

PAUL MOGENSEN

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Paul Mogensen: Going Deep

Nancy Princenthal

Geometric abstraction is the world's oldest visual language. Some of the earliest tools and utensils, pots and textiles, bear patterned decoration, patterns that are cognate with the rhythms of music and dance. We humans seem always to have shared a desire to find connections between the structures of the natural world—the composition and growth of plants and minerals, diurnal and seasonal cycles—and those we experience internally: the beat of our hearts and breath, of footsteps. In working out these patterns we want to be absorbed and challenged; the near edge of the unknowable is a place that promises delight. Determining visual geometries offers all this. The hunger for it seems bred into our species.

Yet the rigorously abstract painting and sculpture that emerged in the mid-1960s, often based on mathematical progressions, was seen by many as an escape from history—as immaculately conceived and also irreducibly concrete. No forebears, no relatives, no referents, no narrative. Paul Mogensen is an exception.

Among the leading artists of the generation associated with such notions, Mogensen stands out, not only for his unswerving resistance to both metaphorical and conceptualist explanatory language, but also for his keen sense of history. Like many of his peers, he rejects most of the terminology that art such as his has generated, particularly the label “minimalism” (which, in fact, has few acknowledged adherents and, unlike Michael Fried's “literalism” and Barbara Rose's “ABC art,” no clearly attributable source). Even the seemingly anodyne term “abstraction,” Mogensen points out, misidentifies his work insofar as it refers to the simplification of known objects in the world. At the same time, he has a deeply researched and highly individual appreciation of historical art, and of the lineage of the mathematics that drives his work.

Born in Los Angeles in 1941, Mogensen had early exposure to classical music and the practical aspects of painting (his father was a spray painter in a heavy machinery factory), and was an avid student of arithmetic and science from the start. He credits Sputnik for placing a premium on his abilities in those disciplines, which led to a scholarship at the University of Southern California, where he concentrated first on mathematics and then on art; fourteenth-century Sieneese painting made an especially deep impression. In 1962 Mogensen attended Yale University's Norfolk summer program in painting, led by Bernard Chaet and William Bailey, a pivotal experience. Even more important was his introduction to Camilla Gray's breakthrough study of the same year, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*. A great admirer of Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin (although not of Malevich), Mogensen arrived in New York in 1966 already associated with such peers as David Novros and, through Novros, Brice Marden. His first solo exhibition, at the Bykert Gallery (backed

by Jeff Byers and run by Klaus Kertess), came the following year.

Possessed of a searching and skeptical mind and a wry sense of humor, Mogensen thinks before he acts. “Abstract expressionist painters stood up in front of a canvas and decided what to do. I don’t paint like that,” he recently explained to me. Instead, he said, “I use arithmetic to find the form,” which in turn determines where the color is placed. And while “math is everywhere,” it is everywhere misrepresented. He brought to my attention the Western tendency to give undue credit to the ancient Greeks; what is known as the Pythagorean theorem, for instance, first appeared in an Egyptian papyrus of 1200 BCE, he said, and as the fifteenth-century scholar Cusanus (also known as Nicholas of Cusa) observed, in a criticism of Euclidian thought, a circle is a special case of ellipse, one in which the centers are congruent, just as a straight line is a special case of arc, one that has an infinite radius. Such insights fire Mogensen’s work. When I asked if there were overarching principles governing, he replied, “Being American I don’t care about theory.” Is there, per-haps, a kind of ecumenical spirituality at work? “Spiritual is a tricky word.” So, it’s math all the way down?

“No.”

As Mogensen’s work makes sparkingly clear, no is a singularly productive word. His earliest paintings, from 1965, were paragons of reduction: single- and two-panel one-color works in relatively simple shapes: two abutted triangles, in several configurations; a U-shaped canvas, the corners sharp, set on edge. The following year, he produced paintings based on materials derived from elements in the periodic table—carbon, graphite, and copper—and then, the next year, he used variously gold-colored bronze powders sprayed on with lacquer. The paintings exhibited in 1967 at Bykert are one-color panels arranged in stacked bands of graduated sizes; the 1969 show featured saturated earth colors, including deep blue, orange, yellow-green, and a deep Morocco-leather red, along with black. By the end of the decade, Mogensen was also using aluminum paint on unprimed canvases, in slashes that produced oily haloes—these works, which look contemporary now, were not exhibited at the time.

In 1969, Mogensen moved first to upstate New York, and then back to Los Angeles, returning to SoHo in 1973, where he has lived (with the exception of ten years in the early 2000s) ever since. Following his early departure from the city, he didn’t exhibit much for several years. Among the paintings he made during that time are compositions on Masonite panels, with holes drilled into them based on spiral configurations, and related canvases with small painted circles, arrayed in scatters that hint at data points on invisible axes. Mogensen cautions against calling the patterns in his paintings linear; instead they are properly understood as describing the edges of shapes. Thus there are shapes (not fat lines) in paintings with Morse-code-like sequences of longer and shorter rectangles of color, creating what seem to be wordless texts of resonant, high-pitched color against dark grounds. Mogensen also began to use circular supports (including elliptical ones) featuring spirals, their arms divided into spectra, often leaning toward the primaries. Robert Delaunay ghosts these paintings,⁴ as does, perhaps, Rodchenko.

