

**VISUAL SENSATIONS**  
**THE PAINTINGS OF ROBERT SWAIN: 1967 – 2010**

Curated by Gabriele Evertz  
with the assistance of Teri Lehner, Jenny Liu, and Rachel Stokoe

October 7 – November 13, 2010

The exhibition is supported by the Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation.  
The accompanying publication is made possible by the Friends of the Hunter College Art Galleries.

**HUNTER COLLEGE/TIMES SQUARE GALLERY**

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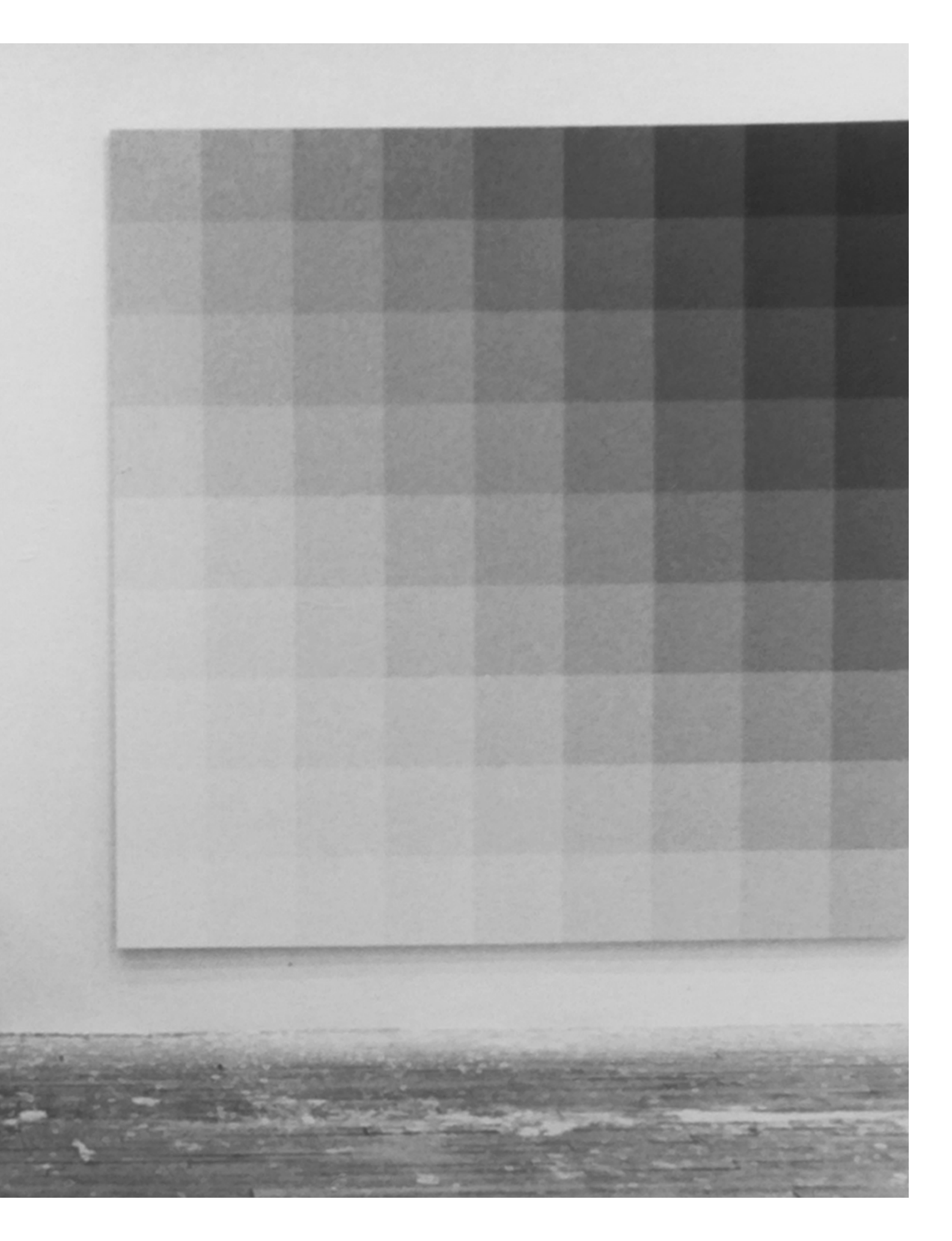
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The artwork presented on the inside cover of this catalogue is an attempt to accurately simulate the colors of a Robert Swain painting by using Pantone spot colors. All other reproductions are printed using a standard 4-color process, a printing method that represents the physical properties of the work but can only approximate the color sensation of Swain's paintings.



Robert Swain in his studio with his wife Nanny, c.1960s



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition evolved out of the desire to present an overview of the life and work of Robert Swain. Rarely are we given the opportunity to examine a life so completely dedicated to the making of paintings. Swain works outside the main currents of contemporary concerns, yet he numbers among the most significant color painters of his generation and he enjoys a distinctive place in the recent history of painting. As an artist/teacher he also lives in the hearts and minds of his students. With this exhibition, I hope not only to encourage appreciation of his art, but also to spur interest among viewers in developing a deeper visual intelligence and in exploring a newer and more informed realm of color. In recent years, inquiries related to psychology and perception have extended into visual and neural phenomena that allow for a revision of past color concepts. This study can stimulate a better understanding of our emotional and intellectual responses to color, causing radically new modes of color expression. The inventions of Swain's work—spanning well over four decades of uninterrupted inquiry—are astounding, and the compelling power of his art is manifest throughout his life's work. Swain's consistent investigation of color in painting, marked by an exacting quest for the real, is inspirational. Continuity, cyclical progression, and interrelatedness determined the selection of the works for this exhibition, which opens with a work from 1973, goes back as far as 1969, covers the 1980s and 1990s, and ends with a spectacular new body of work, presented here for the first time, that has preoccupied the artist since 2006.

