2013

Color/Shape/Form/Space

Brett James Hargesheimer

The University of Montana

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COLOR/SHAPE/FORM/SPACE

By

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B.F.A., Bradley University, Peoria, IL, 2006

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Summer 2013

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*Color/Shape/Form/Space* begins at its title. The show is named with the same directness that I want the work to have: accessible, ready for consumption. Stripped of unnecessary information, the exhibition’s title needed to match the work itself, which expresses minimalistic tendencies, avoiding the superfluous. Everything needed to be consciously put together to operate as a well-designed whole. Simple and clear.

It is the age that we live in that prompts me to be so forthright. Our present is defined by attention deficit digital connectivity. Accessibility and information sharing are rampant. With the possibilities being seemingly endless, it is an exciting time to be an artist. However, there too exists the daunting quality of trying to keep up with contemporary culture and the rate at which it expands. My research considers our culture of instant gratification and contemplates how to compete with it. We are consumed by pleasure and the ease of its acquisition. It is my intent to express this via an experience of fabricated eye candy to examine our cultural wants and needs.

*Color/Shape/Form/Space* reclaims the primacy of the formal elements of visual communication. It is an amalgam of sources and ideas that nexus design, craft and fine art. It places fundamental importance on composition, color and spatial integration; and also expresses the immediacy and streamlined efficiency that we desire as contemporary human beings. The final product coalesces objects and their space to create a push-and-pull that is not just pictorial, but sculptural and experiential. I believe this helps to manifest the transcendent and euphoric qualities that I am after.
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of fabricated eye candy to examine our cultural wants and needs.

In terms of the transfer and impact of information with visual means, the graphic
arts are the most successful. By that I mean they are designed to disseminate data at a
rapid rate, fine-tuned by market research. They are intrinsically utilitarian, conveying
messages in milliseconds and their success lies in the ability to convey content quickly
and efficiently to a wide audience. What the graphic arts lack, however, are the
conceptual and metaphysical qualities of fine arts.

It is my intention that the synthesis of graphic and fine arts in my paintings will
result in a high rate of visual data transmission with spiritual and intellectual properties.
The product is anachronistic while simultaneously contemporary because it references
current graphic design and advertising trends while tipping the cap to momentous eras of painting.

My work reexamines the complexities of the inspired placement of simple formal elements via design; that is to say, the concise organization of different elements whose interaction induces a provocative visual and emotional experience.

I am not only interested in the integrity of the visual but also the idea of sharing and improving other people’s lives through visual means. I think visual art has cathartic powers and can replenish the human spirit in ways that cannot be engaged by other means. The question becomes how to most effectively engage the audience, how to send a cathartic message to the viewer when there is so much else for them to look at, or be distracted by. In my thesis research, my goal was to be as to the point as possible, to advantageously use simplicity and visual immediacy so that the image makes a swift and firm first impression. From there, the subtleties are allowed to sing. My intent via the utilization of craft, design, abstraction, sculptural painting and spatial awareness, is to momentarily displace the viewer by allowing them to be absorbed into a saturated, artistic experience.

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The Foundation

Craft and the Commercial Process

Like many words in the artistic lexicon, craft has dual meanings. It is literally defined as skill or efficacy, but also can connote objects of functionality largely pertaining to handicraft and DIY culture. The word itself can be used in a derogatory context expressing the division between the traditionally high and low of artistic culture, exacerbated by some of the tenants of postmodern thought.

I see a contemporary need to bring back the high level of skill that once went into creation of visual art. The Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 1800s, which ultimately lead into Bauhaus ideals, was a revitalization of craft in the face of feverous industrialization. It was a response to kitsch long before Greenberg wrote on the topic, as it was “a return to handicraft…and the ‘cheap and nasty’ mass-produced goods of the Victorian era were abhorred.”¹ The movement’s retort is similar to my own in relation to our current era. Rapid industrialization was derogating society and artistic practice, now it is rapid digitization and the depletion of physical faculty.

