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COLOR AND FORM

by Charlotte Moser

Lively arts

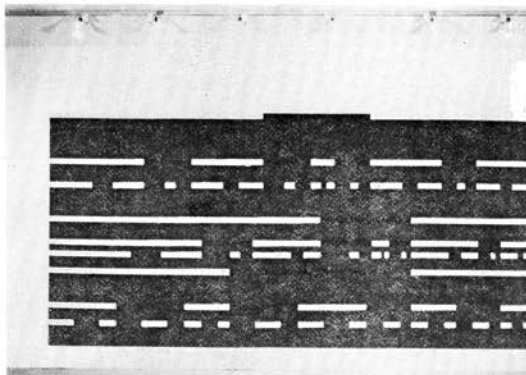
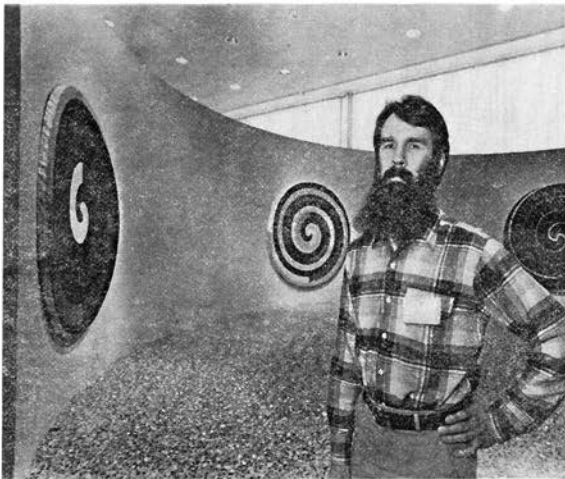


Photo by Buster Dean, Chronicle Staff

Left: Artist Paul Mogensen uses the geometric form of the spiral to explore the rudimentary elements of painting in his show at the Museum of Fine Arts. Above: A mathematical system of exponential progression in shapes is used in Mogensen's "dot dash" paintings, seen in Houston for the first time.

Color and form

Mogensen and Rothko — lots in common from artists at different poles of formalism

BY CHARLOTTE MOSER
Chronicle Staff

A WEEK AFTER THE Mark Rothko retrospective exhibition opened at New York's Guggenheim Museum, the retrospective of a young little-known New York painter named Paul Mogensen has opened at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.

The master comes from Abstract Expressionism and the younger artist out of minimalist painting. But the two have plenty in common, says Harris Rosenstein who organized the Houston show.

Thirty years ago, Rothko with his floating rectangles and pervasive colors, helped establish formalist painting as the dominant art idea of the mid-20th century. Mogensen, working in the 1960s through periods of minimalist painting and conceptual art, represents in his work the most contemporary manifestations of that formalist art theory.

Such a contemporary show at the Museum of Fine Arts, not to mention Mogensen's lack of widespread reputation, is a telling departure for this museum whose convention has generally been to present more historically secure artworks. Adding more to its boundary-jumping, the museum has brought in for the show guest curator Rosenstein, who is executive administrator for the De Menil-funded Institute for the Arts at Rice University and a long-time advocate of Mogensen's work.

While this show might have been more appropriately staged at the Institute for the Arts or even the Contemporary Arts Museum, its appearance at the MFA fits with an intellectual line the museum has been following for almost two years now.

Following last season's Synchronism show and the upcoming Houston staging of the Guggenheim's Rothko show, the major Patrick Henry Bruce show, and next season's "Cubism in Context," Mogensen's work brings into the present an art historical point of view dear to the heart of MFA director William Agee.

That point of view has to do with rigid scientific principles of human perception and creativity. Unrelentingly abstract, it reduces art — or elevates it, depending on your point of view — to its essential elements with the aesthetic purity of some non-Western religions. It requires a tenacious toe-hanging to a fine, almost invisible philosophical edge that appeals in its severity not to the masses, but to what might seem the elite few.

All of which adds up to make the Mogensen show one of the most esoteric, philosophically complicated and potentially meaningful exhibitions to grace the elegant space of Upper Jones Pavilion.

Mogensen, 37, a native of Los Angeles who has painted in New York for the last decade, comes by his scientific orientation honestly. An undergraduate at University of Southern California, he studied physics and mathematics before he switched to painting. Though he was acquainted with classical music as a child, he admits that in his youth he had almost no exposure to art or visual ideas.

The visual language Mogensen finally developed in his work is designed to address the problems of pure painting without references to transitory taste or even historical context. (He prefers not to date his paintings since many were conceived years before he could actually execute them.) You may not agree with the visual language he came up with to communicate his aesthetic position, but it's an authentic, committed effort to push beyond the ordinary, explore new visual terrain and re-establish a new visual order. In the end, Mogensen is telling us art is not entertainment but a multi-sensory wrestling as fulfilling as — and, in some ways, equivalent to — life itself.