Assembling a group of works to represent such a long and distinguished career was a daunting task. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the support and counsel of many individuals.

Of paramount importance was the artist himself, Robert Swain. I have benefitted from his teaching, guidance, and advice and I am most grateful to him. I also extend my gratitude to his wife, Annette Leibel, for her steadfast support. Many thanks go to Bob's assistants, former students all, who serve in apprentice-like fashion with spirit, great skill, and tireless devotion: Dan Crews, Changha Hwang, Pierre Obando, Shawn Powell, and Yao Zu Lu.

During the early stages of this project, several MA/MFA students in my graduate seminar, Jenny Liu, Teri Lehner, and Rachel Stokoe, helped immensely by probing the concept with me, conducting research,

and developing and implementing an independent website that has since merged with the artist's site: [www.robertswainnyc.com](http://www.robertswainnyc.com). There, you will find additional information above and beyond what is included in this publication.

For their generous donation in support of all aspects of this exhibition we thank the Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation most sincerely. In addition, our deep gratitude goes to the Friends of the Gallery who, under the leadership of Phyllis and Joe Caroff, gifted funds to support the design and printing of the exhibition catalogue. We would like to acknowledge that without the support of all our donors this exhibition could not have been realized.

At Hunter, we would like to thank President Jennifer J. Raab. Further, thanks are due to the Gallery Committee; Thomas Weaver, Executive Director and Chair of the Department of Art; Joachim Pissarro, Bershad Professor of Art History and Director of the Galleries; and Kimberly Watson, Major Gifts Officer in the Office of the President. For her thoughtful suggestions, guidance and ceaseless effort we are deeply grateful to Tracy Adler, Curator. And thanks also to Phi Nguyen, preparator par excellence.

Thanks to the outstanding teamwork of video maker Peter Canale and his director, Rachel Stokoe, who produced a valuable and engaging visual record for us.

It is a pleasure to thank those who worked on the catalogue: Jenny Liu for writing the bibliography and Teri Lehner for her cheer and diligence in writing the chronology and exhibition record. Matthew Deleget proved an excellent and perceptive interviewer. Thank you to editor Brian Sholis, whose thoughtful help and suggestions strengthened the texts, and a special thanks to Tim Laun for the clarity and balance of his book design. I am also grateful to Sanford Wurmfeld, who, with Thomas Weaver, wrote his special appreciation of the Friends of the Hunter College Art Galleries and its superb leaders Phyllis and Joseph Caroff; thank you for responding in a supportive and most collegial manner at critical moments. Finally, William C. Agee, Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History, contributed a thought-provoking, sensitive, and profoundly informative essay. I am deeply grateful to him.

**Gabriele Evertz**  
Associate Professor of Art

#### **ARTIST DEDICATION**

This exhibition is dedicated to my wife Nanny, always with me in my heart and mind. I would also like to acknowledge Frances and Ralph Dweck for their lifelong patronage.

#### **SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE FRIENDS OF THE HUNTER COLLEGE ART GALLERIES**

The publication of this catalogue has been underwritten by a generous gift from the Friends of the Hunter College Art Galleries.

For the past twenty-four years the Friends by their contributions have enhanced the quality of education for Hunter College's art students through their financial support of exhibitions, catalogues, publications, community outreach, faculty development, student travel, and other educational programs.

They have held successful auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's, arranged tours to view private collections, and visited various art museums as well as the studios of established artists. These activities have contributed a significant measure of moral and financial support to Hunter's outstanding art programs.

The names of the Friends are listed in this catalogue. We thank the entire group for their sustained efforts, their generosity, and their loyalty. We must especially thank Phyllis and Joseph Caroff for their years of effective and loving leadership.

**Thomas Weaver**, Chair of the Art Department, 2006-present  
**Sanford Wurmfeld**, Chair of the Art Department, 1978-2006







Previous page and above:  
Robert Swain, *Untitled, No 7*, 1968-1969  
Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 30 ft.  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC  
Gift of Mary Howland Chase and the Friends of the Corcoran 1969.13

## VISUAL SENSATIONS

by Gabriele Evertz, Associate Professor of Art, Hunter College

“Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet.”

– Paul Cézanne, as quoted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception*

For over forty years Robert Swain has dedicated his practice to the investigation, application, and experience of color sensations in abstract painting. He states: “Color is a form of energy derived from the electromagnetic spectrum that stimulates our perceptual processes and is instrumental in conveying emotions.”<sup>1</sup>

