

Discovering “Op Art”

Human Presence: Through the Geometry of Color

Through July 17, 2005

Please be advised: visitors to SDMA’s new exhibition of contemporary art, *Human Presence: Through the Geometry of Color*, may experience unexpected and involuntary internal responses to certain works on display. In fact, many artists in the exhibition—including Richard Anuszkiewicz, Victor Vasarely, and Bridget Riley—have drawn on psychological theories of perception to intentionally evoke a physiological response in the viewer through their geometrical abstractionist paintings and prints. Sometimes termed Op (for optical) or Kinetic Art, due to their apparent dynamic qualities, these works are far more than simple optical illusions, but rather carefully conceived works of art that rely on the viewer’s presence to complete the work in his or her eye and mind.

The term “Op Art” was first coined in 1965 by an art critic on the occasion of an exhibition titled *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The show brought together works featuring optical effects—such as perceptual ambiguities created by colored surfaces and the suggestion of movement created by repeated black-and-white patterns and lines—whose origins can be traced back to teachings of the masters of the Bauhaus school in Germany, including those of Josef Albers (1888–1976).

Closely connected with the Bauhaus in the 1920s as both a student and teacher, Albers borrowed concepts from Gestalt psychology in his investigations of the perceptual effects of color relationships, both in theory and practice. In what is his best-known series, *Homage to the Square*, Albers put many of his theories to the test by using the motif of nested squares as a jumping off point for the exploration of the visual and emotional possibilities of color.

One of Albers’s students when he was teaching at the Yale University School of Art and Architecture was Richard Anuszkiewicz (b. 1930), who would go on to become one of the primary figures of the Op Art movement. Like Albers, Anuszkiewicz was fascinated with shapes and their relationships to color, in particular, with the optical changes that occur when different high-intensity colors are applied to the same geometric configurations. In his screenprint *New York City Opera* of 1968, the artist carefully alternates the shapes and colors of the geometric forms and lines to enhance the illusion of plasticity and movement created by the patterns. A similar approach to creating a dynamic sense of movement in the eye and mind of the observer also appears in the work of Victor Vasarely (b. 1908), the artist whose work during the 1960s has become almost synonymous with the term Op Art.

One final artist represented in *Human Presence* who was closely linked to Op Art is



Richard Anuszkiewicz, *New York City Opera*, screenprint, 1968. Museum purchase, 1970:52. (This artwork will be on view as part of a second rotation of works on paper in the *Human Presence* exhibition beginning mid-April.)

the British painter and printmaker Bridget Riley (b. 1931). By the early 1960s, Riley was creating highly illusionistic patterns through the repetition of black-and-white shapes. It was during this time that she too fell under the influence of Gestalt psychology and its theories of human perception. In the suite of prints titled *Red Dominance*, *Green Dominance*, and *Blue Dominance* of 1977 (see page 7), the artist alternates bands of color of varying width to create undulating rhythmic patterns that swell and oscillate across the pictorial field.

Though the term Op Art may not do justice to the rich body of work produced by these artists, their preoccupation with human perception and their approach to color and geometry to effect the viewer psychologically have had a lasting influence and can be seen in more recent works by the artist Linda Besemer, also on view in *Through the Geometry of Color*.

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