

TOTAL AND COMPLEX

by Harris Rosenstein



Paul Mogenson



David Novros



Brice Marden

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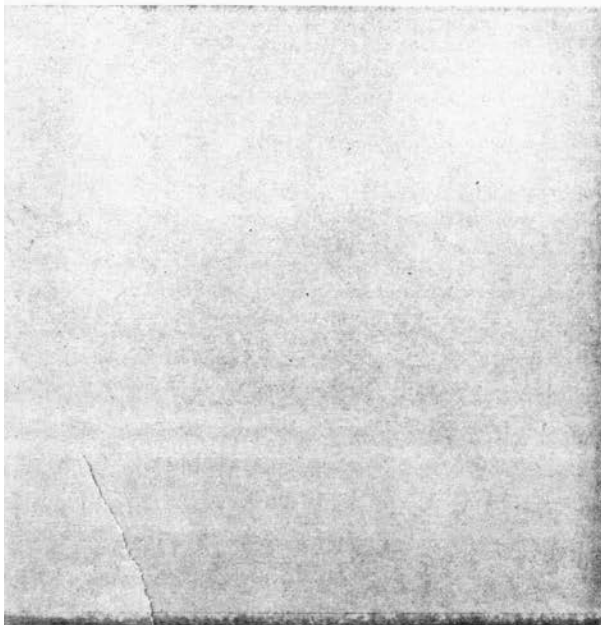
Three young colorists share common aspirations to the full color statement; each has found his individual image and sense of style

Brice Marden, born in Bronxville, N.Y., in 1938; Paul Mogenson and David Novros, both born in Los Angeles in 1941 (and classmates at the University of Southern California), are painters currently living in New York who have similar views about experiencing color, or, more precisely, that color ought to have the freedom of not being realized fragmentarily or indirectly and thus gain a full expression. They feel that there is greater possibility of this when colors are not juxtaposed, and they now use one over-all color in each particular work.

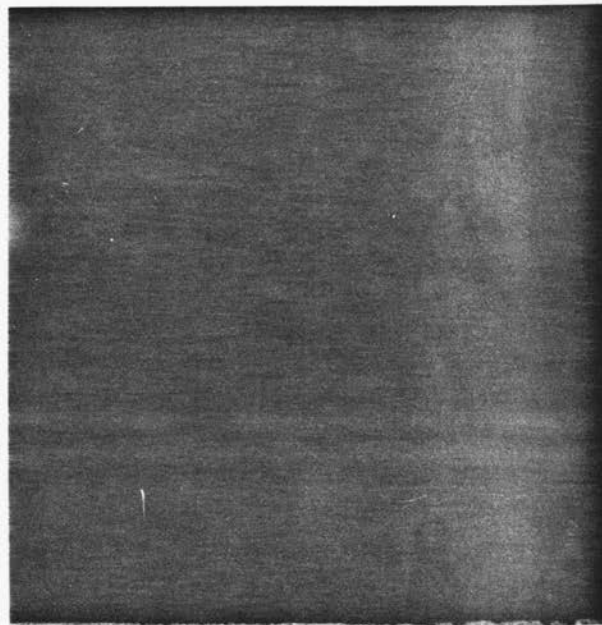
The point of an over-all color is that it may be as "unclear" as adjustment to feeling makes it, but, without the conflict of other colors juxtaposed to it, we "set" to it bodily and give it the chance to determine itself in us.

The development of this view is traced to the idea of "color," rather than "colors" in traditional painting, which, as Marden phrases it, is a sum of experiences that come from the building of each part toward a total sensation. By implication, they are not throwing over painting tradition, but isolating some essence of that tradition and attempting to live up to its possibilities. It might seem that their areas of agreement would produce a monotonous sameness in their work, but what follows indicates that nothing could be further from the truth.

Brice Marden, whose first one-man show was recently at the Bykert Gallery, New York, had an intensive academic training at Boston University, 1957-61, where, he says,

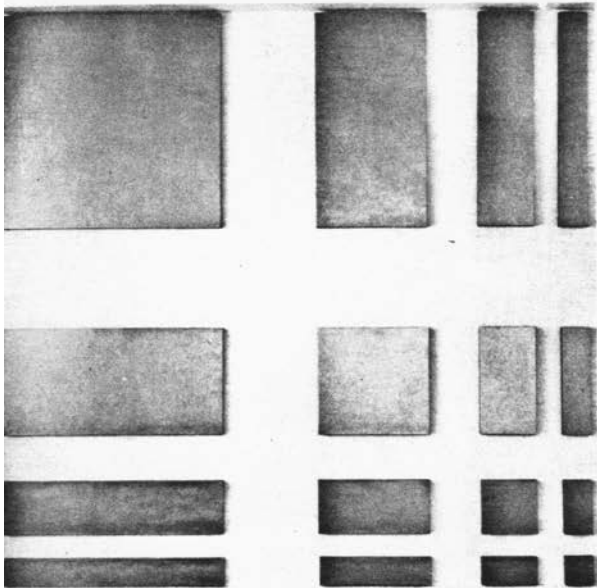


Brice Marden: Untitled drawing, 1966, pencil, at Bykert.