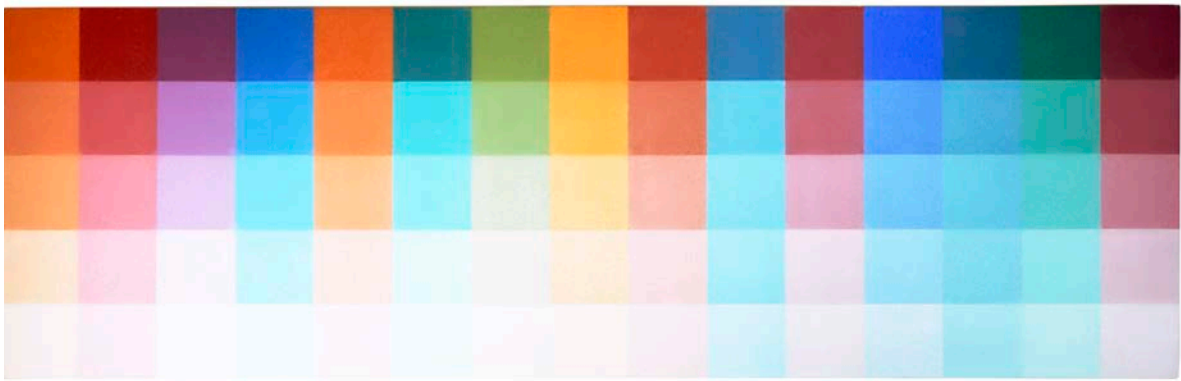
It is an extraordinary and concise observation—made not by a scientist, but by a painter. Indeed, the history and theory of color organization is peopled not only by art historians but also by many experts from diverse scientific disciplines, such as biology, experimental psychology, philosophy, physiology, and chemistry.<sup>2</sup>

Painters have always been interested in color, for pigment is one of their principle materials. Any discussion about the colorists among them could begin with Giotto, for example. But color served as an index and a sign; in painting it was used as local, or surface color, as a means to identify a depicted object. Painting has a long memory, but in the twentieth century—relatively recently—a break occurred, namely the advent of abstraction. This development allowed color to free itself from its subordination to objects and to emerge as an autonomous element in painting. Artists began developing an entirely new language, one that still awaits its analytical and critical assessment.

Fast forward to the mid-1960s, when Robert Swain arrived in New York City. Visual effects such as luminosity, luster, and iridescence were already known and had been explored in art. A new (though short-lived) international movement, Op art, spawned simultaneous investigations by many artists living in different countries.<sup>3</sup>

Around the same time, new scientific investigations of color perception were published. The study of the perceptual properties of color is founded on the biological basis of artistic behavior. With the revolutionary techniques of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), during the 1970s and 1980s the study of the human brain became possible, and by the 1990s MRI technology was monitoring neural activities in “real time.” We painters discovered that the seemingly countless variations among color’s mysterious sensations—though dauntingly difficult to enumerate—could be studied systematically, as many of their psychological and physiological causes were finally being revealed.

When Swain decided to devote his life’s work to color phenomena he was well aware that there was no available paradigm to reference and no consensus about the subject in the art world. He found that the prevailing cultural dialogue did not suffice. Post-structural thought, with its focus on words and other symbolic codes, consigned thinking about cultural history and the philosophy of the human subject to the margins. Feelings, emotions, intuition,



*Untitled #1, 1967*  
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 90 in.  
Private collection

sensations—the life of embodied experience—was essentially ignored in favor of semiotics. With the study of sensations and perception, however, an understanding of our humanity is available to us. The above-mentioned innovative scientific technologies allow a new type of direct access to the complexity, flexibility, and vitality of our mental resources. In contrast, the signification of text, discourse, and code seems limiting. But color painters and art historians had kept up a conversation about color and sensorial perception in parallel to more well-known post-structuralist conversations. And the evidence of science made that sense-based artistic dialogue harder to ignore. In 1984, in the second edition of *The Sense of Order*, the eminent art historian E.H. Gombrich stated that “there exists a sense of order which manifests itself in all styles of design and which I believe to be rooted in man’s biological inheritance.”

Swain has an empirical but essentially intuitive way of working that yields visual expressions of great resonance and beauty. He knows that the feelings produced in the viewer by colors are a direct effect of sensory perception and not a result of cultural or historically conditioned associations. And he is aware that different viewers with normal color vision can actually perceive colors in slightly different ways. (It has been suggested that part of the problem lies with the naming of colors.) Color painters, like Swain, devote their attention to the durational observation of the properties of color in perceptual abstractions. The groundwork for such investigation was laid with the establishment of painting as an experimental activity in the 1880s by Seurat; after the death of Cézanne in 1906 it became more insistently so. In a way, painters were experimenting in the early days of abstraction as the experimental psychologists did. The Danish psychologist David Katz, himself a painter, has described experiences of local and film color effects that Kandinsky writes about in his 1913 autobiography *Reminiscences* and that artists and teachers, such as Josef Albers and Johannes Itten, expanded upon during the middle of the last century. Their instructional books on color phenomenology and in particular their ideas of color strategies for painters, first published in the mid-1960s, are still in use.<sup>4</sup>

How, then, does a young painter go about setting up his studio to make abstract color paintings? When Swain painted *Untitled #1* in 1967, a thirty-by-ninety-inch painting that consists of five rows of seventy-five discrete color squares, organized in a grid formation of modulated hues—ranging from intensely glowing saturated colors at the top to largely unsaturated colors at the bottom—he had deliberately addressed and controlled the three dimensions of color, namely hue, value, and saturation. He could have stayed there, content to keep making these very satisfying paintings.

But Swain was interested in color phenomena. When he painted the larger-than-life-size tondo, *Red and Green Color*, in 1969, he applied red and green, which are direct complements, of similar value in a brushy manner. The afterimage heightened both colors dramatically, offering a well-known and predictable effect. But there occurs a second effect at their horizontal border, a flickering halo of intense light, known as the Mach band. A third effect ensues, as colored light intermixes to a medial sensation, known as the subjective gray, at the bottom and seems to work its way up, as if a cloth was unfolding upwardly.

These sensations are fleeting but powerful. They involve eye, mind, and body. It seems that paintings like this one set the course for Swain, and he devoted himself in subsequent years to unlocking the mysteries of perception. To do so, he had to turn inward and find a personal approach, his own language of color.

