

out of abstraction:

divergent directions in late 20th century art

Now 70 years after the birth of Abstract Expressionism, there still remains a slight disconnect between the art works and the general public. While the disparate artists and styles of that loosely related art movement had their roots in various forms of European abstraction from the early decades of the 20th century, the hopes that a form of pure abstraction might culminate in an inevitable crowning achievement of Western art were misplaced. And while art did not completely shift toward total abstraction for each consequent generation, there is a continuous thread of abstract visual language among the pluralistic styles of the 21st century. This exhibition follows some of the main paths out of that coalescence of abstraction from the mid-20th century.

One of the alternate names for Abstract Expressionism is the New York School. The multinational, metropolitan nature of New York City made it the natural location for avant-garde artists from Europe to relocate and mingle in the years between the world wars. The mixture of continental styles such as Cubism, German Expressionism, and Surrealism was the basis for this new American art movement. However, another influence that would inevitably pull artists away from some Modernist tendencies was also at work – the influence of the art of the East.



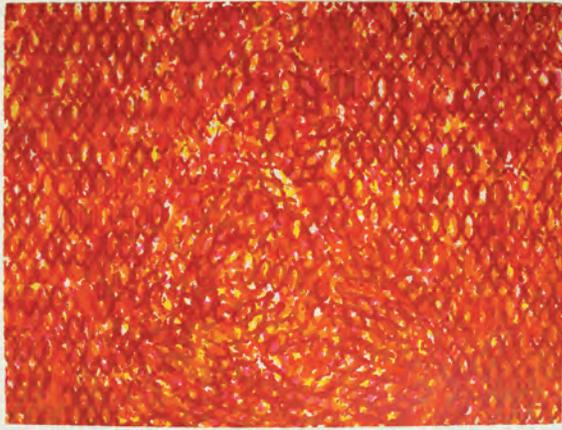
For Friendship, Robert Indiana, 1990

Dimensions No. 4, Jack Sonenberg, 1970



One artist strongly influenced by Eastern concepts, Mark Tobey, is often lumped together with the painters of the New York School. This designation is inappropriate for two reasons. He mainly worked in the Northwest region of the United States and he was already creating work with tendencies toward Abstract Expressionism a decade before those famed New York artists. Tobey was actually an influence upon the more accurately categorized Abstract Expressionists. His "all-over" style of painting would later be introduced to the masses when it was popularized through the iconic drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Much has been made of Tobey's travels to both China and Japan to study the calligraphic writing styles of those cultures. While these were certainly a strong influence on his so-called "white writing" paintings – in which small, bright calligraphic strokes of paint are interlaced across the field of the canvas – the stronger influence was his Bahá'í Faith. The characteristic qualities of Persian and Islamic calligraphic styles are clearly evident in Tobey's white writing works. It was through that region and religion that the Bahá'í Faith was originally founded.



Olympic Torch, Joy Walker, 1976

after the 1940s believed that aspects of gesture and individuality might be removed from the abstract form.

Subsequent stages of Abstract Expressionism began moving away from the aggressive brushwork of the so-called Action Painters, and toward more spare interactions with pure fields of color. This can be found in an example of work by the only proper Abstract Expressionist in the exhibition – Lee Krasner. Often overshadowed by the mythic figure of her husband, Jackson Pollock, Krasner was an equally powerful painter. More often connected to the Action Painters, stylistically, her lithograph – *Embrace* – seems more minimal with its flattened geometric forms. Nevertheless, it maintains the vigor of her characteristic imagery, linking these seemingly divergent styles.

Joy Walker's lithograph also bridges the gap between two differing formats. There is a vitality to her shimmering image as some mysterious movement bubbles up from beneath the surface. And yet, the initial impact on the viewer is found within the warmth of the red-orange that envelops the picture plane. The liveliness of this work is produced from equal parts kinetic energy and passionate color.

Similar fields of color were evident within more purely geometric abstract images well into the 1960s. Some artists had already been honing down elements of their designs toward more austere forms by the later 1950s. British artist Robyn Denny was one of several artists who streamlined the visions of the Abstract Expressionists toward a pure, minimal form. Certain methods of printmaking, like silkscreen and lithography, enabled a flatness well suited to his needs. These three prints strip away any residual content from his predecessors, so all that remains are stark geometric forms in meditative color combinations. In typical Minimalist fashion, the individual titles are even reduced to singular letters or numbers within a suite of multiple prints. The viewer is forced to consider nothing more than the aesthetics of the color combinations because the imagery points to nothing outside itself.