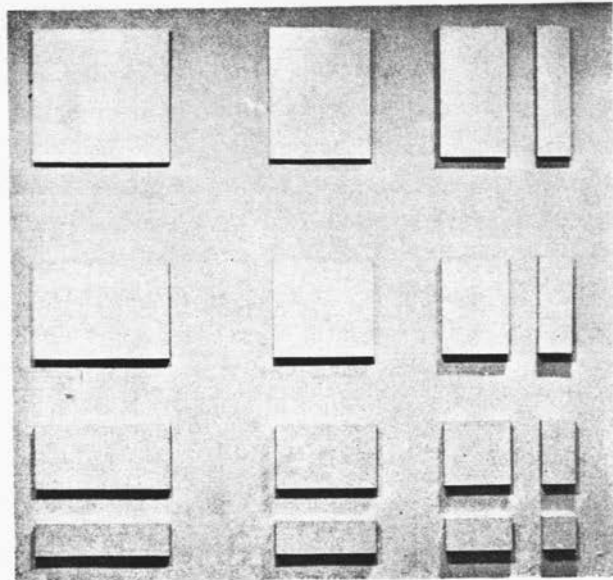


Brice Marden: Untitled drawing, 1966, pencil, charcoal on paper.

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Paul Mogensson: *Copperopolis*, 1966, 11 feet square.



Paul Mogensson: *Untitled*, 1966, 8 feet square, at Bykert.

"constant painting and drawing from nature developed a sense of the real, that which was correct and had form." He continued his studies until 1963 at Yale, where he was drawn into deep study of Franz Kline and then Manet. It is during this period that he went from a clearly Abstract-Expressionist beginning to experiments in drawing on collages and finally to tonal color on a rectangle with vertical and horizontal intersections splitting it into quadrants. During 1962-63, the rectangle and this format became his abiding interest, retaining always however an explicitly painterly treatment, in no way geometric or Hard-Edge. Marden has in fact not changed in this regard.

He gives this description of his divided rectangle paintings: "The color tended toward grey, with color strips sometimes separating the large shapes. Most were done in predominantly cool colors. The surface was often cruddy and labored. It often shone as a result of an oily medium. The surface was, to me, correct." His idea was to bring about a shifting view due to the successive consideration of each part against the others and sometimes with the color elements of the splits, with tension produced by the dilemma of choice, until continued viewing brought about a building up of experiences and the revelation of a specific emotion.

One of the last divided rectangle paintings, almost square, is split vertically into two asymmetrical sectors, the smaller a somewhat deeper blue-grey than the larger and with shading defining the split as the intersection of color planes. By contrast, an over-all light grey painting of this period, considerably wider than high, is bordered and split symmetrically by a dry brush scoring in the wet paint. In going from a dramatic collision of color planes to a one-color surface, evidently the asymmetric split expressively balancing color areas evolved to a device for responding to the more acutely felt support shape. Furthermore, the light grey painting is schematic of the one-color diptychs he did later.

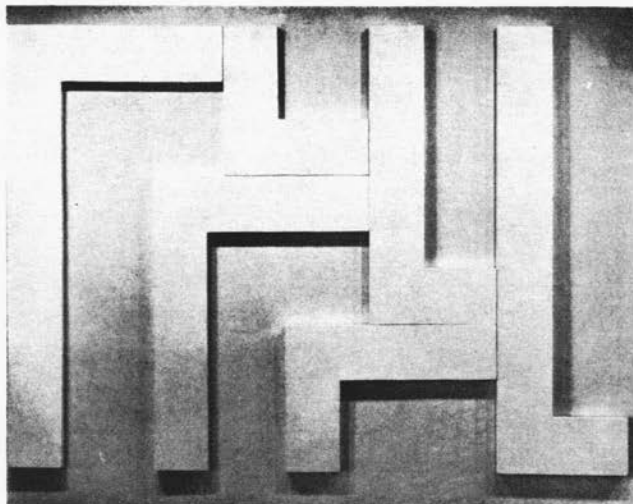
Marden here seems to be facing the resistance to his intention of combining "total" color with the conventional pictorial rectangle, namely the problem of building substance with color and surface to the point where it could hold the shape and not collapse into something fragile or empty.

