

# PAUL MOGENSEN

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### *Paul Mogensen: An Observation On Method*

By Harris Rosenstein

What work of poetry ... has ever been undertaken to “communicate” a feeling, an understanding, an idea? A poet’s task is to invent and prove true; to live, I mean, and not to formulate—he will formulate only incidentally. His clarity, therefore, goes hand in hand with his enigmas ... —Yves Bonnefoy, *Rimbaud*

Paul Mogensen’s career began about fifteen years ago in Los Angeles, where he was born and educated. As an art student at the University of California, he remembers being particularly struck by a Clyfford Still “black” painting that hung in a Los Angeles museum. He found it unlike anything he had seen before, and, in part, one supposes his strong impression was of Still’s extraordinarily forceful handling of monochrome or near-monochrome, in addition to his unusual concentration on what occurs *at* the painting’s borders rather than within them.

Still is among the American abstract painters who provided a standard for a hard and searching art. Particularly by the physicality of his scaled-up gestural paint strokes, the attention he drew to the borders of a painting, and the concomitant lessening of an integrated spatial illusion *within* the canvas, Still so brought forward the material infrastructure of a work—and so its actual properties—as to stand notably among those artists who pushed painting to the brink of the reductivist explorations that were to follow.

Mogensen’s reductive approach may be seen as logically pertaining to his experience of Still’s and related abstract expressionist work of the forties and fifties; whatever impetus minimalist painting of the early sixties provided, its most prominent tendency was antithetic to his own.

He certainly did not believe that the further development of painting, the countering of obscurities and weaknesses, lay in the drastic reduction of its identification to an engagement with strictly real, three-dimensional objects; Mogensen did not see the sense, nor any success, in such attempts to purge painting of its virtuality, which he understood, rather, as inherent to painting. Thus, such an attempted reduction would amount to an unaffordable digression.

Mogensen’s work is altogether characterized by a resistance to digressive aims. It may be seen as a clarification of painting’s ideal character, that which identifies the engagement essentially. He does this by laying down a postulate of that ideal character which he makes fundamental to his work. He then shows us an art of such imaginative distinctiveness and pervasively intelligible structure, of such coherence and consistency in inviting our responses, as to persuade us that he has neither

misunderstood nor mis identified the engagement of painting.

Science as well as art may show instances of a problem arising from a limited concept of its ideal character. Isaac Newton had to contend with the speculative rather than strictly inferred (from precise observation and experiment) “hypotheses” of the late seventeenth-century Mechanical Philosophers. Early in his career, he followed up his observation on the color spectrum’s derivation from passing a beam of sunlight through a glass prism—namely, the “extravagant disproportion” of the spectrum’s length as compared to its width. This suggested to him that more than Snell’s law of refraction was involved. A crucial experiment showed that each color of light passed through a second prism unaltered, but was bent or refracted as much as before. Finally, he recombined all of the colored rays in the spectrum by passing them through a biconcave lens; where all the colored rays converged to a focus, he obtained white light again. Through a series of experiments he showed that the colored rays *composed* white light, rather than being “modifications” of that light by a clear refracting medium as had been supposed. Yet, when his paper on the subject was published, it was spoken of as his “hypothesis,” a characterization he took pains to deny. (And even Huygens remarked that there remained the great difficulty “of explaining by *mechanical* physics what causes the colors of the rays.”) Later, in the *Principia*, Newton discarded the great clockwork mechanism picture of the universe to propose the forces of universal gravitation relating mathematically to the observed planetary motions. Here, the acceptance of the reality of gravitational force no more required an explanation of gravity than Newton’s description of the behavior of colored rays required an explanation of the causes of their different colors. His proposing of an abstract mathematical description instead of an explanatory picture of an underlying mechanism led to the criticism of the *Principia* that it was “a brilliant display of mathematics, but that it was not physics at all.” Indeed, the engagement of physics would subsequently be identified by just such instrumentalities as Newton invoked: his particular “degree of emphasis ... on experiment and induction”; disciplined resistance to “hasty, gratuitous ‘explications’”; and “a striving for higher certitude by considering only what he could measure and describe in the language of mathematics.” Thus Newton challenged a limiting conception of the ideal character of physics and vitally contributed to a more powerful one.