The reduction of form to orderly geometric combinations is also evident in Jack Sonenberg's *Dimensions No. 4*. This work further simplifies the preoccupations of Denny's work since traces of color are completely removed. Once again, the title refuses to point to any grand theme. However, there is a subtle variation in this work. The black and grey are not completely flat. There are embossed elements within each value, breaking the monotony of the paper surface and taking the form into a third dimension – something not typically experienced in print media. The design seems almost physically constructed, extending into the space of the viewer.

Other artists working within an analogous Minimalist tradition exhibit this constructed concept in alternate fashions. Both Susan Hamilton and Tran Kim rely on the simplicity of geometric forms. While neither of these artists ventures into a third dimension, they both rely on geometry as an essential "building block," upon which they construct their forms. The restriction of the color palette and absence of recognizable imagery focuses the mind of the viewer on the interactions among the basic elements of the design.

Though it is not as immediately apparent, purity of geometric form is also a foundation of Mel Bochner's *Iron Point*. Bochner is categorized as a Conceptual artist. His work has frequently been related to performative actions that are photographically documented. His forays into printmaking, however, have sometimes focused on a preoccupation with exploring ideas of what art actually *is*. In *Iron Point* a two-dimensional design for a three-dimensional form is expressed through the slashing brush work

Tobey's *Psaltry (First Form)* etching, although created in 1974, draws upon his seminal white writing works that began in the 1930s. The white lines of this work are created from rolling ink onto the high surface of the etching plate. Its reverse can be found in *Psaltry (Second Form)*, which is printed from the same plate, but inked in the traditional etching process. Both of these works express the Bahá'í belief in a collective evolution toward an establishment of peace, justice and unity in the world. This parallel striving toward unity on the picture surface, by acknowledging the importance of every inch of the image, is also evident in *Morning Grass*, with its expressive and gestural marks.

Even though the apex of Abstract Expressionism was the 1940s and '50s, the existence of the autographic line within abstract art did not cease once new modes and methods of creating art were developed. Alison Hildreth's 1997 work, *Fall From the Sky*, retains the same frenetic energy of Tobey's earlier pieces. David Trowbridge's prints, with painterly monotype inclusions, as well as the free flowing forms in Steven Sorman's *And I, You*, retain a consciousness of materiality that is clearly descended from the first generation Abstract Expressionists. However, other artists working

of an Abstract Expressionist. Performance Art has repeatedly been linked to Abstract Expressionism via the physical act(s) undertaken during the production of both genres. Thus, in this work, Bochner effectively references three decades of art and the shifting in and out of style so prevalent in many of his own works.

While the foundations of Minimalist imagery did hold a place for a time, the monotony of the forms, for some artists, quickly became unsatisfying. Without merely rehashing the styles of their Abstract Expressionist forebears, younger artists sought new abstract expressions that could summon the same physical vigor. Action Painters had revealed the creative process of their works upon the ecstatic surfaces of their pieces, but a new generation of Op artists utilized color and form to produce a perceived action that was generated solely through visual phenomena.

Richard Anuskiewicz is one of the leading figures of the Op movement. He — along with David Roth and Henry Pearson — was represented in the landmark 1965 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Responsive Eye*. *New Glory* is a typical example of his optical style. The diminution of concentric rectangles creates an immediate sense of depth, yet the color interactions produce an almost physical reaction to the image. A standard trick of the Op artists was to utilize color combinations that induced feelings similar to vertigo. So, while the finished works of the Action Painters had left a map of the process undertaken to reach that final object, the Op artists sought a truly interactive experience each time a viewer came into contact with the work.

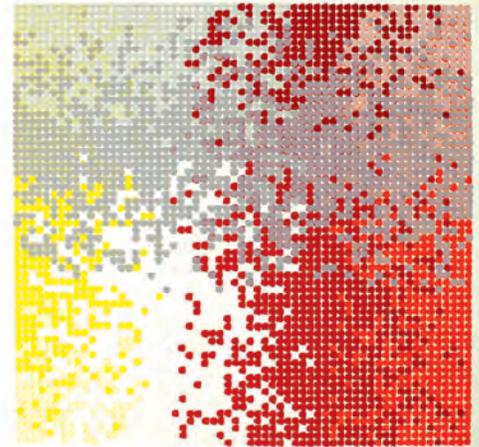
While some, like Juergen Peters, manipulated geometric forms to produce the illusion of depth, others used color interactions to engage the physiology of the human eye. Peters' *Pyramidal* produces space that seems to project out toward the viewer, as well as recede into the picture plane. This is created with muted values. Henry Pearson, on the other hand, skillfully combines only two colors to produce the phenomenon of the "after effect," in which a residual image stays on the retina and reappears in our field of vision. The direction of movement in this topographically inspired image is enhanced when our eyes create retinal vibrations. The image appears to actually have several colors and values when observed with more than a cursory glance.

