

# HYPERALLERGIC

## OCTOBER 21, 2018

### THE SPIRALING LOGIC OF PAUL MOGENSEN'S PAINTINGS

By John Yau



Installation view, Paul Mogensen at Karma, New York (all images courtesy Karma)

In every interview with Paul Mogensen that I have read, he never fails to mention two biographical facts. The first is that he learned about artists such as Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin from the book, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863 – 1922* (1962) by Camilla Gray; he goes on to explain that while he was attracted by what Rodchenko and Tatlin were up to, he was not interested in Kasimir Malevich. The second is that, growing up in Los Angeles, close to aircraft factories, he had a very strong math-science education.

I think Mogensen mentions these facts primarily because he wants to set his work apart from Minimalism and geometric abstraction, and establish that what he got from Russian Constructivism is different than what his peers got. The steps that he took in his work toward reduction, his elimination of what he felt was unnecessary, set him on a trajectory that shares little with the reductive impulses we associate with Minimalism and geometric abstraction. The most obvious difference is that he neither employs a grid in his paintings nor makes monochrome paintings on a single plane. His primary interest is not in reiterating the plane, but in activating it.

These methods help account for a distinctive body of work that has never quite gotten the attention it merits. Perhaps the exhibition, Paul Mogensen, at Karma will confirm that what separates his work from that of his peers deserves to be more closely considered.

Mogensen does not make it easy for those with a historical bent to locate what he has done. He does not title, sign, or date his paintings. Instead, the work in the exhibition can be divided into three formal groups. In each, the placement of abstract shapes — rectangles and stripes — is generated by a system; a system is also used to determine the sequence of color used in paintings that had more than two hues.

One thing that all these systems share is a tendency toward movement: they encourage the eye to move around the canvas, sometimes in a spiral starting in the painting's lower right-hand corner and following the painting's edge in clockwise fashion until one reaches the largest shape in the composition. Or, you might start with the largest shape and your eye will go counter clockwise around the painting's edge, until you arrive at the smallest shape tucked in the painting's right-hand corner.

In the other groups of work, one's attention moves from the painting's left edge to its right one, as well as from the top edge to the bottom one. These actions are akin to scanning a flat area or screen to detect something, to find a pattern or a disruption.

Three paintings in the exhibition, done in acrylic, measure 20 by 28 inches; a larger one, done in oil, measures 39 ½ by 56 ½ inches. The dimensions of the three smaller ones suggest a book that has been opened and laid flat, an association that is strengthened by the line segments of varying lengths spanning the paintings from the left to the right edge, recalling dots and dashes. In two of the smaller paintings, all the stripes are the same color, while in the third they are different colors.

In the two smaller paintings, seeing and reading are brought into close proximity. I was reminded of the artist's book *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance) by Marcel Broodthaers, which was published in 1969. In that book, Broodthaers took Stéphane Mallarmé's poem of the same name, published in 1914, and replaced all the words with black stripes that corresponded exactly with the poem's unusual typographic layout.

What is clear about Mallarmé's poem, which Broodthaers further clarifies, is that no one knows how to read the poem. Something similar happens in these paintings. I felt like I was reading something that could not be read, and that it did not matter because the pleasure of looking superseded the act of deciphering.

The initial realization that the painting is guided by a system leads to further curiosity. You begin trying to tease out the system or, if you cannot, you begin noticing the relationship between repetition and disruption. Kenneth Noland

wanted to make paintings that you comprehend in an instant. Mogensen uses systems to explore different ways of seeing and looking. His interest in a spiral — something that closes in on itself as well as expands outward — reminds us that what can be seen exists beyond what we see.

At the same time, the colors he uses — which always come directly from the tube and are never mixed — do different things, depending on various factors. In a square red painting populated by a spiral of blue squares increasing in size, from the outer edge in, the effect is optical. Something different happens when he begins with a small red square in the upper right quadrant of a black painting, and proportionally increases their size as he articulates a row of four of them down the right side, along the bottom, defining a square made of 16 squares within a square. It is hard not to conclude that infinity is being invoked. At the same time, the use of mathematics suggests that infinity is not chaos. And still something else happens when the squares are pink and the ground is orange.

Mogensen's interest in forms such as the spiral and equations such as the Golden Section has led him into a territory that is recognizably his. An interest in light, movement, and mathematics are all part of his approach. By getting viewers to engage with the painting's structure — to see how it is put together — he invites us to recognize that the world is made of interconnected structures, not surfaces.