The writer and artist John Ruskin (1819-1900) inspired the philosophy of this movement. Asking how society could ‘consciously order the lives of its members so as to maintain the largest number of noble and happy human beings,’ Ruskin rejected the mercantile economy and pointed toward the union of art and labor in service to society…According to Ruskin, a process of separating art and society had begun after the Renaissance. Industrialization and technology caused this gradual severance to reach a critical stage, isolating the artist…Underlying Ruskin’s theories was his fervent belief that beautiful things were valuable and useful precisely because they were beautiful.²

² Ibid.
The democratization of the visual arts, which is a direct product of globalization, postmodern thought, the internet, social media and other technological advances, has created an overwhelming amount of images being produced and shared.

Beyond this, technology has provided the dissolution of “the role of chance, error and the uncontrollable from the production process.” Commercial and industrial processes, as well as the use of the readymade, have emerged as acceptable and accessible implements for contemporary artists. Because of this, I view the identity of the handmade object and the artist as a tradesperson going by the wayside.

Handicraft, the particular skill of making an object by hand, is essential within my process and with my work in general. By exercising handicraft in a fine art application it allows me to show my appreciation for both the ‘high’ and ‘low’ and it promotes them to coalesce into new and interesting forms with new identities. As an example, I pay as much attention to detail in the construction of my panels as with the painting of them. To me, they are of equal importance in their execution. This is of vital importance considering I place a high concern on sculptural painting. Within my work the pictorial plane and the form are united. As such, they are in direct collaboration, each dependant on the other for the integrity of the overall object.

A greater depth of meaning is achieved with the skilled hand. No matter how it is perceived, there is less intimacy in experiencing styles of art-making that wholly utilize machine-fabricated work and the readymade. Even though I endorse the visual precision, clean aesthetics and the use of simple geometric elements often found in machine-fabricated work, there is something missing in the viewing experience and this is because

there are completely different identities between works like this and that of those made by hand.

My work captures the grey area between these two stances as it combines handicraft and the use of the machine. *Prose and Cons* (fig. 1) directly examines this by adjacently situating a colored pencil drawing mirrored by a Photoshop rendering. Both have attributes leading the viewer to question their relationship.

Furthermore, this is the first time I have labeled the glossy topcoat under the “medium” in my inventory, indicating a full embrace of it as an integral part of the product and idea. This also holds relevance because I had outsourced this portion of my process because there was no possible way to complete this body of work as I conceived it using my traditional processes. Before my thesis series I was applying Golden polymers and varnishes by brush for their final topcoats. It became a limited practice because of the need to cover a massive amount of square feet and I had no means of storing and working on the panels because of their scale, excessive dry times and other particular needs. There was also the issue of problematic surface anomalies resulting from the brushed application. Because a streamlined quality was imperative to the work, outsourcing was the only option. Here is where I came to fully embrace the use of commercial/industrial production teamed with handicraft. Ultimately, a more important facet of the work took precedent over my issues with personal craft. It was a practical evolution and ultimately created an interesting dynamic between the commercially made and the handmade.
It is very important to me to create work that is visually impressive. I want something to grab my attention and hold it, and a very basic way of achieving this is by a high level of accuracy and talent that goes into it. This is strengthened by the appeal of seeing when something is composed by hand. I want my craft to exude efficacy and I have vehemently practiced and mechanized my skill set to compete with the computer or the fabricator. This when combined with the appreciation and utilization of commercial/industrial processes has created an interesting dichotomy within my work. It expresses my philosophical intent to achieve perfection but also the need to be eclectic by employing the contemporary tools that are available to me. I support the artist as a skilled tradesperson and theoretician. I want there to be a balance between the two and it is my duty to develop and uphold this balance.