For many, Pop art is the one movement that first comes to mind when considering the post-Abstract Expressionist decades. In fact, the use of images from popular culture and the media was a direct response against the cryptic abstractions of artists from the 1940s and '50s. Pop brought with it a return to representational imagery. It was imagery that was already known to the masses and took no special understanding to decipher or enjoy. It was imagery of the banal and mundane.

Night Suite "B," Robyn Denny, 1972



Untitled, David Roth, 1980



Some artists aligned with the Pop movement were not ready to completely break tradition with the Abstract Expressionists. Croatian artist Boris Bucan, like the pre-eminent Pop artist Andy Warhol, has often blurred the lines between high and low art. His silkscreen prints have been created as limited edition fine art pieces as well as mass produced posters. In this work he combines an ordinary, easily recognizable chair form in the foreground with a chaotic, all-over black and white abstract background. The all-over pattern leads back to the origins of Abstract Expressionism, to Mark Tobey's early experiments.

Clayton Pond's *Drag Racer* is the more obvious example of Pop imagery in the exhibition. It utilizes the silkscreen printing method so favored by Warhol. Like many other Pop artists, Pond produced work that seemed as if it could be used as an advertisement, if it was not already taken directly from one. Other movements flowing out of Abstract Expressionism tended to alter certain aspects of that germinal style. Pop, conversely, was produced in direct opposition to many of the key elements of Abstract Expressionism. The explicit use of representational imagery was the most obvious change,



Untitled, David Trowbridge, circa 1985

but there were certain elements that Pop artists shared with others working during the 1960s.

The idea of appropriation was used by many Pop artists, though in various ways. Andy Warhol appropriated images from mass media (i.e. photographs of Marilyn Monroe). Robert Indiana often appropriated imagery from other artists he admired. *For Friendship* is directly related to a series of paintings that American Modernist Marsden Hartley did in remembrance of and homage to the German military officer Karl von Freyburg. The stark, graphic qualities of Hartley's images were reminiscent of commercial advertising design, which Indiana has often brought into his pieces.

That commercial design quality is most often connected to Indiana's *LOVE* design which has graced paintings, sculptures and eventually turned up as an actual graphic design for a postal stamp – a testament to the power of the style the artist sought to emulate. Again, the bridging of high and low art was at the center of Indiana's work. Many early pieces were based on the artist's concept of the American Dream. Often, these pieces – like *American Dream II* – incorporate text within the design. The artist links the idea, or even myth, of the American Dream to a game of chance in which an individual may win big, but is also at risk of losing it all. The use of text as a primary image was not only a factor in the works of Pop artists, but a major interest for Conceptual artists.

Iain Baxter& (he officially changed the spelling to include the ampersand in 2005) is a conceptual artist who is also interested in language. *Golden Gate Bridge*, from the series *Reflected San Francisco Beauty Spot*, is typical of the artist's use of photo-documentation of his performance events, similar to Mel Bochner. Those photographs would later make their way back into other works by the artist. This self-referential type of art, though based in the methods of appropriation made common by Pop artists, eventually made the work as abstruse as that of the Abstract Expressionists. Thus, the attempts of certain artists to negate the esoteric qualities of high art and bring work back to the common viewer reached a new tipping point. This use of appropriation marked what many saw as the end of the Modernist age and the beginning of Post-Modernism.

Nearly all of the artists within this exhibition could fit under the umbrella of Post-Modernism. The break down of the Modernist experiment began to end with the works of the Abstract Expressionists. Experiments with non-Western imagery and theories (Mark Tobey) opened artists to alternate modes of thinking and working. New methods of re-framing the history of art through different lenses – such as feminism, colonialism, and the oppression of persons of color – also fractured the evolution of style within art. While there had always been multiple styles and movements practiced simultaneously, the pluralistic approaches taken by artists after the mid-20th century proved that there was no longer one way forward. The works in this exhibition offer a sampling of the chorus of different artistic voices that are still intoned today. Within that chorus is a voice that speaks to everyone.

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Exhibition Dates:
Friday, April 5–Sunday, June 2, 2013