How, then, does a painter find and determine color relationships? The most

straightforward expression of these is the color circle, and Swain proceeded to paint several versions of it with an increasing number of segments, beginning in 1971 with a twenty-four-part wheel that had an eight-and-a-half-foot diameter. It is interesting to note that the color yellow is placed at the top center in several of these early works, such as the color wheel studies and his *Untitled #1* of 1967. As an organizing principle this choice is perhaps indicative of Swain's particular sensitivity toward the polarity of tonal light/dark values. And it is one of the reasons why his early work can never be confused with color charts: it always involves a spatial dimension.

Over the years, in an effort to gain insights afforded by his practice into the ever-expanding vocabulary of color behavior and effects, Swain has devised a catalogue of close to five thousand color samples. Organized according to his unique numerical system, these color chips are carefully filed in narrow drawers in his studio and serve as aids in formulating color relationships for his paintings. It becomes self-evident that Swain's concern is neither to expose the hierarchy of colors nor to illustrate a theory or symbolism of cultural codes. Rather, his impulse stems from the desire to make us *see*, and thus *feel* and *think*, color at its most active, existential, and most refulgent.

His works are not immersive. Instead, factureless and painted in precise, modular grids, they demand a practice of looking with heightened attentiveness that engages us completely in the disquieting visual, cognitive, and intensely sensuous experience of color's constant flux. Our reward? There is knowledge and understanding to be gained by active and attentive looking. For instance, Swain seems to favor the two extremes of color organizations: contrasts and assimilation. Similar colors have the tendency to group together—we call them analogous colors—while complementary colors contrast and heighten each other's presence. Here reality and the sensation of color collide. When contrasting colors are precisely painted with a focused, definitive edge, they will not only create phantom lights that seem to come forward into the viewer's space but also create two ways of seeing color; one of which is the "true" color (seen at the center of the shape) and the other a kind of flickering around the edges where multiple colors meet. Diffused or unfocused edges, as in the paintings by Mark Rothko, for example, cause the viewer to "move" into the picture space, a way of viewing paintings familiar since the Renaissance. On the other hand, if we are patient and quietly observe Swain's paintings from varying distances, they can lead us to a new understanding of color painting: we are invited to participate in the complication and fluidity of color experiences that appear to change, move, and glow with heightened intensity. But the colors also come to rest again as the individual shapes take their turn at the center of our attention. Since viewers create these effects within themselves, each may experience them at slightly different times and in varying spatial modes of appearances. Such effects are considered intensely private experiences and therefore it is tempting to associate these paintings with religious or mystical states. The contemplation of Swain's paintings, while they always retain their own identity, provokes a concentrated, even heightened awareness of our direct access to our own consciousness. And for Swain, each of his paintings is hard-won in this way, by empirical investigations of color's behavior, its relationships and interactions. Swain selects individual colors by looking at one given color, say a saturated orange, and then attentively waiting for its complementary partner, a certain saturated blue, to emerge in his mind's eye. The same method holds true for his "Value" paintings of black, white, and gray. Color painters consider the achromatic tones of black, white, and gray as colors since they are subject to similar psychological effects as chromatic tones, but only their brightness changes within the



Robert Swain, photograph of the artist with  
*30 Part Circle*, 1971, Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 6in. diameter  
Private collection

context of a painting. Once the color structure is determined by Swain's choice of the colors' location and quantity, a particular and unique color expression is arrived at. After he has mastered this set of relationships, he subtly altered his considerations—and entered a new phase of work. During the 1980s, for example, he broke down the compositional structure of his paintings into differently sized blocks of colors. They were still set in relation to each other, but were shifted around. Some works were organized according to the Golden section, a mathematical ideal that, Swain said, came to him intuitively.

Phenomenological energies can be experienced as well when we look at Swain's large-scale mural work. This involves peripheral vision. While we observe the center of the painting, its edges can only be sensed and the colors seem to blend in motion. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Swain explored subtle but innovative adjustments to the scale and the size of individual elements, their order and configurations. Each painting exists on its own terms; nothing is arbitrary in this work. Its structure arises purely from formal or expressive considerations generated by its component parts. It takes awareness, time, and imagination to figure out the individual experiential sensations these paintings evoke. It is up to viewers to enter into a dialogue with the work.

### **New Work**

Inspired by new insights, in 2006 Swain set out to radically change his style. With this new body of paintings, he returned to earlier problems that had been abandoned for want of clarity. He revisited his efforts from the mid-1960s, when he attempted to combine the irregular shapes of the brushstroke with particular color concepts. It was a way to grapple with the heritage of Abstract Expressionism. But this new work is not merely a cultural citation.

To Swain, all his previous work began to appear passive. It seemed to evoke a certain kind of quietness, if one can manage to disregard the often bright color. A quietness or equilibrium, due perhaps to the vertical and horizontal divisions of the pictorial field. But this new body of paintings, he decided, would be given open structures of irregular lines that mimic brushstrokes. And in them, viewers can discover discrete elements of curved structures, repetitive units of individually jagged edges, and torn shapes unlike any encountered in nature. Almost always organized from top to bottom and diagonally across the picture plane, Swain's shapes reduce in size as they descend toward the lower left of the composition. Suddenly, afterimages appear within these shapes due to the effects of successive contrasting pairings. Their movement and frequency of pace creates the tension between control and aliveness of the paintings' surface. Swain's earlier concern with color contrasts has expanded in this new body of work to include the "active shape." Tensions arise, not just on the surface, but between such applicable characteristics as expansion and contraction, static and active, accumulation and dispersal, and the cross-blending of fields and structures. Every visual element is run through every possible permutation.