**Formal Elements and Design**

Nowadays, when paintings torture the retina, when music gradually destroys the eardrum, there must, all the more, be a need for an art that searches for new ways to achieve harmony and equilibrium.\textsuperscript{4}

–Ilya Bolotowsky

This quote, found next to his piece *Grey Rectangle* (fig. 2) from 1955 in the Art Institute of Chicago, summarizes the omnipresent need for aesthetics and design. Bolotowsky embraced Neo-Plasticism as a means of conveying equilibrium long after the movement’s prime and his sentiments are similar to mine in that he too

\textsuperscript{4} *The Art Institute of Chicago*, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/186682> (16 March 2013).
was appropriating an anachronistic visual language to do so. Most importantly, he was consumed by a need for harmony and used non-representational, hard-edge abstraction to do so.

My work stresses clean interaction of visual information via design. Design typically means to plan and organize with the product having some form of function. The function can be utilitarian or metaphysical and design simply allows it to present itself in an organized format. Summarized by Donald Judd, “It’s a relatively chaotic and random world—it just so happens that I want to order my own particular part of it.”

In a 1946 article titled "What is Modern Industrial Design?" Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, wrote,

In modern design, each problem is considered to carry the germ of its own solution—full comprehension of the needs to be fulfilled will indicate the form of the design . . . The responsibility of a modern designer thus becomes understanding his problem as thoroughly as he can and solving it as directly as he can…Functions, materials, techniques, the environment and psychology of users—these are not to be circumvented or forced, they are guides to right design.

This ultimately exposes the spirit and intentions of all artists: thoroughly understanding the ‘problem’ and solving it as directly as possible. We are all designers in this regard. Oftentimes the ‘problem’ is simply the compulsion to express oneself. In the words of Hans Hoffman, “Art is always spiritual, a result of introspection, finding expression through the natural entity of the medium.”

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5 William Furlong, Speaking of Art: Four Decades of Art in Conversation (New York: Phaidon Press, 2010), 87.
**Significant Form**

Individuals feel and comprehend in different ways. However, I believe there exists at certain points of visual art perfect bits of rapture that everyone can understand and find a truly personal and transcendental experience with. Not everyone perceives art with similar sensibility, but there is always the possibility of certain combinations that can create a universal sense of appreciation or reverence. This is a slightly romanticized idea, but universality is possible, and I think it can be achieved with quality design, or as Clive Bell would refer to it, significant form.

From his essay, *Art*, he states, “For a discussion of aesthetics, it need be agreed only that forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way, and that it is the business of an artist so to combine and arrange them that they shall move us.”  

Good design can best solicit meaning for the broadest audience. Capturing significant form theoretically allows the artist to provide an elevated visual experience in which the audience can be profoundly moved. This teamed with the other content of the work creates a rich experience of conflated information.

Frank Stella’s “Black” paintings (fig. 3) are extremely significant historically and personally; and speaking on their genesis he states, “I wanted something that was direct—sort of direct thing right to your eye—something that you could see…you got the whole thing right away. It was basically simple symmetrical patterns so that once you

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saw it you understood it and it would have a direct effect on your eyes, on your eyesight. It was a kind of visual imprint."\(^9\) This is very relevant to the simplicity that I want to convey with my work. There should be a satisfying aspect to the work and I think the unabashedly direct use of formal elements can do this, if done ‘successfully’. Art needs only to be a moving experience; and what moves me lies in the structure of what I am looking at. That is to say, how someone has organized visual components to elicit emotion.

**Beauty**

Beauty plays a vital part in the meaning of my work. It is not simply incidental. I interpret beauty to be both subjective and inextricably connected to socio-cultural conditioning. The tension between the subjective and the social is characteristic of modern disputes about beauty. Beauty is caught up in rationality, commodity exchange and calculation. It is tied to design, style and marketing.\(^10\) We are not and cannot be completely aware of all forces and therefore cannot be completely in control. Here exists the tension between individual experience and social structure.

