

# ARTS MAGAZINE

## MAY 1979

### PAUL MOGENSEN: RECTANGLES

by Valentin Tatransky

Everyone admits, as Croce has said, that every work of art is historically conditioned. But when we say that, it doesn't mean that we just locate the work of art in its particular moment of time, and then proceed to simply discuss the historical relevance of the work. A work of art is historically conditioned insofar as it is conditioned by the value judgment of that particular observer in that particular moment of time, beginning with the artist. I say this by way of preface, because the rectangles that Paul Mogensen showed last fall in New York have historical significance, not just because they were made in 1966, but because of what they were in 1966 as well as what they are in 1979.

It's important to know when an artist made something, not in order to have history validate the work, but in order to have the work validate history. Mogensen is not an artist who believes in cataloging his paintings according to dates and titles. One of the worst habits of contemporary art criticism is the use of art history to rationalize the response to a work of art. Art history is circular, not linear.

In 1967, Harris Rosenstein wrote an essay about three new painters, Brice Marden, David Novros, and Paul Mogensen. I'm not referring to other writers and other painters so as to see Mogensen's paintings through the eyes of others. These kinds of critical comparisons are made in order to isolate what is unique about Mogensen's work. Rosenstein described all three painters as having the desire to give color its full expression. Rosenstein singled out Mogensen's paintings as having the purest commitment to color, because the division of the painting into a series of separate canvases freed the color from having to serve as a support structure.

One of the paintings reproduced in the Rosenstein essay, and just recently shown again, is *Copperopolis* (1966). This painting consists of sixteen separate canvases arranged in a succession of rational divisions. The color of each canvas is copper. Mogensen's conception is elegant and majestic. In striving to bring color to its fullest expression, the painterly body has had to undergo a partial alienation from its medium. The copper color turns into chiaroscuro: its surface reflects light. Furthermore, the painting turns into a series of sculptural parts. Any medium, when it is pushed to its furthest development, always creates the effect of another medium. No one makes good paintings unless they borrow something from sculpture and something from drawing.

Besides *Copperopolis*, there were two other rectangle paintings from 1966 in the recent exhibition. One was a white painting, consisting of four separate canvases, while the other was a black painting, consisting of four horizontal canvases placed one above the other. *Copperopolis* is the best of the three, mostly because of its color and proportions.

The origin of Mogensen's use of the rectangle is his interest in the spiral. Mogensen began making spiral drawings and paintings in 1965. The rectangle is a conceptual armature by means of which a spiral can be constructed. In fact, the white rectangle painting is a spiral. However, there's a white rectangle painting by Mogensen from 1967, consisting of several canvases, which not only illustrates the spiral better, but is also a better painting than the one shown recently. Historically speaking, Mogensen is as important a Minimalist as any of the others in 1966, and his *Copperopolis* is an important precedent for more pictorial art in the late 1960s.

## SPIRALS

After 1968, Paul Mogensen began to exhibit his spiral paintings. The spirals are painted on circular canvases, and the rectangle is contained within the painting. The rectangular grid marks off changes in color along the route of the spiral. The spirals on the paintings from the mid-1970s are wide with respect to the scale of the canvas. If we are to look for the art historical prototype of these paintings, then it is to be found in Robert Delaunay's *Disc* (1912), which is as much a precedent for Noland and Johns as it is for Mogensen. But once we establish that, the differences can be noted.

The spiral on the four new paintings in Mogensen's last exhibition has narrowed down to a thin line. The sculptural power of the single color is restored in the new spirals. The effect is like that of a color wheel, which tends to blend colors into one color as much as it separates them.

Frank Stella is another painter who has shifted his mode of painting from a strict rectilinear format to a mode that incorporates the spiral. Stella added the curved line to his art much later than Mogensen. Unlike Mogensen, Stella strove to create a sculptural relief out of the grid and the spiral. Mogensen, however, has managed to segregate the rectilinear quadrant, the spiral, and the color in a more harmonious fashion than Stella by relying on one basic color, creating an implied relief with the spiral.

Mogensen showed four new spiral paintings last November. They had no titles or dates. Each painting could be identified by its basic color: ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, vermilion, and deep cadmium red. Mogensen chose strong colors and a simple format; each painting is a double spiral. The colors of the spiral of the dark ultramarine blue painting (9 feet in diameter) are bright in the center and on the edges. The colors move from bright orange to red, violet, blue, green, and yellow. The colors change, depending on how far you stand from the painting. The painterly surface of the thin spiral is much

lighter than the dense, glossy surface of the ultramarine blue field. Along the edges of the spirals the blue pigment begins to thin out, creating a kind of halo along the spirals.

The strongest painting is the large ultramarine blue. The other three red paintings works just as well optically, in fact, too well, so that colors tend to cancel each other out. At first, I though the blue painting was better than the other three because of its larger scale, in relationship to the human body, until I saw a new small blue painting by Mogensen (not shown in this exhibition). It's the dark color that makes the difference, because the contrast in value and hue enables Mogensen to exercise his sense of proportion, which otherwise, due to the rational composition, goes unrealized. These two blue paintings are Mogensen's best, especially the new smaller one. In the smaller work, the handling of the paint has been more deeply felt. (Mary Boone, *November 4-16*).

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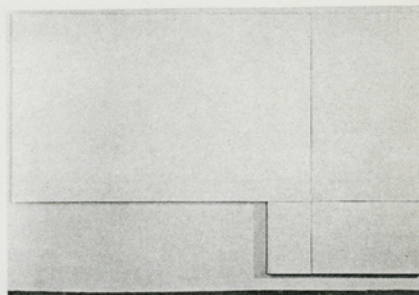
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Paul Mogensen, Unlitled (White), 1966. Oil on canvas, 8 x 13". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

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