These examples not only go to the meaning of the concept of ideal character, but the nature of Newton’s correctives also has some parallel in Mogensen’s approach. As Newton resisted gratuitous “explications” that might block scientific discovery, Mogensen resists gratuitous invention that might block discovery in his art.

Mogensen also makes use of elemental mathematics, derived from antiquity, developed in the Renaissance, and long familiar in architecture and music, but one must look for its significance as it arises out of his engagement with painting. The decision to make form a given is the postulate, mentioned earlier, that he lays down for his painting. More fundamental to Mogensen’s postulate than “mathematics,” however, is that form in Mogensen’s work originates through his adopting rules of progression, the aptness or necessity of which becomes evident in the outcome. These rules are ordering concepts, having suitable properties in relation to particular paintings. What is more, these concepts simply lie at hand, and he uses them, one might say, because they are interestingly sufficient. Thus Mogensen has disinvolved himself

with the invention of form, as an end, some thing he had set out to do; rather, he has set out to make paintings of a newly powerful address. This disinvolvement is in itself an enormous accession of freedom, a freedom to heed the subtlest discernments that emerge in the mind's overview. Unfamiliar, striking form appears in his paintings, but as generated in a grander context by the following of an adopted progression rather than by gratuitous invention.

Mogensen's following out of an adopted progression is tantamount to following a rule. The following out of a rule compels choosing how to follow it; as a rule is merely regulative, it is left to human agency to determine *how* it is to be followed; it is a practice rather than a process. The following of the rule imparts to the generation of the work an implicit momentum—felt the more strongly because digression from or abandonment of the rule is denied by its givenness that is a postulate of the work; this inevitably brings occasions of choosing how to follow it. This choice amounts to a necessary, and not gratuitous, response, that may be seen as occasioned invention—with freedom that is made meaningful by its exercise limited to opportunity and contingent circumstances.

With the “blankness” of given form as its origin, Mogensen's painting, as it is elaborated in rule-following with its necessary choosing of how the rule is to be followed, becomes an exquisite reflection of human agency. In the monochromatic, eight-part “pushed-together rectangles” paintings, for example, the geometric progression 1:2:4:8 appears in the successive lengths of the panels in the upper tier and again in the lower tier, but running in opposite directions. With the first three panels in each tier adding up to seven units (1:2:4), and the last panel being eight units, Mogensen chooses a vertical alignment of the two tiers so that the lines of separation between the four-unit and the eight-unit panels in each tier coincide to form a strong vertical axis at the center, crossing the strong horizontal line of separation between the tiers. Thrusting horizontally in either direction from this strong focus at the center, the eight-unit panels, being one unit longer than the added lengths of the one, two, and four-unit panels in the adjacent tier, break out of the rectangular contour at the left and right extremes. The jogging of the contour so strongly engages the wall space at the left and right sides (a distinctiveness that plays against the focus at the center) that the horizontal extensiveness of the wall is needed. In the six-part monochromatic “pushed-together rectangles” paintings, on the other hand, the arithmetic progression 1, 2, 3 is used and the sum of the lengths of the first two panels is equal to that of the third, and a similar alignment of the two rows produces a perfectly rectangular form. Significantly, the progressions in the six-part paintings run vertically, down on one side and up on the other, suggesting that, in contradistinction to the eight-part paintings, the six-part paintings are adaptive to the constriction of vertical wall space by floor and ceiling; in fact, only the six-part paintings are expanded to large sizes vertically, which the more placid rectangular shape would permit. Thus the two types of progressions have different “natures,” different possibilities, but only as realized in how the rule of the progression is followed, the human agency that is manifested.