I am exploring the visually beautiful via the design dictum. My interests are to be widely appealing, crossing all demographics of the human race to share a beautiful experience. I know art has the power to be rapturous because I have felt it firsthand. I have been in the presence of numerous

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\(^10\) Beech, 16.
works that have generated euphoric sensations (fig. 4). Scale, color, craft and design have all played part in distributing this pleasure to me. It is the exact experience I would like to share with others, to make a positive difference in peoples’ day-to-day existence. This is where beauty can take on conceptual meaning, as it can also be a value, which in this circumstance is brought about by my interest in wanting to share a positive experience. My work is intended to elicit pleasing, visceral responses with immediacy. “The experience of beauty helps coalesce the disparate itineraries of humans” because there is an intuitive response to magnificence in art.\textsuperscript{11} It is my goal to supply this magnificence.

I believe quite firmly that design is a universal language. This has become a problematic view since the genesis of postmodernism’s espousal and dismantlement of institutionalized aesthetics. Euro-American cultural hegemony has decisively affected the arts and this has led to the politics behind the dismissal of established aesthetics. However, a full rejection of these aesthetical systems destroys potent aspects of visual communication; and how could I stray away from these systems when they have created such profound experiences in my life? There is a myriad of connotations that we forcibly decipher within the postmodern mind state, but this plays a minor role in relation to the purity of experience that I am after. The bottom line is I like to create the type of art that I like to view; and oftentimes there is limited concern for the politics or critical theory. Instead, I submit to the profound power of well-organized visual information.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 69.
Abstraction

Rejection of the Representational

The use of geometric, abstract elements in my previous work served a multitude of purposes. It was used to compositionally balance the representational imagery, which was appropriated from a source, and then collaged or realistically drawn. This allowed a tension and interaction with the abstract elements. I used the openness of abstraction to push against the representational, expanding the parameters of the imagery by re-contextualizing the visual stimuli. At this time I was working with a lot of socio-political subject matter and overtones. While the representational imagery was dark, irreverent and cynical, the color and the shapes created a sense of compositional and emotional contrast and balance, thus creating tension while simultaneously harmonizing the different components. As an example, my last series before moving into the aesthetic of my thesis work heavily appropriated Space Race imagery (fig. 6). The astronaut served as a symbol of isolation, fear and rapid technological expansion. By including abstract elements I was able to offset the dismal content of the representational imagery with the use of color and shape. This created push-and-pull that was visual and emotional. A primary goal throughout this period of development was to address certain aspects of humanity while simultaneously creating equilibrium. The combinations precipitated constant oscillation between the imagination and the immediate. The result was a
relatively complex, multi-faceted array of stimuli. In turn, this created a sense of
decoding, akin to solving a puzzle.

Representational imagery is something that has troubled me since the beginning
of graduate school. Representational images are ripe. So ripe in fact that it is difficult to
use anything without an excessive amount of personal/historical/societal interpretation.
My previous body of work brought this understanding to the forefront. Quite a bit of the
imagery that I was appropriating was historical. This meant that not only was the image
to be understood, so was the time from which it came and its connotations. Furthermore,
the relationship between that period and the present was analyzed. More often than not,
it led the artistic dialog about a given piece into too many directions. There wasn’t
enough control with this approach as it created too much confusion.

With my thesis work I made a conscious decision to move away from
representational imagery for numerous reasons. An integral issue was “Abstract art
denies many of [the] possibilities of interpretation offered by figurative images; it
demands instead an effort of the imagination, a creative response.”\(^{12}\) Abstraction allows
the work to engage the viewer on an imaginative level because “Painting becomes a kind
of intuitive metaphysics, intimating another dimension of reality, accessible only to the
imagination, made visible only by art.”\(^{13}\) This is exemplified by Malevich’s Black
Suprematist Square from 1915. “It was what could not be seen that mattered: the energy
within things, that higher order of connectivity between phenomena, invisible but ever

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 17.
present in the perceptible world, the abstract *spiritual* energy that animates the universe, independent of the objects through which it moves.”¹⁴

Abstraction provides a platform for higher purity than what representational work can offer. This purity is one of the most important things I am after. It is something that is difficult to define as it is steeped in the metaphysical. How does one explain the emotional power and presence of a masterpiece to another who hasn’t seen it?