These new works read as dynamic fields without referring to landscapes. Further, the jagged edges of the "brushstroke" shapes are applied in thicker layers of impasto, and their shadow line lends an additional visual element, further rendering unique each new painting. And even in paintings where we discern not more than three colors, they are set into a disruptive contrast by the closeness in value and hue relationships and varying distribution of changes in size, quantity, and location.

In the former work, viewers could observe in time all the apparent movements of



*Untitled, 9-25-8 x 13-25-7 x 19-25-6 x 25-25-6 (left), 2010*

*Untitled, 11-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6 (right), 2010*

Both acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.

Collection of the artist

immaterial, merry blocks of light and color in their stimulating, advancing, and receding restlessness. These new canvases ask viewers to engage with the materiality of color as paint, something visceral and physical, the “physical fact” that Albers spoke of in relation to “psychic effects.” Reduced in number, the colors still emanate light and sensation, as, for example, in an untitled 2007 painting, a seven-foot-square canvas that consists of the split complementaries of red-violet, yellow-green, and blue-green median value. They are distributed in an all-over manner, in dramatically decreasing marks as they approach the lower left of the painting; the effect is of a fan-like spread. At that corner small patches of colors of a close value tend to mix optically. But when the texture is too coarse, the pure complementary hues create a phenomenon called complementary vibration, whereby the constituent colors seem to repel each other and cause optical movement or vibration. Observe the lower left areas of this canvas carefully. Which is it? Optical mixture or optical contrast? Scanning the entire surface, viewers notice a distinct sensation of everything being animated. The agitated lines of the brushstroke shapes, as they shrink in size, appear to collide with the colors that flare up in contrasting and successive afterimages of luminous light. At a heightened state of consciousness the tension is almost unbearable, the equivalent of an epic struggle: shape and color are enmeshed between states of emergence and resolution, existence and extinction, until closure sets in and all concern fades away.

### Summary

Painting can be comprehended only through direct experience. With these new works Robert Swain has achieved a visual expression that can be seen both all at once and in all its permutations. Viewers are presented with a series of particular problems that are solved differently in each individual work. His repertoire is vast. Swain has at his disposal a seemingly unlimited palette and his sequences of experiential sensations, such as simultaneous contrasts, after-images, and other induced effects, keep viewers in a reciprocal relationship with the paintings. Luminous shapes, brighter and more brilliant than the painted shapes that generate them, can be observed to appear, disappear, reappear, or cyclically fade out as our color-sensitive cones become fatigued. Swain has pushed the limits of perceptually functioning art from a gentle but lively impression of individually interacting color phenomena to a more aggressive and energetic fusion of cause and effect. The result is a new color expression that can reach all of us since we share the biological make-up to perceive it. But its experience is individual and private, taking us beyond visual sensations to our own radiant universe.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 [www.robertswainexhibit.org](http://www.robertswainexhibit.org)
- 2 To devote an exhibition to the experience of color in painting at this moment seems only fitting when we remember that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's seminal work on color phenomena, *Theory of Colours*, was published exactly two hundred years ago, in 1810. First trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake, London, 1840. First MIT Press paperback edition, March 1970.
- 3 Key texts include: Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy* (1950); Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954); Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color* (1961); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962); Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (1963); *The Responsive Eye*, exh. cat. by William C. Seitz, New York, Museum of Modern Art (1965).
- 4 John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (1999).

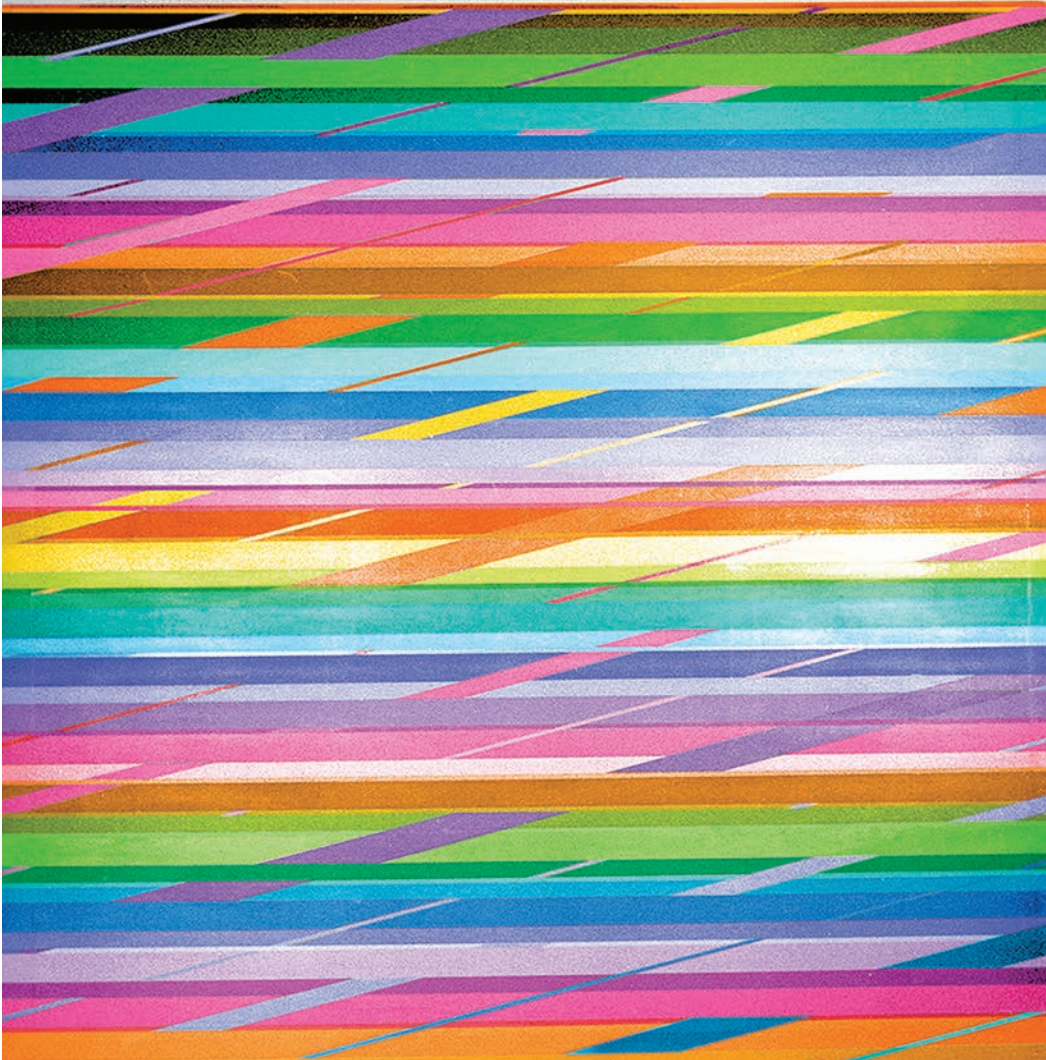
## ARTIST STATEMENT: COLOR AS CONTENT IN PAINTING