The show is also imaginatively installed with the same sort of careful precision seen in the paintings themselves. Though it doesn't fill Jones Pavilion entirely, the empty areas at the gallery ends work well proportionately with the maze of rooms set up for the paintings in the center. There are two distinct rooms built for two series of paintings — a large round room for five large round paintings and a large rectangular room for a 360-degree work composed of 11 progressively larger rectangular canvases. The rest of the works are intimately installed in corridors around the two main rooms.

Ironically simple, Mogensen's painting is promoted on limiting himself to the most rudimentary visual tools a painter can have — pure, unambiguous color and basic geometric shape, primarily the rectangle.

To present these two elements, he's developed a refined structural system which both frees him from unnecessary decision-making (i.e. where to put shapes, what color to paint them, etc.) and calls for a clear affirmation of his individual, aesthetic guidelines. By keeping himself to these guidelines (or his aesthetic values), Mogensen has made what amounts to a moral commitment about art.

If not outright mathematical, Mogensen's structural system is Pythagorean in the dictionary sense which reads "the belief in numbers as the ultimate elements of the universe." Taking a basic unit of measurement — either the dimensions of a small canvas or the length of a line — Mogensen will establish a pattern based on doubling or tripling of the unit.

The most elaborate exposition of this principle is seen in a series of works called "pushed together rectangles." In them, Mogensen has assembled a collection of up to eight canvases which increase in size exponential to the smallest canvas. The configuration can either tally up a new larger rectangle or become a new irregular geometric shape.

Two variations on the "pushed together rectangle" are also pursued by Mogensen. His "separated" rectangles, the earliest work in the show, consist of individual canvases separated by wide sections of wall which themselves become incorporated into a new overall configuration.

The most ambitious work in this format is the 11-piece dark blue one installed in its own separate room. Beginning with a slender eight-foot canvas at the room's entrance, the series of canvases enlarges systematically as it proceeds around the four walls of the room. Enveloping the viewer, the work not only presents a viewing predicament (thereby calling attention to the act of viewing) but sets up a rhythm as the canvas scale progresses.

The second variation on the "pushed together" rectangles are paintings descriptively called "dot-dash" paintings. In these Mogensen has substituted painted forms for separate canvases, building elaborate notations of long and short rectangles based, once again, on exponential progressions of the smallest rectangular unit.

Visually the most striking works in the show also showing here for the first time anywhere, the strong patterned paintings of glossy black, Indian red or aluminum oil paint on top of matte oil paints of the same colors have a Mondrian syncope about them. In fact, Mogensen's system of rectangles, scale and pattern bears resemblance to musical systems in theory and in result, particularly in the case of the "dot-dash" paintings which might be construed as electronic music scores of sound passages and rests. It's a propos to Mogensen's paintings to note that music is not only the main art form based on mathematics but the most abstract art form.

While Mogensen's rectangular paintings have something of the flavor of intellectual exercise to them, another of his systematic painting formats,

the spiral, provides the structure for his ideas color. All double spirals with two curling lines winding into a tight center, these works consist, huge round canvases or large spirals fitted in rectangular canvases.

On first sight, these spiral paintings have little to do with the rectangle paintings. Brilliantly colored, the spirals inch their way across a spiral scale which glows with pulsating color as the eye travels its course. In either broad curvy lines or ribbons of color, the spirals have fuzzy edges of thin painting through which colored light seems to penetrate and uneven painting surface with none of the hard severity of the "pushed together" rectangles.

Yet, the spiral itself is a geometric form which when unrolled, refers to the progression of rectangles. While less spectacular in color than the spiral works, the rectangular paintings are executed with similar color considerations. Concerned with pure pigment and the effect of monochromism, these works were based on the different characteristics of pure paint — brilliance of color, matte or glossy finish, effect of dry time, etc. The same problems influence the final outcome of the spiral paintings, too, but are more developed visually. The rectangular works strive for a subtlety too academically constrained by the aesthetic guidelines Mogensen has set for himself.

The round room at the center of the gallery installed with five of these large round painting including the three most recent works in the show, is the focal point of the show. Along with series of spiral watercolors hung in the corridor, these works clearly reveal Mogensen's certain as a colorist in the highest sense of color theory. Unlike the Muzak paintings of some color field painters, these works are allied to the scientific studies of color of Goethe and Hering.

It is with the spirals, whose meditative calm and constantly evolving colors suggest ancient, spiritual insignia like the mandala, that clues to Mogensen's humanness are seen. It is no accident that two sculpture maquettes based on his "pushed-together" look like ziggurat temples of the ancient Persians.

The similarity reminds us that, philosopher-mathematician that he was, Pythagoreas was also concerned with the immortality of the soul through the process of transmigration. Perhaps, in the long run, what formalist painting like Mogensen's tells us is that the continuity of human creativity shines brighter without the baggage of fashion or the intrusion of personality.