**Color-based, Hard-edge, Geometric Abstraction**

My interests in hard-edge abstraction has always been there, latent or not, tugging at my aesthetic sentiments. The formal elements and principles of design have always found their place within my work and the way I view art. Hard-edge abstraction is just the means to convey color and shape in the clearest and cleanest way possible. It is a vehicle. It carries color with a high level of clarity. There is a visual sincerity with it.

Hard-edge, geometric abstraction has come and gone repeatedly over the last century and has taken different forms and diverse identities since its initial emergence in artistic practice. Within this context, my influences are largely from 1910-30 in Europe and the mid-fifties to seventies in America. The De Stijl movement posited that their aesthetic could create a new social order via the quality of art, architecture and industrial design. Minimalism utilized hard-edge, geometric abstraction to evince the austerely impersonal through its mechanical aspects and industrial materials. The point being, hard-edge abstraction has been in a state of continual exploration for sometime now.

I see a contemporary need for the values from the Color Field/Post-Painterly Abstraction era. There was an “unspoken renunciation of colour that went hand in hand

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.
with the sabotage by conceptual art of certain kinds of aesthetic and visual protocols associated with modernism.”\textsuperscript{15} In its feverous rejection of the ‘archaic’ modernist conventions, postmodernism formed a collective sentiment that dismissed important facets of aesthetics and formalist concerns. Color and other formal elements were purported to be connected with politics and art world hierarchies, rendering them obsolete. The modernist cannon was rebelled against which created room for immerging sectors of creation.

The ideas of color-based abstraction circa the 1950s and 1960s were lost within the changing tide of collective interests. “In the wake of post-modernism, with its cynicism, irony, and political agendas, Color Field abstraction—with its wholehearted quest for visual impact and wordless eloquence—has been somewhat overlooked.”\textsuperscript{16} This is to say that there is still more to be explored.

There exists an inherent connection in using a particular visual language vis-à-vis the periods in which it originated and was developed. This reverts back to my previous works with representational iconography. It simply adds to the layers of information within the work itself; albeit, I have found that it is more conducive to the overall product via non-objective painting. How this plays a role in the meaning of my work is that these eras from which I draw from have specific identities, and these identities are diversified and augmented when re-contextualized with each other. This is applicable in the visual, the historical and the intentional. It results in a complex network of information within the use of simple geometry. Some of these dialogs include the championing of significant form, minimal authorship, the metaphysical and utopian. All of these

\textsuperscript{15} Briony Fer, \textit{The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 190.
\textsuperscript{16} Mitchell, 6.
meanings merge into a manifold system. However, there obviously exists the possibility of one not having an interest/knowledge in art history/critical theory and therefore losing these important tidbits of content. It is hard to engage a wide-scale audience, reaching out to different people in different ways with the same work. I see my work to be able to bridge this gap because at its fundamental level it has a strong visual presence.

What sets me apart from previous movements is what also grounds me in contemporary culture, and that is the synthesis of different stimuli and processes. Selection and the combination of different movements, ideas, visual frameworks, etc. give rise to the personal and cultural content of the work. It shows who I am as a person/artist and what it is that I find to be exciting or interesting. It also expresses our current cultural state of affairs in that we have access to so much information and the areas that we gravitate towards inherently express power just by the means of selection. The result of eclectic appropriation is a merger of different, possibly even opposing, visual languages and ideologies into a composite that is compliant with my sentiments and artistic endeavors creating an idealized product.