“French painters, he would continue, may have seen a rainbow. Nature may have given them some taste for nuance, some sense of color. But I have revealed to you the great and true principles of art. I say of art! of all the arts, gentlemen, and of all the sciences. The analysis of colors, the calculation of prismatic refractions, give you the only exact relations in nature, the rule of all relations. And everything in the universe is nothing but relations. Thus one knows everything when one knows how to paint; one knows everything when one knows how to match colors.”

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from *The Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Color is a form of energy derived from the electromagnetic spectrum that stimulates our perceptual processes and is instrumental in conveying emotions. In some instances, color is culturally encoded, projecting content through symbolism or associations. The origin for such references is found in the way that the energy (wavelengths) from a particular color generates feeling; a physiological change produced by the wavelengths (energy) of a particular color or colors. The energy which emanates from green is distinctly different from the wavelengths that define red. In some cultures, pure red is associated with danger. Feelings and attitudes created by the aggressive, radiate energy, which is unique to the red part of the spectrum. When pure red is altered, its emotional attributes change, as in the stability associated with red earth colors, or the whimsical fluctuation produced by pink. In this sense, color transmits feeling(s) through the perception of energy (wavelengths) from the electromagnetic spectrum. Freed from cultural restraints, red can be experienced by itself as a phenomenon that possesses substantial content. When red is placed next to green, the contrast is heightened, as M. E. Chevreul has observed, and the experience resides in the energy generated by the convergence of these unique spectral wavelengths.

– Robert Swain



Untitled, 1966  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.  
Destroyed

COLOR AS CONTENT: ROBERT SWAIN AND AMERICAN ART  
by William C. Agee, Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History, Hunter College

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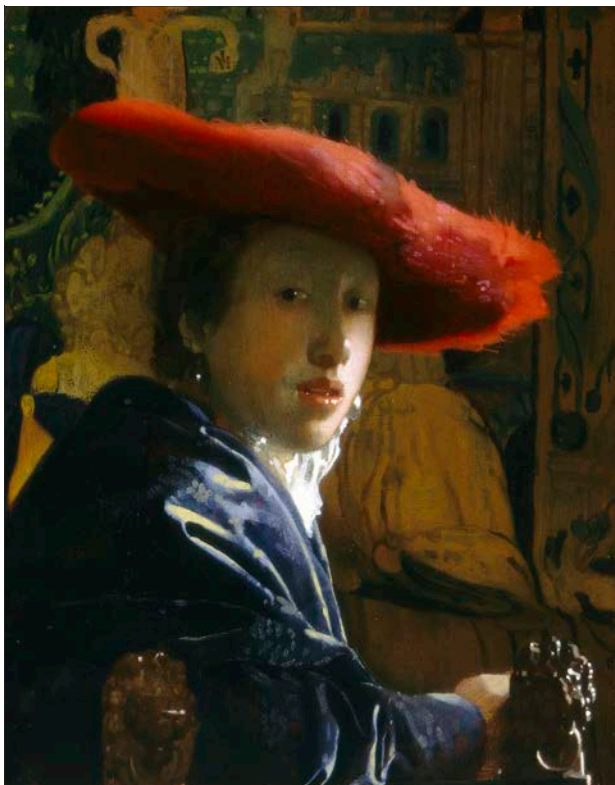
In concluding my 1965 study of early abstract color painting in America, I stated that the artists under discussion—Morgan Russell, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, and Patrick Henry Bruce among them—were “forerunners of a painterly vision being defined today.”<sup>1</sup> I was sure of that, but I could not know that by the end of the decade color painting would account for a good portion of the best work being done in America. Among those responsible for this surge of glorious color was a young artist who had not yet turned thirty. By 1970, in New York, Texas-born Robert Swain had launched a series of large-scale paintings of pure color, structured by a grid and composed of single squares of hues that seemed to be infinitely varied in their chroma, value, and saturation. This structure, with variations of divisions and emphasis, continued as the basis of his work until recently. Within this format, Swain found the means to an art of a virtually unlimited range of color effect and experience.<sup>2</sup> The artist radically altered the character of his paintings in 2006, but nevertheless, color has been and remains the content of his art.

