

ART IN AMERICA

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PAUL MOGENSEN AT BYKERT

by Phyllis Derfner

Paul Mogensen at Bykert

Mogensen's new paintings continue to make use of circular canvases. They range in diameter from 4 to 7 feet. There is no getting away from their mandala-like effects, yet whatever transcendental or spiritual content they might have is presented in terms of color, form and texture—and that is all one can really discuss. These are paintings first of all, not icons or meditative aids. Nonetheless, one's eye does tend to be entranced by the labyrinthine patterns. Each painting shows two interlocked spirals winding from the outer edge to the center. It seems at first that one spiral is the figure and the other the ground, but then they reverse. Doubleness of this sort occurs in various ways in each painting.

Horizontal and vertical lines divide each tondo into quadrants. One of the interlocked spirals ignores these linear divisions, rushing past them with no color change. The other spiral changes color whenever it reaches a boundary between quadrants. (The coloristic activity in this spiral makes it seem at first to be primary—that is, figure as opposed to ground.) There is a compelling, logical, serial rhythm to the moment of color change in this spiral. Furthermore, the changes recapitulate the color wheel. For example, the multi-colored spiral might start out yellow, turn green, then blue, violet, red, orange and back to yellow at the center. But Mogensen's version of the color wheel is extremely idiosyncratic. There is, as I said, a systematized logic in the *moment* of color change. But one sees a sophisticated parody of logic in the *nature* of the color change, for although the general sequence of the color wheel is followed, it is undercut by extreme variations in tone and saturation—as though fragments of several color wheels were linked. This mixture of logic and anti-logic is one of the doublenesses in these paintings. Another one, the figure-ground switch mentioned above, occurs when the eye finds the solid-color spiral more compelling because continuous and unified.

I've been concentrating on the way the eye spirals toward the center of these canvases. But the direction is easily reversed—another doubleness. And the tensions between the spirals and the division into quadrants can double up one's reading again: the spiral motion, whether inward or outward, is in visual competition with a radiant motion away from the center—or a convergence from edge to center—which occurs when one concentrates on the circle's horizontal and vertical divisions. Then there is the question of flatness. Spiraling, radiation and convergence can all be seen as motion into or out of depth. How-

ever, Mogensen's use of tone is so complex that all these effects tend to erase one another. The surface comes through as the flatness that it is. A judicious use of texture, roughness alternating with smoothness, helps especially to pull the spirals back to the surface.

It is unlikely that I have touched on all the complexities of these paintings. They seem to have the richness of natural things, each one generating its inexhaustible individuality from very simple, very impersonal premises—circle, quadrant, spiral. Perhaps it is this self-generative quality that gives Mogensen's paintings their elusively transcendental feel.

—Phyllis Derfner