My work is stripped down to its key elements, which allows the compositional/formal elements to speak as loudly as possible. This is why I have selected hard-edge painting as my means of visual transmission. The critical difference in ideas between the gestural and the geometric is exemplified by the change from Abstract Expressionism to Post-Painterly Abstraction, Pop and the origins of Minimalism. Greenberg reported on an exhibition in 1964 in Los Angeles with his essay *Post Painterly Abstraction*. He speaks in reference to post-painterly artists Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, etc.:
In their reaction against the “handwriting” and “gestures” of Painterly Abstraction, these artists also favor a relatively anonymous execution. This is perhaps the most important motive behind the geometrical regularity of drawing in most of the pictures in this show. …These artists prefer trued and fairied edges simply because they call less attention to themselves as drawing—and by doing that they also get out of the way of color.\footnote{Clement Greenberg, \textit{Post Painterly Abstraction} (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964), 73, quoted in E. A. Carmean, Jr., \textit{The Great Decade of American Abstraction: Modernist Art 1960-1970} (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1974), 73-4.}

Albeit, written sixty years ago, this quote shares my sentiments with the work that I am currently producing, which is intended to be expressive in its color choices and compositions, not in the gesture of a brushstroke.

Speaking on Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Hamilton stated, “I think there is a good example in \textit{Brushstroke} (fig. 7). To say that a brushstroke can be converted into other kinds of marks and can mean ‘brushstroke’ but have nothing to do with the brushstroke physically is a very interesting philosophical idea.”\footnote{Furlong, 96.} This statement captures the spirit of creating work via an industrial or commercial process, or intimating such a process. Lichtenstein’s \textit{Brushstroke} series, which clearly was a retort to Abstract Expressionism, removed the overt hand from the work and simultaneously commented on what expression can mean and how it exists in a mechanical process.

By allowing my work to operate on minimal and mechanical means, it can be regarded as impersonal. I argue that this is not so on the basic grounds that a work of art
is always a means of someone’s expression. I feel that even though my application is stripped of blatant authorship, one can see that they are made by hand. The slight imperfections of surface and texture precipitates a general conclusion that my objects were made by a person with the intent to be as precise as possible. Furthermore, “An artworks subject matter, its formal properties, and the very materials that it is created from reflect the identity characteristics, on the individual and broader cultural level, of both the artist and the intended audience.” ¹⁹

Where as I prefer to eliminate the hand via the application of the medium, current trends void authorship by the materials themselves. There is an abundance of contemporary artists working with readymade mediums like televisions, lights and digital materials that negate the idea of the hand that created it. The importance does not lie directly with the entity that created the work, but in the integrity and conciseness of the messaged delivered, as well as the cultural connotations that it presents.

I am interested in showing my craft at the same time as allowing the form to exist without a high concern for the physically expressive application. Overall, my minimalist concerns are designed to showcase the formal elements, emphasize color, and to help push objects to interact with the geometry of their surroundings, which leads into questions and examinations of space.

Synthesis and Result

Sculptural Painting and Spatial Experience

You know when you read a book you’re often so involved in the space generated by the author that whatever happens in front of you disappears…. A lot of people come to art and look at it, and this is one of the problems of contemporary art. And so they don’t actually enter the realm that the artist was involved in. We have a little more of a distance there.20

—James Turrell

Turrell is a master of creating space. His work examines how light, and its relation to the divine, creates or develops one’s sense of location and understanding of space. This quote discusses the need for developing the space as opposed to looking ‘at’ two-dimensional images on walls. It is the pursuit of a heightened sense of experience. Ultimately, my work is about enjoying the emotional effects that can only be induced in person. Efficiently controlling an environment allows the greatest means of dictating how a viewer perceives space in relation to oneself. This, along with a strong intent in formalist aesthetics, promotes a powerful personal experience.

Prior to the modern era artists were categorically separated by trade. Painters were primarily painters, sculptors primarily sculptors, and so on. In contemporary context, the line has been skewed to an almost borderless, multiple-disciplinary practice.

