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PAUL MOGENSEN'S ABSTRACTIONS RADIATE HIS PURIST PHILOSOPHY AT KARMA

By Rory Mitchell



Paul Mogensen, *no title* (2022). Ultramarine in stand oil with oil colour scape on canvas. 182.88 x 182.88 cm. Exhibition view: Paul Mogensen, *Paintings: 1965-2022*, Karma, New York (3 March–22 April 2023). Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York.

Paul Mogensen's reductionist approach of flat planes of colour and simplistic forms are a testament to the artist's unwavering, purist philosophy.

Born in Los Angeles in 1941, the American artist is most known for his minimal, kaleidoscopic abstractions, arranged in sequences derived from arithmetic and geometry, that are inspired by early 20th century Russian artists such as Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin.

His latest exhibition with Karma, *Paintings: 1965-2022* (3 March–22 April 2023), presents a collection of paintings that showcase Mogensen's progressive disposition as an artist who is not bound by the categorisations of abstraction that fell before him.

In one of the most ambitious displays of Mogensen's work to date, Karma will feature work spanning from 1965 to present day in the gallery's 188 and 172 East 2nd Street space in New York.

On this occasion, Karma founder Brendan Dugan speaks with Ocula Advisor Rory Mitchell about Mogensen's evolution as an artist and his unusual approach to making paintings.

When did you first come across Mogensen's work?

We became acquainted through artist David Novros, who went to University of Southern California with Mogensen and would later show together at Bykert Gallery in New York.

How long have you been working on this show?

We started working with Mogensen in 2018, when we showed his work at the Independent Art Fair in New York. For this exhibition, we focused on both his latest work and the pivotal years that marked his evolution as an artist. Throughout, he's worked in series that span decades.

Our current show has been in the works for a little over a year, and from the beginning, we knew we wanted a survey format. He's been living in New York City, in SoHo, since the mid 1960s, so it felt important to show works from when he first came here from Los Angeles, alongside works from the present, as Mogensen continues to rigorously paint every day.

How prominent a figure was Mogensen in the New York art scene during the 1960s and 70s?

Mogensen was part of an influential cohort of artists that showed at Bykert Gallery in New York in the 1960s and 70s, which included David Novros and Brice Marden.

Conceptual artist Mel Bochner beautifully discusses Mogensen's work in an essay from 1967 alongside Dan Flavin, Jo Baer, and Sol LeWitt, who were also exploring mathematical structures, repeated series, and hard-edge abstraction. Later, Mogensen exhibited with Mary Boone Gallery, and by the end of the 1970s he had a solo retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

In a 2018 *The New York Times* review, Roberta Smith described Mogensen's efforts as one of the best displays of abstract painting in New York 'for their rigour and pleasures and their illumination of the act of looking'.

Despite being housed in the permanent collections of some of the most prestigious museums in the U.S., his work is perhaps less well known internationally than some of his contemporaries. Why do you think this is?

If he's less known internationally that is certainly changing—Mogensen's work was exhibited at Maruani Mercier in Brussels in 2022 and the year before at carlier | gebauer in Berlin.

It's true that before that he was shown more in the U.S., but in 1994 he had a large survey exhibition at Vienna Secession. As time goes on, Mogensen is getting increasingly recognised for his work both inside and outside the U.S.

The shaped canvas works from the 1960s immediately call to mind Ellsworth Kelly and Minimalism but Mogensen was more interested in following his own path and a very distinctive set of rules.

I have read that these rules are in some way arranged according to

mathematical progressions derived from a deep understanding of Russian Constructivists and Renaissance theories. Could you tell me a bit more about this approach to making paintings?

Mogensen's paintings begin with structures and sequences, which he sources from arithmetic and geometry. He describes his process as letting the painting 'make itself'.

He then further pares down the process of painting by only working with unmixed paint, often monochrome or when there are multiple colours, they're arranged in a prismatic spectrum. He is removing everything but the essentials to reveal the kind of elegance that exists in maths and science within his paintings.

You have enjoyed some success energising the conversation around older artists that were perhaps not so well known internationally. I am thinking of Manoucher Yektai, Thaddeus Mosley, and Reggie Burrows Hodges.

Did this happen naturally or has it always been something you have been aware of and were keen to pursue?

The focus is always on the art itself and about giving it the attention and context that it deserves.

Mogensen and Mosley articulate different but complementary ideas of universal art-making, which de-emphasise their own biography. For Mogensen this means giving precedence to arithmetic and geometry, and for Mosley, an emphasis on an aesthetics of vitality that transcends place, time, and culture.

These are profound callings, which these artists have spent their lives exploring—what becomes important is giving their practice context where it's needed and to always let their work speak for itself.

It must be very rewarding when it works out as well as it has done for these artists. How different is it working with artists at this stage in their career compared to younger artists?

Artists who have worked for many decades bring with them an archive, which presents opportunities for exhibitions and publications, as well as the need for research and restoration.

For Mogensen we've published a facsimile of his notebook from early 1968, when, after his first exhibition at Bykert Gallery, he travelled through Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia by boat. In our current exhibition, we show works from then until now, but since he's been prolific for more than five decades, even more remains to be seen.

Are there museum shows in the pipeline for any of these artists?

Certainly. Very recently, Mogensen's work was acquired by the Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Helsinki. Additionally, Mosley will have a solo exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in May 2023, which travelled from Art + Practice in Los Angeles and the Baltimore Museum of Art before that. —[O]