The earlier drawings, that just precede his "total" color paintings, record his tentative explorations of the surface problem. At that time he began drawing over-all grids, rather open and permitting extensive treatment within each rectangle, which was repeated but not duplicated throughout. Shadowing near the lines solidified the grid into a wall that gave the surface strength, but the varying shape of the splotches of unshaded area within each maintained the surface quality. These drawings seem to be the bridge between Marden's painterliness and the "micro-painterly" quality of the mat, lustrous, smooth but not slick, wax-oil medium surface he developed for his recent color paintings, which does for the continuity of painterly feeling what "total" color aims to do for color.

Marden's color is a felt-out balance of a number of tube colors first mixed on the canvas (a finely woven Dacron sailcloth that shows no texture after painting) by brush and then spread flat with a palette knife. The wax-oil medium requires that the color be applied hot with the process completed before it cools. For large paintings, batch mixing is necessary. To get down the shine, the paint is scraped off, reheated and reapplied, perhaps several times. The difficulty of the process accords with the intention of getting a surface whose substance is "serious"—the same intention he had earlier with his shiny, "cruddy" surfaces. There is a further contradiction: the wax is soft and luminescent, yet the paintings themselves are hard and flat.

Marden rarely favors any one color and usually tends to greys and atmospheric colors (the quality of heavy, misty air saturating the space of a landscape is an example of a reference). The process of developing the color is heuristic

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David Novros: 6:32, 1966, 8 feet high, at Dwan.

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and usually slow, as he strives to realize an unclear but subtly engaging intention.

If his ability to hold shape with color and surface is not perfectly evident in single paintings, it becomes immediately so in the power of his diptychs, critically spaced vertical panels where shape necessarily plays an enhanced role. One, a light grey and about a foot high, has a deeply moving pallor, as if it was born old; another, about twice this size and a deep warm brown, is stonily ferocious.

Marden's color in all his "total" color paintings comes down to a painterly internal edge that runs a short distance above, and parallel to, the bottom of the support. Across it, usually scored for definition, color is allowed to drip down to the edge. This margin of accumulated drips is more important than it may seem. For one thing, it provides Marden with the element of a painted edge, something he has always had in his work. Moreover it is an index to the evolution of the color as well as a totemic sign of painterly intention. It establishes the bottom of the painting and orients it in the gravitational field. But very importantly, too, when you are familiar with Marden's work, it establishes scale.

Marden is a romantic, emotional painter of highly refined sensibilities evolving directly out of Abstract-Expressionism, with a surprising personal synthesis of diverging masters of the New York School including Kline, Guston, Newman, Reinhardt and Rothko, as well as Jasper Johns. His manner has evolved radically in the past few years (although his style is structurally very consistent from the beginning), pressed forward by a serious and pure intention. His own contribution is his insistence on an art of all-out awareness.

David Novros had his first one-man show at the Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1966, his second at the Galerie Müller, Stuttgart, Germany, and last month at both the Dwan and the Park Place galleries, New York. Basically,

Novros' work is sets of flat, shaped canvases, hung independently on the wall, in some cases sprayed one over-all color, or more often a "complex" color, accomplished with a pigment suspended in acrylic lacquer as a primer coat and then a nacreous pigment ("pearl") in the same medium sprayed over it. Novros also uses finely-woven Dacron sail-cloth. The pearl color combines variably with the primer color depending on the angle of incident light; it seems to change a great deal from one part to another and varies in degrees of sheen. The work seen on ARTNEWS' cover, for example, when viewed frontally, ranges from copper-bronze to blue-violet; it was obtained with red pearl on a blue-grey primer coat. 6:32 [left], is white with a light tinting from pink to green.

The smooth spray surface that Novros uses on his primarily linear, cut-out segments (usually a family of "L"-shapes or one of narrow ziggurat shapes), particularly when the pearl is used, functions oppositely to Marden's. Novros' surfaces are not intended to hold the eye but to promote movement along the axis of a shape and into implied complementary images on the wall space.

With all that he has done with shape and color, the first thing to be said about Novros is that the wall is his perceptual space; he can open up on it and literally breathe that space into the work.

If Marden's is a close-to art that drives to the brink of awareness of the unwilling cognitive act, then Novros' is a public art, one that presumes to grandeur. And in order to be this, to justify such bearing and expansiveness, it had to be recognized by Novros for precisely what it is, and then made free of what contradicted its possibilities.

