains an essential route for artists to create their own worlds. In that sense, it is doing much the same as it has always done but, harnessed to new media, it looks very different. *A Bigger Splash* argues that, rather than sounding a death knell for painting, performance art has given this venerable activity a new lease of life.

Here, we introduce five key works in the exhibition that entangle painting and performance in radical, often surprising ways.

Painting as a mask Lynn Hershman

Roberta Construction Chart #1 (1975)

In the Sixties and Seventies, artists pushed the definition of painting to the limits and "paint" essentially became any material that covers, masks or changes the appearance of things. This extended to the human body and to drag and make-up, which were particularly evident in a number of works exploring queer and feminist politics.

The American artist Lynn Hershman notably constructed a character, Roberta Breitmore, based on images from the media, and lived a double life as herself and Roberta for four years. Using photographs taken by private detectives and documents including medical records, Hershman minutely detailed Roberta's

existence, from dating to psychiatrist visits to contemplating suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge. Hershman has described Roberta as “a composite of all those stereotypes that people had at that time”, and Roberta Construction Chart #1 gives details of how to recreate her alter-ego’s appearance.

Art as a theatrical device

David Hockney

A Bigger Splash (1967)

In the early Sixties David Hockney travelled to California, and the idyll he discovered there led to some of his best, and best-loved, paintings. A Bigger Splash is one of a number of images of swimming pools he made and captures the moment immediately after a diver hits the water. The picture looks expressive and immediate but up close you see that it is meticulously painted — it took two weeks to capture. This was typical of the theatrical, illusionistic devices used by Hockney at this time, and the painting is shown alongside Jack Kazan’s film of Hockney, completed in 1974, also called A Bigger Splash, which contributed to Hockney’s celebrity and his being seen as a kind of living work of art.

In the film, his paintings act as a kind of stage set for his and his friends’ activities, which are part-real, part-exaggeration. They anticipate Hockney’s designs for the theatre and opera and introduce a key strand in the Tate show, in which paintings act as an environment or backdrop for performance.

Questioning identity

Helena Almeida

Inhabited Painting (1976)

The Portuguese artist Helena Almeida’s series of Inhabited Paintings are a halfway point between performance and painting. She would perform before the camera, often with a paintbrush in hand, and then, after the photographs were developed, would paint directly on to the prints in red or blue acrylic.

In one sequence, paint appears to disappear into her mouth, but most feature Almeida creating the illusion that she is painting from within the picture, her brush dragging the colours across the image, or filling it in, obliterating herself in the process. “I was my work,” Almeida once said. “There was no distinction between the canvas, the dimension of the canvas, and me. There was no distinction between the inside or the outside.”

A happening moment

Jackson Pollock

Summertime: Number 9A (1948)

Jackson Pollock felt that the seminal films of Hans Namuth, which capture the American artist almost dancing around the canvas, rhythmically flinging paint, made him look like a “phoney”, and may even have prompted the descent into alcoholism that ultimately killed him. So he would probably be horrified that, while paintings like *Summertime* initially inspired a deluge of artists making expressive abstracts, arguably his enduring legacy is found in the moments captured by Namuth’s camera, which accompany the painting in the exhibition. Here, the line between the painter and his canvas blurs and the artist becomes an active performer.

Writing about Pollock in 1958, Allan Kaprow used the term “happening” to describe the kind of art Pollock’s actions might inspire — Pollock had unwittingly inspired a new genre.

Creating illusion

Lucy McKenzie

Slender Means (2011)

McKenzie is one of a number of contemporary artists using painting alongside performance and other art forms. Her skilful trompe l’oeil paintings derive from her studies at Institut Supérieur de Peinture Van der Kelern-Logelain in Brussels, whose approach is based on 19th-century artisan painting skills.

The four canvases are inspired by a Muriel Spark novella based in post-war London, which follows a group of women under 30 of “slender means” living in the fictional May of Teck club in Kensington. McKenzie seeks to capture the feel of a room that was once part of a wealthy home but is now tarnished by other uses, complete with watery stains, fading paint and grubby borders where pictures once hung.

Although they are stand-alone paintings, they have already been used as a set in a film by Belgian artist and film-maker Lucile Desamory and in an advertising campaign for a Viennese hat manufacturer.