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A good time to ask: What is abstract art?

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Eric Sall's painting "Washed Out," part of the Bemis' new exhibit, makes use of digital technology.

There are two guaranteed ways to cause panic in a crowded museum.

You can yell "fire!" Or you can shout "abstract art exhibit!"

This week, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts opens a new show called "Borderland Abstraction," which features the creations of 13 contemporary abstract artists. Works in the exhibit include paintings, sculptures, photography and video. Many of the artworks relate to other disciplines: music, architecture and film, among many others.

Hesse McGraw, the Bemis' 30-year-old curator, organized the exhibit. We thought this would be a good time to ask him about abstraction — what is it, why has it been so controversial and why is it the focus of a new exhibit at the Bemis?

Q. Can you give us a good working definition of abstract art?

A. Abstract art refers specifically to creations that are nonrepresentational, and that means art that is not necessarily intended to look like anything in the real world. It's important, by the way, not to confuse abstract art with modern art. Modern is an all-inclusive term that refers to everything from Picasso portraits to Jackson Pollock's more aggressive splatter paintings. Abstraction is a subset of modern art that is more concerned with form, color and line than in creating a representative likeness of something.

Q. Western art from the Renaissance through the middle of the 19th century was primarily concerned with creating illusions of visual reality. What changed? Why did artists embrace abstraction?

A. Abstraction gave artists a new dimension of freedom to express themselves. The Dadaist movement around World War I, which rejected traditional aesthetics of representation, helped lay the groundwork for the concept that art is whatever you can get away with. That also paved the way for artists like Marcel Duchamp, who wanted to work in collaboration with artists in other fields, like music.

Q. You mention Duchamp, the 20th-century French-American known for his famous "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2." Who else would you mention as leading 20th-century abstract artists?

A. Well of course you have to start with Wassily Kandinsky, the 20th-century Russian painter who created the very first modern abstract works. And Jackson Pollock, whose works have come to define abstract art in the popular imagination. Other important artists are the surrealist Yves Tanguy and the Russian-born painter Mark Rothko. Finally, I think the American installation artist James Turrell, whose work focuses on light and space, is an extraordinarily important abstract creator.

Q. What would you identify as some landmark 20th-century abstract artworks?

A. I think Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased De Kooning," a work in which he actually took one of Willem de Kooning's drawings and

erased it, is a quintessential example of abstraction. I also think Robert Smithson's land art, like his "Spiral Jetty," which is an earthwork sculpture in Utah, will be considered one of the great abstract works. One of James Turrell's installation pieces, "Roden Crater," is also important. He has spent the last 30 years turning a volcanic crater in Arizona into a celestial observatory.

Q. Abstract art has been around a long time now. Why has it remained so controversial?

A. Part of it is education. In the United States we don't spend a lot of time teaching our kids what art is all about, and that makes it hard for people to appreciate art that is new, unusual and challenging. But it also has to do with individual tastes, which have always been a battleground. People know what they like, and a lot of them don't like abstract art.

Q. Why is abstraction the focus of the Bemis' newest exhibit?

A. There's been a lot of debate about abstraction in just the past 10 years, and we wanted to get beyond all the talk and actually look at what contemporary abstract artists are actually doing. The work is both innovative and original. One of the artists in the exhibit, Ara Peterson, has created a 24-foot panel full of vibrant colors. The work is part painting, part sculpture and part architecture. In other words, it defies description. Tim Bavington has a painting that expresses in color the sound of the song "Cold Fire." And Eric Sall uses digital technology in his painting "Washed Out." He paints on canvas, takes a photo of the work in progress and then manipulates the work on his computer. So this show is a good survey of what contemporary artists are doing and what abstraction is all about.

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