

MORGAN LEHMAN

526 West 26th Street, 4th Floor, New York, New York 10001

HYPERALLERGIC

Confronting Loss Through Abstraction

Throughout her career, Andrea Belag has pushed her style of the moment to its limits and then modified it again.

By Alfred Mac Adam on April 27, 2019



A mainstay of New York abstract painting, Andrea Belag's latest exhibition, *Inheritance*, includes four large format canvases from 2018-19, supplemented by a pair of smaller works on wood from 2018. The disjuncture between the two sets of paintings is more than a matter of size and medium: it is a quantum leap from one style to another.

Belag has been exhibiting regularly since 1992 and has regularly modified her definition of abstraction. Her work has undergone many transitions, turned many corners, but what is captivating in this show is that Belag's steady evolution should now undergo a mutation. Her internal genealogy matters as much as her relationship to a tradition of abstraction.



Throughout her career Belag has cultivated variation, pushed her style of the moment to its limits and then modified it again. Going back to 2003, we find geometry and order, a landscape format canvas with a rectangular band of red running across the top quarter of the surface, a red vertical column dividing the lower three quarters,

varying panels of dark and light blue. This work echoes Minimalism but softens Minimalism's hard edges with impressionistic brushwork. The overall impression is a solidity that aspires to classical tranquility. In Belag's 2007 show at the Mike Weiss Gallery, we find the painting "Great Intentions," in portrait format. Here the geometry breaks down into color fields, with a deep blue-black on the left and a soft red on the far right, variously dimensioned veins of yellow and light blue in between. The relationships Belag sees between and among color groups slowly pushes geometry aside, the significance of brushwork is enhanced, and gestural expressionism is clearly adumbrated. By 2014, with "Wave," also in portrait format, geometry has left the house, and we are in Belag's fraught dream of fragments from Hokusai's "The Great Wave" (1829-32). Swirling swaths of muted color dominate the canvas: solidity has given way to vertigo. In 2017, in "Pirate Jenny," Belag begins to yield space to the canvas itself, as she does in 2019. Here, horizontal strata of color float on a surface,



like some cross-section of mineral layers from an imaginary geology. Now we're ready for a leap into the void.

In these 2019 paintings, Belag turns her back on staid abstraction and lets loose a flurry of emotion. *Inheritance* simultaneously implies gain and loss. To inherit something we must lose someone, so Belag is acknowledging in her title that she has made a sacrifice. She has set aside measure in favor of raw emotion without violent contrasts. She uses an overtly light palette, especially pale blue, to signal melancholy. But she has sloughed off her old artistic self. "Inheritance" (60 by 70 inches, 2018) consists of two vectors, one moving up, the other moving forward. The lower, heavy vector is anchored, like memory, to the bottom of the canvas and is densely packed with splotches of ochre, green, pink, and blue. The upper vector seems to have caught a tailwind. Both energies float on a white surface



and evince little or no depth. Belag is using these color groups to allude to a process of artistic bereavement: to move forward she must leave something behind.

The show's *tour-de-force*, "Cave," a 48 by 56-inch canvas, slaps a border on the free-floating color groups of the other three paintings. This border is critical in that it reminds us of Belag's earlier, quasi-Minimalist work, and in doing so it acknowledges limitations: no matter how far she leaps forward, she will always have links to her own past. The color group is an island in a white void, a refuge, a place defended by those borders, and a new artistic world. "Inheritance" implies subtraction and addition, also perhaps an intimation of personal mortality and a need to challenge it.

The two works on wood, both from 2018, are preludes to Belag's mutation. While the larger oil-on-linen paintings float colors on a surface, leaving a considerable space free, these pieces allude to old-fashioned landscape painting and cover the entire surface. "Gardening on the Moon #2," which is 22 by 30 inches, recalls Caspar David Friedrich's views into infinite space. It is as if we are perched on a vantage point, gazing at peaks, hills, and a river. "Untitled #3" lays out its swaths of color in discrete bands, again suggesting a landscape. These paintings on wood also take advantage of the wood's grain to add nuance and texture, a sharp contrast to the smooth white of the oils. It is important to notice this juxtaposition. The year that separates the two kinds of work is more like a void.

Andrea Belag: Inheritance *continues at Morgan Lehman Gallery (526 West 26th Street, Suite 419, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 4.*