

ARTFORUM

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PAUL MOGENSEN

by Robert Pincus-Witten

Between 1968 and 1970, PAUL MOGENSEN painted monochromatic rectangles that were organized upon the wall in ordered subdivisions of rational wholes. The parts were deduced from processes of regular subdivision — whole, half, quarter, eighth. They reminded me of Carl Andre's *Cuts* in which the artist covered the gallery floor with bricks, wall to wall, then removed some of them, brick by brick, to create rectangular hollows.

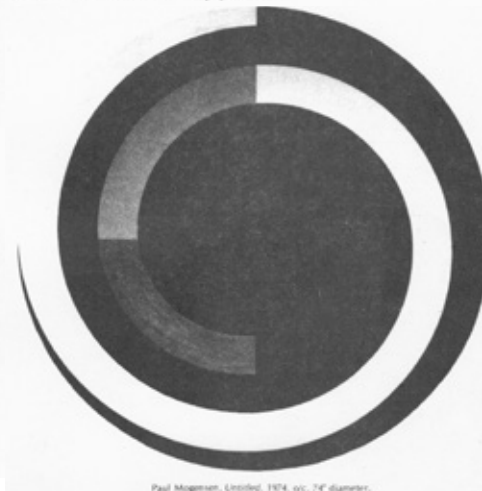
In 1970, another principle of order emerged in Mogenson's work, though one still based on an external icon, the target. I believe this image, codified for us in Johns's *Targets*, is meant to be a prime sign of knowledge in contemporary art. *Targets* function as closed, self-refer-

ential systems, akin in meaning to the grids and checkerboards of Minimalism and early Conceptualism. Shortly thereafter, a new icon, the spiral, appeared, one often incorrectly construed as an outgrowth of concentric circles. In deceptively circular terms, the spiral epitomizes the sign of infinity, as the spiral is (implicitly) infinitely large or infinitesimally small. The spiral, as icon, negotiates two ideological worlds, the open and the closed, as it incorporates into its structural logic a rational increment derived from rectilinearity — the value of pi. The spiral lassoes in the rectilinear world and all that it symbolizes with the circular world and all that it symbolizes.

In his most recent paintings, Mogenson perpetuates a visuality predicated on an external structural system through the superimposition of the concentric upon the spiral. This induces a double parallel spiral, one element of which functions as monochromatic foil (either figure or ground) while the other spiral changes color through a stepped chromatic sequence. These colors are based on four

primaries: yellow, red, green and blue. The color subdivides within the eight cardinal points of the compass, reading as yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, blue green, green, yellow green and once more yellow.

In his corroboration of an external conceptual system through color, Mogenson keeps pace with and nourishes that aspect of contemporary abstraction which determines its structure through processes of external system validation. For the most part, such artists as I allude to tend to avoid color, preferring instead to bracket graphic and structural notions in black-and-white terms. Thus Mogenson preserves issues germane to Ellsworth Kelly's paintings of the later '60s. This preservation is altered, however, by Mogenson's diffident execution, one suggesting a natural painterly temperament, that is, a temperament conventionally excluded from this kind of art. This paradox is subject to still one more level of ambiguity: so linked is Mogenson's painting to external theory that his pictures for all their color are not about painting as color but rather "inversions" of his earlier monochromatic premise. Though not visually embedded — it can't be — this last paradox is the one which affords these paintings their greatest "romantic" appeal.



Paul Mogenson, *Untitled*, 1974, oil, 74" diameter.