The radiant, intense luminosity of Swain’s work can seem almost magical, even mystical, so much so that early on, the color might have seemed to have appeared overnight. But good art, of course, doesn’t just happen; it is almost always a long time in the making, and Swain’s first mature paintings appeared only in 1966, after long study and experimentation. In that year, he made a painting composed not of shapes filled with color, but with colors as independent forms, standing on their own, as autonomous pictorial elements in their own right. Swain did this by making lateral, crisscrossing, and intersecting bands of hues that created color areas, full and self-sufficient, independent but in unified sequences that filled and carried the painting. He had found the means to fully engage color as a formal and expressive language of its own, within the realm of abstraction, which freed it from its conventional role as a supporting agent for drawn shapes. His discovery, some forty-five years ago, opened a new world for Swain, a world that he has explored fruitfully, without pause, to this very day. One thinks of the young Paul Klee, who exulted after he had discovered color in 1914, “Color and I are one. I am a painter!”<sup>3</sup> Four years later, by the time Swain had turned thirty, his talent had outpaced and belied his young age, and he had to be counted as one of the major talents to emerge during the 1960s.

Swain’s journey can be traced to his boyhood. His only respite from the tropical heat of south Texas came from the study of nature on long walks and from drawing for hours on

end on his grandmother's porch. He remembers well the fluctuations of light on the Texas landscape as day turned into evening, a beautiful and recurring experience for anyone who has experienced it. Light, of course, is synonymous with color, so Swain believes that his exposure to natural phenomena formed the basis of his visual knowledge at this early date. We never forget our early impressions, so it is no wonder that his paintings have always been marked by their intense luminosity. It may also explain why this writer feels strong overtones of landscape in the work, especially the movement and change of light across the surface; the paintings may be abstract but they convey strong emotional experience.

As a teenager his family moved to the Washington, DC area, where he discovered the National Gallery of Art, for him an unlimited source of treasures. He scoured the collections ranging from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries. He was drawn especially to three painters, Raphael, Rembrandt, and, in particular, Vermeer, whose famous *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665-66, is a painting he still cherishes and studies intently whenever possible. He was struck by how the "formal elements could visually impart the content through the articulation of color and compositional elements."<sup>4</sup> In Vermeer, hues are closely equated with the forms; color modulation illuminates the painting, filling it with the light for which Vermeer is famous as it spreads across the canvas; the blues, reds, yellows, all primaries are gradated in careful calibrations throughout the surface.<sup>5</sup> Swain came to understand that the experience of a painting relied on its perceptual structures, which could thereby engender deep personal feelings and reactions. From the start of his education, then, he saw first-hand how color speaks to us at our deepest emotional and psychic core. From the beginning, *color was the content*, the credo on which he has based his art for a lifetime.



Johannes Vermeer  
*The Girl with a Red Hat*, c. 1666-67  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection  
Oil on wood panel, 9 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



Paul Cézanne  
*The Garden at Les Lauves*  
(Le Jardin des Lauves), c. 1906  
Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 31 7/8 in.  
Acquired 1955  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

In the late 1950s, Swain traveled throughout Western Europe, visiting the major cities and their majestic museums. It was a rare and valuable education, based on seeing first-hand important works of art, rather than the poor reproductions used in classroom settings. As he traveled, he noticed that whatever the subject or structure was in the old masters' work, it was always color that was the "alchemist that ushered in the decisive aspect of the experience."<sup>6</sup> He came to realize that color, the actual pigments, are material facts, real unto themselves, not descriptive, but expressive in themselves and made more so by the method of application. By the time he returned home, he had learned much about the art of painting and its making. But he lacked a real sense of how color actually functioned.

Back in Washington by the early 1960s, Swain found work at the Phillips Collection as a guard, maintenance man, and all-around handy man. There was no decent course in color available in Washington, but Swain continued his self-education at what is no doubt still the best place in America to look at painting. The intimate galleries, fashioned from the rooms of a private house, still afford an unique immediacy and intensity of the viewing experience. For Swain there could be no better place, for the founder, Duncan Phillips, had built his collection around the great masters of color painting, from Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881), Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Matisse to a small gallery set aside for several paintings by Mark Rothko. Working there on a daily basis, one could not help but be immersed in an atmosphere of color. Most important for Swain was Cézanne's famous *The Garden at Les Lauves*, c. 1906, one of his last paintings. It is usually thought of as unfinished, but we need to remember the old adage that a painting is finished when it's finished enough; it was no doubt finished enough for Swain. Even its "incomplete" parts, the open areas of unpainted canvas, served him well. The open areas become another color, heightening the intensity of the painted hues, and focusing our eye on the color areas. In the central area (the painting can be said to be divided into five zones), patches of blue, orange, and green abut each other, standing as independent shapes, not really describing anything but



Mark Rothko  
*Green and Maroon*, 1953  
Oil on canvas, 91 1/8 x 54 7/8 in.  
Acquired 1957  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