Varieties of these forms occupied Mogensen for more than two decades; triangles reappeared as well, and there are circular canvases divided in ways that suggest

sundials. One anomalous painting—though they are all, really, anomalous, each a new spin of the color wheel, a new engagement of ratio, size, and shape—is a narrow ellipse on which a rainbow-colored double spiral threads across an ultramarine ground: tipped on edge, it seems a foreshortened description of a distant planet’s orbit around the sun. In the later 1990s, great circular cutouts began to eat away at rectangular supports. Aggressive voids that are also festive, the cutouts create scalloped edges, or odd, heraldic equilateral crosses with curved sides. Often they frame a central painted spiral, or a cluster of spirals, all atwirl.

Such descriptions, it must be admitted, violate Mogensen’s long-standing commitment to an art without associative or narrative props. (When he does read literature, his favorite authors include Melville and Twain: just the facts, please; and beware poetasters.) In this regard his preferences are hardly unique. Mel Bochner, in a 1967 essay promoting a “serial” art (such as Mogensen’s, and his own) based on numerical or otherwise predetermined functions, wrote, “Whatever art is, it is, and criticism, which is language, is something different.” In this tradition Ad Reinhardt strove (without success) to have the last word; his twenty-five “statements” of 1958 begin, “Art is art. Everything else is everything else.” The barricades against “everything else” manned by so many artists who emerged in the sixties are long since down. If we have reason to wonder that they stood during a time of such inviting cultural ferment, we can also now see more clearly both the profound quixoticism—and the deep tradition—of art stripped to essentials.

In the mid-2000s, Mogensen introduced a composition in which a centered circle is suggested by radiating spokes or rays. These circles, a variety of optical illusion, illustrate the tendency for the mind—that is, the whole visual system, from cornea to retina to brain—to complete a pattern, to see a form that isn’t there except by implication. In an earlier illusion, Mogensen had created a cobalt-blue painting in eleven progressively larger parts, each 8 feet high, the widths advancing from 1 foot wide to 11. Mogensen describes the sequence as simple enough to be called blunt, but, installed around the walls of one gallery for a 1978 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (the painting was conceived earlier), it creates, in photographs, a confoundingly exaggerated foreshortening.

Neuroscientist (and Nobel laureate) Eric Kandel has written two books about art, the second addressing the question of reductive abstraction. It is relatively simple to explain the appeal of figurative art, Kandel claims, because it relies on deep-rooted, “bottom-up processing”—on neural systems activated by the most important (to us) visual forms: human faces first of all, and, in general, living things in the world. “How, then, do we respond to abstract art?” Kandel asks. The answer he offers is that by isolating color, line, form, and light, abstractions make us “implicitly more aware of the functioning of the individual components of the visual pathway.”⁷ But they also, explicitly and more significantly, make us think. “Abstract art dares our visual system to interpret an image that is fundamentally different from the kind of images our brain has evolved to reconstruct,”⁸ he writes. Hence, nonfigurative artworks “rely heavily on our imagination, our top-down associations from personal experiences and encounters with other works of art.” Being radically unlike forms in nature—where, as we are often told, there are no straight lines or perfect circles—geometric abstractions, says Kandel, perplex us. So does his argument. How does this model of perception

comport with geometric abstraction's antiquity? Does mathematics describe the world or not? That is, do geometric forms reveal a deep and fundamental order or instead express a perfect estrangement, disturbing and exalting, from the messy, lumpy, wet, unstable reality of things as they are? Or are they? "The earth was like a shut coin," says novelist and naturalist Annie Dillard, about the wonders of rock collecting she discovered as a child. "Pry open the thin lid and find a crystalline intelligence inside, a rayed and sidereal beauty. Crystals grew inside rock like arithmetical flowers." (Pry deeper, of course, and you'll come to seething magma.)

From the outset, the reductive work of the 1960s had its insubordinates. Sol LeWitt's cheeky "Sentences on Conceptual Art" of 1969 begins, "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists." But stretching logic is no bad thing; "Irrational judgments," LeWitt suggested, "lead to new experience." And there were some who, while steadfast, acknowledged pure abstraction's inherent paradoxes. Pressed to explain his work, Mogensen's friend Robert Mangold—whose "Flat Art" manifesto of 1967 begins, "Art should be taken at face value"—confessed, "I am interested in the idea of presenting as simple, economical, and as wholly readable a statement as possible. At the same time, I don't really know what that means." Richard Shiff, commenting on this admission, concluded, "Mangold is not being coy." While his interlocutor "as critic is concerned with meaning[,] Mangold as artist is concerned with experience."

And so too is Mogensen. In a departure from his main argument, Eric Kandel backhandedly suggests a way of negotiating these impasses. Paraphrasing William James, the nine-teenth-century psychologist, Kandel writes, "perception differs from sensation by recruiting the consciousness of further facts associated with the object causing the sensation." That is, perception—of the kind elicited by geometric abstraction—may well be top-down, and involve active thought. But sensation, James argued, emerges unbidden, from the depths. And it is sensation, I believe, that Mogensen is after. If we make an effort to quiet our busy minds, as he powerfully encourages us to do, and look long and hard in silence, we have the chance to be engrossed beyond words in visual experiences that go very deep indeed.

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