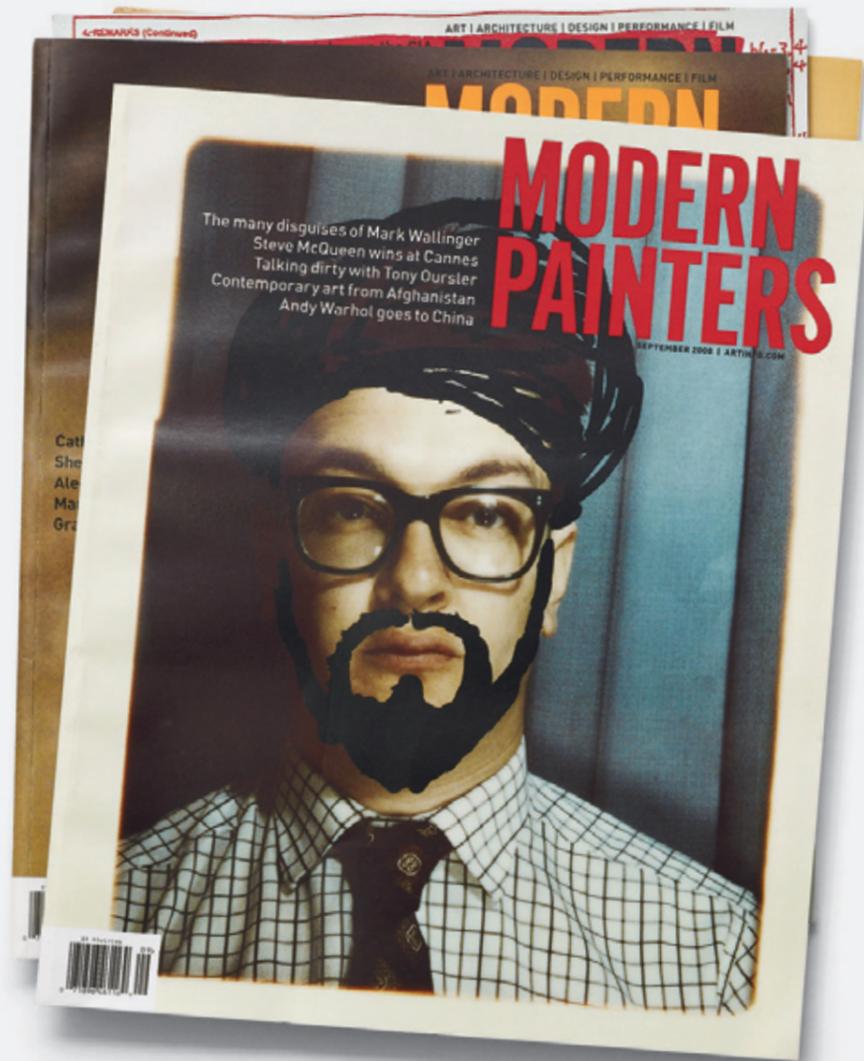


reviewed by Mark Lamster

Brush with Greatness

An art magazine reinvents itself.



MODERN PAINTERS
Designed by Helene Silverman
Published by Louise Blouin Media
www.artinfo.com/modernpainters

Last September, the venerable art magazine *Modern Painters* launched itself anew with a fresh design and a handful of original features. If nothing else, you have to give its determined staff credit for moxie. These are scary days to be in the business of arts journalism. Magazines, in general, are an endangered species, and no medium has been eulogized with more passion and frequency than painting, famously proclaimed dead well over a century ago by the French academician Paul Delaroche. The editors of *Modern Painters*, in fact, deserve credit for much more than moxie. They run a wonderful magazine—literate, engaging, visually compelling—and its renovation only makes it better. The changes, orchestrated by executive editor Christopher Turner and creative director Helene Silverman, accentuate the magazine's greatest strength: its lucid writing on subjects too often treated with pretentious, sleep-inducing artspeak.

Among the welcome new highlights is an artist-on-artist interview, "Meeting of Minds," which now commands the back page, and a column on architecture and design, inaugurated by I.D. contributing editor Tom Vanderbilt—another mark of the editors' good judgment. The most prominent modification to the magazine comes in the display of its title, which previously ran clear across the cover in spindly sans-serif type. Beneath this was its syllable-heavy motto, "The International Contemporary Art Magazine." Silverman has replaced all of this with a satisfyingly stocky block of stacked type shifted to the cover's top right corner. Above its title, *Modern Painters* now bills its contents not with a phrase but with a string of nouns (art, architecture, design, performance, film) separated by vertical bars. These alterations aren't quite revolutionary, but they are a considerable improvement.

As a longtime editor at the unfortunately named Princeton Architectural Press—not located in Princeton, not just a publisher of architecture books, too many damn letters—I'm inherently sympathetic to the challenges of working under a deceptive, clunky banner, and there's no getting around the fact that "Modern Painters" is a cross its editors bear, visually and conceptually. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, it's awkward: overlong and unbalanced. And as the magazine's revised tagline suggests, *Modern Painters* is about much more than modern painters. In case you missed the reference, the name pays homage to critic John Ruskin's six-volume magnum opus of the same title. Yes, that now comes off as a bit affected, but after 20 years in publication, the magazine is stuck with its name. The editors, one suspects, were taking out a bit of their frustration over this circumstance when they com-

MARK WEISS



Examples of Helene Silverman's redesign of *Modern Painters* magazine, which launched last September.

missioned artist Brian Dettmer, who specializes in sculptures created by deconstructing antique books, to take his tools to Ruskin's classic for their November 2008 issue. Dettmer gave them a small masterpiece, a palimpsest of staggered words and images, and Silverman handles it adroitly, presenting it with full-page photographs that take advantage of the magazine's tabloid trim size. It should be no surprise that Silverman is comfortable with *Modern Painters*'s large scale; she cut her teeth designing the generously sized magazine *Metropolis* in the late '80s. Yet while her *Metropolis* was avant-garde for its time, *Modern Painters* is a graphically straightforward affair, no-nonsense and no frills. This is generally laudable, but it doesn't always work to the magazine's advantage. The "Field Guide," a front-of-the-book section of exhibition squibs that's presented in rows of image-capped columns, feels formulaic. There's lit-

tle experimentation with type, as in Janet Froelich's endlessly creative *New York Times Magazine*, nor is there the antic visual density of Luke Hayman's many recent magazine designs, most prominently *New York*, with their obsessive charticles and graphics. Matte paper stock doesn't help on this front; sometimes, the magazine simply feels flat. This problem is most conspicuous on the cover, where the revamped magazine has thus far been at its weakest. A project of dubious merit by the artist Mark Wallinger (he depicts himself as a series of ethnic stereotypes) was perhaps not the best way to relaunch the magazine. The bypassing of Dettmer's stunning, custom-made work for the November issue in favor of a comparatively inscrutable Jenny Holzer is even more difficult to fathom. Most egregious, however, was the choice of a Catherine Opie portrait of Barack Obama for the October issue. Taken as a Polaroid and then blown up to

full-bleed size, the result was a muddy blur that appeared unintentionally awful and did nothing to distinguish the magazine from countless other publications featuring the then-future president. In addition, there was a perfectly suitable option on hand: Shepard Fairey, who was profiled in the issue, had been shot standing before one of his iconic "HOPE" posters. These cavils, however, do not detract from the overall accomplishment of *Modern Painters*. At a time when good arts journalism is a rarity, the magazine stands out for its thoughtfulness and clarity. Even John Ruskin, one assumes, would be pleased with the association. *Mark Lamster is the author of a forthcoming political biography of the artist Peter Paul Rubens.*