

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The Show Is Over: has painting really had its day?

A nihilistic new exhibition called The Show Is Over seems to contradict its own premise – by showing the fearless, living glory of painters such as Ed Ruscha and Richard Wright

Jonathan Jones



Only the beginning ... Ed Ruscha's End (1933) at The Show Is Over in London. All photographs courtesy of the artists and Gagosian Gallery

Painting has a future – if it walks a thin blue line. That is the lesson of an exhibition at London's Gagosian Gallery that explores the deaths and strange rebirths of painting in our time.

Death is here as image as well as phenomenon. A painting of an hourglass by the Californian modern master Ed Ruscha sends a gothic chill down the spine. It's a big horizontal picture with a black hourglass marking the approach of death. If this exhibition dares to question the survival of that old stuff, paint, in an age of installation and video – hence the nihilistic title – Ruscha offers one rather timeless answer. This deeply troubling picture is a very old-fashioned painting, of the sort that might have intrigued Hans Holbein.

The idea that painting must inevitably die out because it has been succeeded by other, more "modern" art forms is nonsense. Art does not evolve upwards towards some prescribed goal. There is no such thing as artistic "progress"; just change. And change can take all kinds of twists. Marcel Duchamp's urinal, *Fountain*, was exhibited in 1917. The decades that followed did not see painting shrivel in the face of this readymade. Instead, the abstract art of Mondrian, the twisted figurative paintings of the surrealists, and Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist* all revealed a new freedom for the medium.

Today, that freedom lives in the painter Richard Wright. He's the one walking the thin blue line. Or rather, he's taking some blue lines for a walk. Wright has created a huge blue watercolour on

the uneven white ceiling of the Gagosian Gallery. It's a temporary installation for this show, a passing moment in paint. Zigzag lines dance in parallel across the ceiling. They lead into the exhibition or out into the street, depending on your direction. This is painting as movement, as time's arrow, as ephemeral beauty.

Wright also shows intense, fascinating drawings for a mural he's made at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Here is a painter who seems to be in love with his medium and what it can be, now.

Painting has not died. Instead, it has been set free. No longer responsible to any preconceived notion of art or reality, it has claimed absolute experimental freedom. That freedom abounds here in paintings made with bubblegum and mirrors and words and shadows. The show is not over. It has just begun.