Particularly from Mogensen's multipanel monochrome paintings it may be understood that color is also a given, and that, like form, given color is made a postulate of his work. If not white or black, it is always an unmixed color such as Prussian blue, cobalt blue, Indian red, terre verte, viridian, cadmium orange, copper, or graphite,

intended to be seen against a stark white wall that allows the color to be seen at maximum intensity. Color, isolated and heightened, is seen with a reiterated scanning motion set off by the transitive effect of the arithmetic or geometric progression that is a literal aspect of the material infrastructure. This brings a given color to such a level of live noticing and consideration that it may be proposed as a totalizing entity, a summation of color. Reciprocally, the rule of the progression, with the choices in following it that yield the form, is given its powerfully invested character by its embedment in the material infrastructure of a monochromatic work. In these paintings, color and form each make the other better seen; they are mutually supportive, and neither is subordinated to the other. In different works one may find either color or form as the more prominent; in the case of the “pushed-together rectangles” paintings, for example, form is particularly striking when the rule of the progression and the way it is followed result in a shape that breaks out of the rectangular; yet color and form are essentially in a balanced interrelationship.

The simplicity of this bipolarity underlies a leap of astounding ambition—the eleven-part painting on four walls. This, which is the ultimate example of Mogensen’s “separated rectangles” paintings, is a horizontal progression along the walls of a specially constructed room. It comprises eleven panels, eight feet in height, painted a pure cobalt blue. The room has an entrance at one corner, and the panels progress in width arithmetically from left to right, the series beginning and ending at this entrance. As in all of Mogensen’s “separated rectangles” paintings, there is an interval of wall space following each panel of the same width as the panel. In this work the first panel is one foot wide and each succeeding panel is a foot wider than the preceding one. The intervals of white painted wall between the panels progress in width identically to the point that the progression ends with a panel eleven feet in width.

The presence of this painting is sustained by so powerful a sweeping force across all the walls as to make the viewer *feel* the hidden part of the painting behind him. The viewer’s normal movement, forward, backward, and laterally, in confronting a traditional painting—to see a detail, to see the whole, to reduce the distortion of viewing angle—is amplified here beyond the usual bounds. The interplay between focused and peripheral vision is drawn into a larger field of activity. The wall is a two-dimensional continuum that asserts a horizontality against which the panels assert their verticality. Here, what Sheldon Nodelman has described as the “latent transitivity” of the wall is acknowledged and made active with the progressive widths of the wall spaces repeating that of the panels. Moreover, the immediate untutored reaction to this work—wondering whether this is all one painting—is quite to the point. Each of the panels, by its lone occupancy of a substantial span of wall, induces consideration of it as a painting in itself; yet the other panels and progressive spaces, seen peripherally while vision is focused on any one panel, make such a consideration only momentary. Thus we are reminded with each panel of how we customarily see a painting addressing us, and, at the same time, that these eleven panels on four walls constitute in their totality a painting that we can receive as such only with participation in a perceptual dynamics. In so doing, the participatory nature of our constructing an understanding of a painting is revealed. In all this the sign-nature of painting is implicit, and the confidence with which that nature is developed here confirms the value of Mogensen’s non digressive stance and of the potentiation offered by his resisting gratuitous invention in his work, whereby invention, when it comes with occasioned

freedom, escapes being already captive to banal purposes.

We see this clearly in two other categories of Mogensen's paintings, in which the work is contained in a single canvas: the spiral paintings, which are polychromatic and may be round or on a rectangle; and the "dot-dash" paintings (so named because of their horizontal bands of alternating painted segments). Both types of paintings involve more complex organizations than the "pushed-together rectangles" paintings and the "separated rectangles" paintings that have been discussed, but it is proposed that they are no less governed by the approach that has been described.

