

ON VIEW

## Owning the Abstract: Kianja Strobert Taunts, and Sometimes Tops, Her Ab-Ex Ancestors

By Ryan Steadman | 02/18/15 9:30am



**Kianja Strobert, *Untitled*, 2011**  
(Photo courtesy: Collection of Sam, Shanit and Alexys Schwartz)

Kianja Strobert's first solo museum retrospective, in Santa Monica two years ago, was aptly titled "Nothing To Do But Keep Going."

Born in 1980, the fast-rising New York artist has been showing her work nearly constantly, and around the world, for the past decade. And while she's also been exhibited at art fairs by such noted dealers as Jack Tilton and Zach Feuer, she's managed to avoid being lumped in with a group of artists often described as "art-fair artists."

So, in a sea of gifted 30-something painters, what, other than the always helpful Yale MFA, sets her apart? A look at her vibrant Abstractions on paper, now on view at the Studio Museum through March 8, answer those

questions with a series of refreshing rib-jabs that take on the gravitas of Abstract Expressionism with the potent one-two punch of reverence and personal creativity.

Ms. Strobert, given her academic pedigree that also includes Cooper Union, is far from an outsider when it comes to the art world, but as an African-American woman working in the vein of Abstraction, she is keenly aware that she's treading on turf that has been historically monopolized by white male artists. It's a tension that Ms. Strobert has adroitly harnessed within this impeccable group of recent paintings.

Born and raised in the birthplace of Ab-Ex, Ms. Strobert puts her fluency in 20th-century art to good use. She has deftly enmeshed palettes and compositions from New York School greats like Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston, and Franz Kline to create a unique mix of vibrant and earthy colors that shimmy across her paper surfaces. Her touch with a brush allows her to make a variety of exuberant marks that seem to dance with unique and energetic ebullience.

These tools alone would amount to an adequate skill set for someone wanting to forge a nice career as a painter, but the artist pushes her work beyond that. She quietly but persistently embellishes her paintings so that they start to feel like sophisticated, even radiant, cartoons of Abstract paintings.

Working on a humble scale (between 50 inches and 30 inches high) enables Ms. Strobert to exaggerate the formal aspects of her paintings, many of which begin to resemble delirious yet approachable maquettes of Ab-Ex grandiosities. Her heavy paint application (a calling card for all types of Expressionism) is amplified to a caulky thickness with a variety of additives, forcing her loud colors to literally jump off the page. String, paper pulp and even chicken bones are all used to comically beef up these surfaces. Another technique nuttily reaffirms the "artiness" of many of these abstract paintings: a neatly painted outer edge that boldly encases/frames Strobert's messy paint marks.

Not limited to pure Abstraction, recognizable imagery often seeps into her oeuvre. Some of her overloaded papers, such as *Untitled*, 2011, are emblazoned with stark brown or red hand prints that walk the line between crude humor and protest. They add an aspect of literalness, one that seems to wordlessly taunt the guttural urgency of much mid-century Abstraction.

Ms. Strobert delves even further into the realm of visual metaphor with a rough grouping of yellow dollar signs in the luminous painting, *...all these bright ideas*, 2013. These barely legible ciphers (which perhaps emphasize the love/hate relationship between money and art) feel effortlessly integrated into her tightly wrought composition. Adding this element of mock Twombly-esque symbolism to this vivid balance of grays, pinks and blues works surprisingly well, while also opening up new avenues for Ms. Strobert to navigate. It is exactly this kind of thirst for experimentation that keeps this artist's output fresh and evolving.

Talent is what lifts Ms. Strobert's work above parody, but her ability to come to terms with all aspects of the Ab-Ex movement is what makes it a beautiful and earnest example of contemporary Abstraction. She has done what many Abstract artists before her have failed to do by transforming the tradition—owning it in a way—and making it new.

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