

IDEEL ART

NOVEMBER 7, 2018

THE SYSTEMATIC PAINTINGS OF PAUL MOGENSEN

By Phillip Barcio



Paul Mogensen - installation view at Karma, New York, 2018. Photo Courtesy Karma, New York

Paul Mogensen creates pared down visual compositions based on simple mathematical systems. He expresses those systems through structured arrangements of squares, rectangles and lines. Each image he creates employs a limited color palette—sometimes only a single hue. Each also only consists of a single layer of paint. Mogensen visualizes the composition then sketches a rough outline on his surface then fills the outline in with paint. Whatever he ends up with, that is the picture. He does not fix things or do them over if the colors do not work as well as he hopes. Sometimes the edges are sloppy, or a bug gets embedded in the paint. It does not matter. The process has its own logic, regardless of how the finished product ends up. Despite the simplicity of what Mogensen does, his work stymies many an art viewer. It has been especially challenging for other artists and for those who take on the responsibility of writing about art. What makes it so dumbfounding is its honesty. It is inherently unpretentious. Mogensen explains exactly what he is doing. He uses math to develop visual compositions that he then paints. Nothing else is going on. Nonetheless, some people see spirituality in his simplicity. Others perceive philosophy. Still others think Mogensen is attempting to make a point about art history. Yet none of those things are actually in play when Mogensen works. He is not a Minimalist, nor even necessarily an Abstractionist. He is just a painter, working, or perhaps playing, with the endless possible variations of a system.

This Is Not Minimalism

One of the most common misconceptions about Mogensen is that he is a Minimalist.

It makes sense why this label would be assigned to his work. Take for example his two untitled white on white paintings that were on view in his recent exhibition at KARMA Gallery in New York. Each of these two paintings expresses a common compositional theme Mogensen employs, that of squares and rectangles arranged in lines separated by space. In both paintings, the shapes increase in size symmetrically according to a preconceived mathematical formula. From a distance the paintings seem like monochromes. Upon closer inspection, however, the myriad shapes become clear. Even once they see the shapes, most people still call these paintings minimal compared to, say, a figurative painting. But an opposing argument could also be made. These paintings offer much for the eye to see, and much for the mind to consider.

There are variations in texture, in brush stroke, and in the finish of the paint. The hand-made quality of the surface means that there are places where the canvas shows through the paint. The variation between opacity and translucency means the light interacts differently with different parts of the composition. There is only one hue, but multiple tones are evident. There is also much to think about in terms of the shapes. Since they are the same hue, their size becomes the main differentiating factor. The mind does not really have a chance to think about scale very often. Yet scale is one of the most essential aspects of the visual world. By only using one hue, Mogensen expresses his ideas in as simple and direct a way as possible. He shows us his math, his brush work, and the steadiness of his hand. He presents an expression of texture, tone, and compositional structure. These are not mystical ideas. They are not philosophies. They are the common everyday building blocks of the physical world. If they are not interesting, what is?

The Art of Active Looking

Despite the simplicity of his compositions, they do often appear to become activated with a sense of motion. The linear compositions sometimes seem to vibrate, especially if the color relationships pop. The circular compositions sometimes seem to spin. But his most active paintings are the ones in which Mogensen uses mathematical strategies such as the Golden Ratio or $N+1$ to create a spiraling formation of squares. He starts with a single small square then increases the size of the next square according to whichever formula he has chosen. He then continues adding additional squares the same way, rotating them around the edge of the canvas then moving into the center. At first glance, it seems like the entire surface of the picture is either exploding or imploding geometrically. The sense of whether it is exploding or imploding varies depending on the color relationships. It demonstrates the "Push Pull" theory of Hans Hofmann, how some colors seem to recede into the background compared to other colors and other colors seem to push outwards from the surface.

Despite the activity that I sometimes see in these compositions, however, I feel that their only truly active element resides with the viewer. That is the only respect in which I take issue with Mogensen himself. In the various interviews I have read with the artist, he has said in one breath that he does not care what people think of the work, and then in the next breath talked about becoming confrontational with a viewer who dared to comment that they thought they saw in his painting a depiction of something figurative. It is obvious to me that artists cannot be in complete control of what other people see in their work. By paring down images to the bare essentials, Mogensen and other artists might feel they are controlling the message, or at least limiting it. But people are surprising in their ability to activate art with their own inner thoughts and feelings. Artists are not responsible for what other people think or say. But the least they can do is accept responsibility for the unavoidable fact that there is more in every work of art than the artist knows. The endless variations that emerge from the simple systems Mogensen has created do not end when he puts down his brush. The possibilities extend into the experience of the viewers. Active looking creates active art.