As a segmented, coiled band, the spiral offers the possibility of an extended progression. In cuing a rotative scan, it resembles the "pushed-together rectangles" paintings in their usual arrangement of duplicate serial expansions in opposed directions in the upper and lower or in the left and right sides of a work. Given the spiral band form, the scanning momentum is already provided, and is furthered by the progressively longer band segments as the spiral turns out ward, with breaks at ninety-degree intervals. Unlike the "pushed-together rectangles" paintings, the form described here would not strategically complement or form a balanced interrelationship with monochrome; if the segmentation at equal angular intervals were retained, the repetition of monochrome within the quadrants would make a senseless outcome. If the segmentation at equal angles were replaced by some other rule of progression, the ordering of form would be excessively prolix and unbalanced in relation to monochrome. Polychrome allows an ordering progression in the element of color itself (the order of colors in the spectrum is the given progression Mogensen chooses) that is in balance with the ordering progression in form as described.

This speculation on the polychromaticity of the coiled-band spiral paintings shows in what direction Mogensen's consistency lies. Polychrome is *occasioned* in his work, and exemplifies the occasioned opportunity associated with the ideal character of painting that I propose Mogensen's work clarifies.

The immense variety of the polychrome spirals would perhaps seem astonishing from the previous discussion, and more so if we also consider that the colors are always unmixed, just as they are in the monochrome work, and that they always follow each other in their order in the spectrum from the center out, changing from one color to the next every quarter-turn.

Since there is choice in how to follow the rules, and freedom in aspects of the work out of their reach, the paintings cannot be deduced from the given form and from the rules of progression. Some paintings are single spirals, others double spirals—two spirals starting 180 degrees out of phase in the center and coiling within each other. The band or bands may be thick or thin, the ground color freely chosen, and the spiral or spirals may start with any color, although the sequence of colors in the spectrum must be followed.

If one sees the freedom described here negatively, because its exercise is contingent and occasioned, one should consider that this work has been generated only by putting aside conceptions of noncontingent and unoccasioned freedom. If the contingency and occasionedness of freedom continue to be questioned, one must also



realize that these works are inescapably the outcome of these characteristics, and that they would not exist at all in their absence. It is because Mogensen is consistent in his understanding of his work that the coherence within his paintings arises—a consistency and concertedness of signification throughout a painting’s structure that we recognize as strength. Moreover, to be impressed only with the *limitedness* of such contingent and occasioned freedom is not to understand that all in human awareness that cannot be directly addressed bleeds through our expression at any opportunity.

The point of concentration of the “dot-dash” paintings is such that the only necessary variation in the element of color is obtainable within the context of monochrome. Here monochrome binds the work in the face of the bristling activity in the development of given form. The variation of the monochrome arises from the necessity of defining the nine horizontal bands of alternating painted segments and bare canvas against a field of the same color as the painted band segments.

This is done simply by a single application of the color in the segments of the bands that are to be painted, which, absorbed by the canvas, appears matte. With two applications of the same color in the field areas between the bands, the paint remains more on the surface and appears relatively glossy.

The bands in the “dot-dash” paintings incorporate sections of bare canvas in a way similar to the incorporation of wall space in the “separated rectangles” paintings. In the “dot-dash” paintings, the matte/glossy variability in the monochrome, plus the bare canvas, represents an ordering in the element of color which, as in the polychrome spirals, is in balance with the ordering progression in form.

An extraordinary aspect of the “dot-dash” paintings is that the development of form by given rules of progression is represented by only one example, a single prototype, that is reiterated in all of the works in this manner, although any number of variants are possible. This invariance of structure, although carried through two formats—square, and rectangular with a fixed width-to-height ratio—and through different sizes and colors, is quite enough to produce, in the experiencing of the works, strongly distinct differences. The “dot-dash” prototype may appear as a modest-size watercolor or be amplified to the great size of the painting reproduced on pages 272–73, a rectangular painting of black acrylic on bare canvas, 135 by 307 inches. Because greater size brings the viewer to more powerful and extreme imaginative experiences in successively yielding to the virtual aspects of the painting and returning to the perception of its actuality and because the structure of the painting shows so brilliant an awareness of this “voyaging” and is so self-consonant with regard to it, the differences in size are strongly distinctive. Moreover, color is so sharply apprehended in this context—even more because of the matte/glossy variability and the internal heightening of the color by the contrast with the bare canvas—the use of each color is a new experience of that color. The invariance of the “dot-dash” prototype is attributable to the far greater importance—again with regard to the ideal character of painting which Mogensen’s work clarifies—of showing that variation is less needed than gaining further distinctiveness between paintings of this kind through gratuitous variation. (I would add here an indication that Mogensen attends precisely to the experiencing of these paintings, although in doing so he is simply choosing how to follow the rules of the progressions: in a “dot-dash” work of square format and the chosen monochromatic color