The nature of Novros' building block, the color-sprayed segment of shaped canvas, is that basically it has no significant modalities other than the one in which we take it. As such it has no substances, for substance, as Merleau-Ponty defines it, is the condensation of relinquished modalities, the sum of all the ways we are not taking something in order to take it just one way. The segment of Novros' shaped canvas is therefore liable to appear ridiculous when it takes on any kind of obviously expressive form, consciously intended or simply because it is difficult to avoid; or when it seems to look like something, which if it were actually that (for example a stamping or a machine part), would have relinquished modalities, but which the shaped canvas does not have. The use of the shaped canvas, if it is to be consistent with itself, has to be purely formal.

The clue, I believe, to the enormous stride forward in Novros' work shown this year is the disappearance of the diagonals that previously were used freely along with horizontals and verticals. Some of the diagonal work is impressive and beautiful, and most of it shows the strength of Novros' talent, but I believe that in general the use of diagonals either led to or was symptomatic of the effects just described and placed a ceiling on what Novros could do.

Moreover it seemed to lead to other undesirable effects. There was no single shape to set to (real and implied Continued on page 67

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shapes were rectangles, triangles, trapezoids and rhomboids) and the complementary images on the wall space were often not strongly enough related and unified. At times a small, odd-seeming form terminates a large segment to make an awkward contact.

In the work of the last year the only basic shape, real or implied, is the rectangle, and there is much greater unity, even interlocking of the complementary images in the surrounding space, which is of benefit both when the work is a closed-up, tight figure and when it is spread out and open. In both cases he has gained new freedom. For Novros the value of realizing an apparently unflawed formal style, with the seeming destruction of expressiveness of the particular kind contradictory to the implications of the material, is the achievement of an inscrutability behind which a poetic imagery is possible.

At this point, the nature of Novros' color, particularly "complex" color, may be more clearly understood. With the achieved formal qualities protecting the work's inscrutability, the color, providing that it does not undo these qualities by interfering with the recognition of the work's unity (which "complex" color doesn't and painting the shaped canvases different colors would), can serve to stimulate, to shock-excite the possibilities of implications. The work reproduced on the cover, with its great space and lift, and two horizontal lines of repeated forms, with the ceiling lights causing most of the color play on the top forms and very little below, can suggest a landscape (or if it doesn't, no matter). The point is that "complex" color has no formal role (except to unify) since this is a function of the shape and disposition of the supports. It does not require that we inhibit "associations" to focus on formal considerations, because with "complex" color there are no fixed color areas—color is entirely fluid on the surface. It may be seen that the shaped-canvas form of Novros (and Mogenson) lifts formal restraints to permit the freer character of "complex" color, when desired, and consequently a wider range of color and image. It is this situation that Novros has exploited magnificently, with richly sensuous and poetic work, ranging from the intimate to some of breath-taking scale.

Paul Mogenson had his first one-man show recently at the Bykert Gallery, New York. His work consists of rectangular canvases in sets sprayed either a single or a "complex" color. His materials are similar to those of Novros.

The contingent factor for Mogenson is color, but purely so. The serial forms he has developed are intended strictly as color supports, to serve the propagation of color on a wall. To do this, the canvases in a set are spaced apart according to the progressive terms of either an arithmetic or geometric series, to accomplish both impersonality (not just because of the clearly mathematical derivation, but more precisely because of the implication that the artist is withdrawing his hand from the factor of shape) and to serve through the implied serial expansion to sweep the color impression over the wall area. *Copperopolis*, sprayed a metallic copper, and the untitled white work on p. 53, are both of the type where the serialization is carried out vertically and horizontally, the former according to the more rapidly building geometric expansion and the latter according to the gentler building of arithmetic. The other works in Mogenson's show

were all stacked horizontal forms, of constant dimension in a given work, with three or four elements to each comprising an expanding series sweeping greys, blacks and complex yellows upwards on the wall.

Mogenson has accomplished something with color in the most direct way imaginable, and it is an accomplishment of striking intelligence, on the level of his understanding from the first that a purely formal means was the only possibility either for his intention or his materials. If he had used a single support for each work of the same over-all dimensions and given that the color, then I believe (as the previous discussion of Marden's work makes clear) that color would not have been the only contingent factor that Mogenson wanted. If he hadn't realized that, and persisted, answering only to the contingency of the color that he was interested in and ignoring the unwanted, but still present, contingency of holding the rectangular shape, then he would simply have ended up with some weak pictures. With Mogenson's serialization technique, the color doesn't have to hold the shape of a particular segment since that problem has no bearing in the situation he provides, where the color is given a forced sweeping movement that implies its freedom from the support structure.

The color expansions that Mogenson is after clearly come off, but more strongly, of course, with a greater number of elements and when the serialization is both horizontal and vertical. His is the purest commitment to color of the painters discussed here, and the quality of the experience his work gives is extraordinary.