Merging sculpture and painting provides an unexpected element of visual experience for the viewer. Sculpture is already intended, or seemingly preordained, to elicit responses of form to space. One expects that a sculpture will engage the environment and allow the questions of form in relation to space be evident. Sculptural painting intensifies the elements of form and space because it defies what one expects from ‘traditional’ painting. When a painting intentionally crosses over into the three-

dimensional realm, the product is more profound because there is an effect of the unexpected as well as additional informational strata to be decoded. Pictorial illusionism and sculptural literalism can and cannot be opposing agents. I find that when they are unified the result is a heightened meaning of formal significance. These themes are examined in *Call and Response* (fig. 8), which flanks a multileveled panel with a floor sculpture.

Furthermore, in regards to the work I am creating at present, the geometrical concerns are pushed to an all-encompassing result. The pictorial shapes become synchronized with that of the forms of their supports. They then go on to interact with the viewing space by collaborating with the shapes of the walls and the geometrical layout of the interior space. This becomes apparent with limited effort because of simple geometric shape relationships.

**Historical Influence**

Sculptural painting motifs have been explored many times. In the later half of the twentieth-century, activation of form and space became a focus and concern for two-dimensional visual artists. For example, one can only go so far without discussing the origins in Mondrian’s work circa the 1920s and 30s.

Mondrian sought to eliminate the illusion of three-dimensional space created by the “window” of the picture-frame by directly mounting his
stretched canvases onto a white backboard, thus projecting them into real space as objects whose clearly defined right-angle edge implies the continuity of the black lines, and of the colored or white planes, into the infinity of the circumambient space. No painter before him had used this simple devise to propose the transcendence of the image over the material limitations of the support.21

His successors on this theme in painting, Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, contributed revelatory compositions probing these ideas further. Stella fully called attention to the depth and ‘objecthood’ of the canvas with his Black series circa 1959. In it, he used the depth of the canvas as a template for the spacing of his concentric bars/lines on the pictorial plane. The result was a complete unification of shape and form. Fried contends that this series, “represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgement of literal shape in the history of modernism.”22 Stella did not only believe in the object/form but called full attention to it; and because of this, it helped make the development visible to others.

Ellsworth Kelly has spent his career solving formal problems and pushing formal properties to their limits. Notorious for breaking the conventional rectilinear/square format, he is highly concerned with the integration of the form with shape and color; and ultimately, the relation of an object to its surroundings. Kelly’s work has consistently questioned the relationship of the viewer to the work, which ultimately creates the question of space and environment. “…His canvases are not just for the eye. Or better said, they never fail to remind the eye that it sits atop a mobile body that involuntarily adjusts its stance to the way each painting takes its position in space.”23

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21 Gooding, 30.
Contemporary Artists

Two examples of contemporary working artists that share my sentiments of sculptural painting are Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Rene Rietmeyer. Both are interested in expanding the viewing experience via the sculptural. Zuckerman-Hartung pushes “the duality of the painting as both an object and a planar vehicle for imagery and content…”24 with work that utilizes connective physical elements to tangibly create forced associations between multiple canvases. She uses the connective elements between panels to create abstracted shapes that mimic the pictorial imagery Furthering the compatibility of all the factions. Although massively different from my work in aesthetic and how spatial associations are asserted, our views are very similar on how compositional decisions can pronounce assimilative qualities of pictorial visual elements with that of the forms produced by their supports.

Rene Rietmeyer is an oil painter with a concern for form and surface tactility. His work is intended to be read as painting and sculpture by thickly applying vivid colors on three-dimensional boxes. The panels play upon themselves creating relationships amongst the individual objects and their groupings, but also, and arguably most importantly, they address the space in which they exist (fig. 9). He states, “For me, the space is one. My boxes within a given space are part of the space as a whole, and they create a certain atmosphere within and

with that space.”

This lends itself to the micro and macro, the individual and the collective; and is similar to interests in my thesis work which suggest sculptural painting has the advanced capability to express these concerns. The simple geometric forms and colors of Rietmeyer’s boxes create dynamic formal relationships that provoke a complete visual and emotional experience. This is precisely the effect that I am interested in employing with my thesis work.