aluminum paint—with whose metallic sheen, presumably, the distinction between matte and glossy would largely lose its usefulness—the field between the bands is left bare canvas, the bare canvas segments within the bands are defined by horizontal pencil lines at top and bottom, and the thickness of the bands made twice normal to offset the paleness of the color.)

As to the development of form in the “dot-dash” paintings, the rules Mogensen follows comprise three different harmonic progressions, each a sequence of three small whole numbers. These progressions appear in theories of Renaissance architecture and have their counterparts in music with intervals in the diatonic scale—fourth, fifth, octave—and combinations thereof. Taking as an example the rectangular format paintings, the ratio between the extreme terms of the first progression initially determines the ratio of the painting’s width to its height. The complete first progression, comprising three numbers, determines the sequential lengths of the three alternating bare canvas and black painted segments in the horizontal band at the very top of the canvas. In the second horizontal band down from the top, the same three-part progression, in relative lengths of the alternating bare canvas and black-painted segments, is repeated directly under each segment in the top horizontal band, giving nine segments in three groups. In the third band down from the top, the last in the top tier, we again have the same three-part progression in segmentation repeated directly under each segment in the second band, giving twenty-seven segments in nine groups. So we may note that there is another rule of progression (perhaps related to the three-part nature of the harmonic progression), a geometric progression in powers of three (3<sup>1</sup>, 3<sup>2</sup>, 3<sup>3</sup>) in the increase in the number of segments from the first to the third band. Finally, the governing three-part harmonic progression in this tier appears again in the three successive vertical spans of the glossier solid black field sectors following below each of the tier’s three bands.

In addition to the top tier of the three bands, there is a central tier and a bottom tier, each of three bands. The central and bottom tiers are each governed by a different three-part harmonic progression than governed the top tier, but otherwise both are developed in precisely the same way.

The value of this taxing description of the “dot-dash” prototype is that it reveals the freedom of choice that lies within a rule of progression, an ordering concept. The three-part harmonic progression is a rule, and the geometric progression in the number of segments in a band is a rule, but both are chosen, and chosen to operate interactively. The form in which the rule-following is manifested is also chosen, for example, the repetition within the confines of each segment of the band above. Moreover, acknowledging the necessity for coherence of distinguishing the band in its entirety from the field produces a necessary formal invention in the course of rule-following, an invention which interrelates with the ordering of the element of color within monochrome.

The freedom in rule-following expands much further, encompassing within its operational field all of the subtleties of the artist’s over-view, and permitting the finest insinuation of visual logic. Consider Mogensen’s choice of three different harmonic progressions for the three tiers of the painting: if we imagine this painting to consist of only one of the three tiers, it would resolve itself too easily, too quickly. The

juxtaposition of two tiers comprising different progressions introduces incompatibility in their mutual interaction, and the three tiers together multiply this incompatibility to the greatest possible point before confusion sets in. In effect, by this means, Mogensen reduces redundancy in the work to a minimum, and thereby blocks any easy visual understanding and resolution of it.

The ideal character I have alluded to with respect to Mogensen's work is not proposed to be prescriptive, but rather as a way of understanding. In any case, profound painting must have a bearing on the definition of the engagement of painting, at least by implication. A reason to consider Mogensen's art in terms of the ideal character of painting is that its risk so much seems to be his counting on ideas in the realm of ideal character, ideas of such rare clear-sightedness that we can hardly be prepared for them. And this is no small part of the deep joy we may have in his work.

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