**Installation**

One only needs to look so far to see the monumental influence that Installation Art has on contemporary practice. Installation has diverse identities and meanings but its core premise is the “immersion of the spectator in an experience… encompassing the whole of his or her field of vision; as such it went beyond the impulse to decorate, narrate or instruct, characteristic of church or palace architecture during the medieval period or in the Renaissance.”

The Surrealists first fully examined the immense possibilities that installation could have. In an exhibition from

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1938 at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris, “music and smells pervaded an entirely enclosed space that included coal sacks on the ceiling, assemblages, plants and paintings.” After that, Minimalism and Conceptualism further contributed. Sol LeWitt was a huge proponent of installation, creating grandiose, yet formally simplistic, room-filling compositions (fig. 10). One is also inclined to think of how successful artists like Richard Serra can be with the control of space via sculptural installations (fig. 11).

My work is not site-specific, unlike Installation Art, which has a strong background of being temporary and expressing site-specificity. The following can summarize my intent in this endeavor:

Modernists who were formalists believed that the meaning of an artwork should remain consistent regardless of where the artwork is displayed. Archetypal examples of modern art, such as the color-field paintings of the mid-1950s to late 1960s in the United States, which emphasized formal aspects and were designed to be portable, were expected to make the same visual impression on viewers in any exhibition site.

Typically, installation-based art is viewed as a complete entity as opposed to a collection of objects. I am modifying this premise by placing importance on the individuality of the objects as well as the collective of the space (fig. 12). This has importance because it mirrors my sense of contemporary identity. Aptly defined, critic Lucy Lippard “maintains that identity is relational and defined by our similarities

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27 Ibid.
28 Robertson, 76.
and differences with others. Moreover, Lippard advocates embracing a collective self, expressed through naming oneself as part of a group and representing oneself verbally and visually in terms of a shared identity.”

Like with Rietmeyer, there is a strong interest in intertwining the singular with the plural, the solo with the group.

The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas is a perfect example of an aesthetic and spiritual experience teamed with egalitarian action via installation. Rothko’s paintings, which are comprised of large fields of subtle colors, engulf the space (fig. 13). The result is a spiritual experience open to all peoples, on par with what I am trying to accomplish.

Taken from their mission statement,

The Chapel has two vocations: contemplation and action. It is a place alive with religious ceremonies of all faiths, and where the experience and understanding of all traditions are encouraged and made available. Action takes the form of supporting human rights, and thus the Chapel has become a rallying place for all people concerned with peace, freedom, and social justice throughout the world.

Via non-objective abstraction and installation, Rothko was able to create a space that was not particular to any demographic. The chapel provides a profound experience to a person of any education level, faith, race, gender, etc. In his book American Visions, Robert Hughes writes, “…[Rothko] hoped to express the sense of awe and numinous presence which had

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29 Robertson, 104.
once been associated with the depiction of gods in art—but do it without the human figure.\textsuperscript{31} The only thing that is intrinsically required is the viewer must be in the space to fully appreciate being surrounded by the contemplative beauty that it provides. This is the same issue integral to my work.

**Thesis Intent**

My thesis series has clarity and precision, but also a sense of possibility and open-endedness that affords the viewer a complete yet amendable visual experience. Combinations of visual elements and their integration with space invite viewers to stop, think, enjoy, and be captivated. I want to be impressed by visual art and I want to afford that same sentiment and opportunity to my audience.

My work is about the fastidious organization of individual elements into a complete and harmonious whole. It is about the collective result. My goal has been to create work that synthesizes components of craft, design, non-objective abstraction and sculptural painting into a product that promotes metaphysical awareness. As an artist, I am committed to contribute to our contemporary socio-cultural epoch in a positive way and consider this research to be a solid base for subsequent investigations.

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