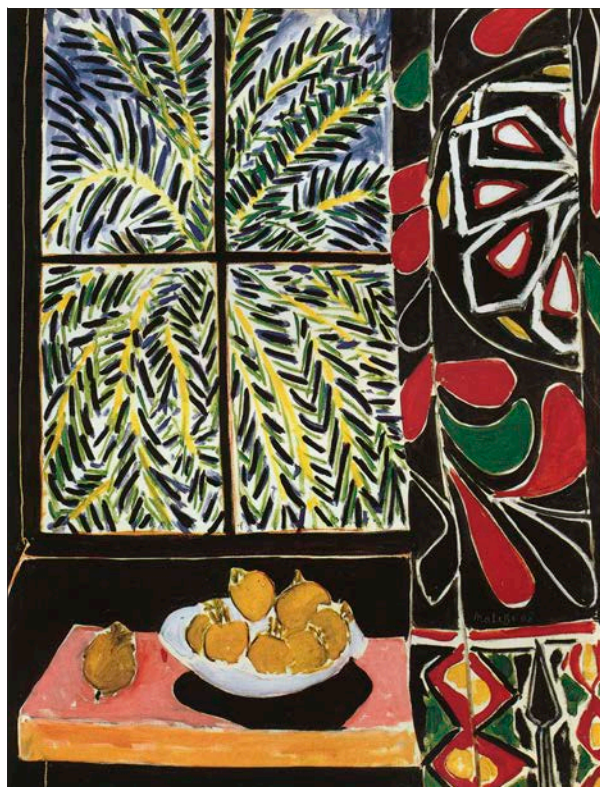
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embodying what Cézanne called his “sensations.”<sup>11</sup> They make forms, free and clear in spots, but mostly fusing into another area of different hues and values. This process has been called modulation, or more specifically gradation, producing harmony of contrasts, or harmony of analogous colors. These methods were defined and described by the great nineteenth century color scientists Eugene Chevreul, Charles Blanc, and Ogden Rood and have come down to us unchanged, although they are now used as the basis of a modern abstracting type of painting.

These methods have been at the heart of Swain’s work until recently, when he developed his brushstroke paintings in 2006. In this Cézanne, the color areas resemble Swain’s color units, though the latter’s work is clarified and more precise. Similarly, Swain often employed a composition in which extreme hue and value, ranging from white to a dark, almost black hue start at the lower left and move to the upper right corner, as Cézanne does in the lower left and top right sections of *Les Lavres*. Cézanne’s patches of constructed color led to Matisse’s work of 1905-1908, and subsequently to his monumental compositions of the later 1910s. So, too, the frontal intersections of the color areas form the basis of the Cubist grid, developed by Picasso and Braque by 1909-1910. By 1917, Mondrian had extended the grid to the entire surface in a way that later allowed Swain to use it in mural-sized paintings, a natural conveyance for his colors. These key figures of the early modern movement studied Cézanne intently and at length, understanding that he was the pivotal force that had to be assimilated to move painting forward into a new realm. We can say that Swain recognized the very same thing. Virtually every noted painter of color has started with Cézanne.

More treasures at the Phillips demonstrated for Swain the possibilities of color as a powerful visual medium, in particular a 1935 painting by Wassily Kandinsky titled *Succession*. It was a new kind of painting experience for him—the painting was carefully divided and organized in five horizontal tiers of space, almost like lines of a musical staff or text in a book. (It was as if Kandinsky had made the divisions in the Cézanne clear and literal.) In these tiers there is a wide band of linear, highly colored shapes, some organic, some geometric. Together they formed a unique visual language, based on an evident logic and clarity, far different from the prevailing heavy and dense surfaces of Abstract Expressionism that more often than not hid and obscured color. In this work colors stand independently, each distinct in the composition, each unique in its own right. Swain saw it as a work of a premeditative thought process; it helped him to begin to think of a new way of structuring a painting. Elsewhere in the Phillips Collection, Swain was dazzled by the sheer color luminosity of the Rothko paintings set aside in their small private gallery, and took new hints about the contrast of lights and darks in the Matisse painting of 1948, *Interior with a Egyptian Curtain*.

Indeed, if his studies were self-guided, at this point he had, perhaps unknowingly, linked himself to a long history of color painting in America, a history in which he now holds a distinct place. This history has never been written in full, but it is there, an important part of modern art in America. It can be traced to 1904, from the discovery of Cézanne in Paris, just as Swain had later discovered Cézanne at the Phillips Collection. In that year, a small group of American artists, collectors, and writers working in Paris had begun to uncover revelations in Cézanne's late work as it had gradually made its way to the progressive galleries of Paris. (We need remember that Cézanne had been something of a recluse in the south, with little of



Henri Matisse  
*Interior with Egyptian Curtain*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 45 3/4 x 35 1/8 in.  
Acquired 1950  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

his work to be seen in the capital.) Foremost among these figures were the Steins, especially Leo, as well as Michael and Sarah, young collectors and patrons from San Francisco. Gertrude, the most famous member of the family, took her hint from the others, and her famous salon soon became a primary viewing place of Cézanne's art.

At the same time, Matisse worked to absorb the lessons and implications of Cézanne's art. By 1907, no one understood the elder painter as well as he did, and it became the basis of his teaching and his art. At the request of the Steins, and of two young American painters, Max Weber and Patrick Henry Bruce, Matisse opened his famous school in early January 1908 with those listed above all in attendance. Matisse emphasized the primacy of color, echoing Cézanne's statements, among them, that "when color is at its richest, form is at its fullest; color and drawing are not distinct; one should never say model: one should say modulate; the painter must become classical again through nature, or in other words, through sensation."<sup>8</sup> All, especially the last, relate closely to Swain and his art, especially when we recall that Swain's sense of art had started with nature. Color is elevated to the status of line for Cézanne, and then for Matisse, thus eliminating the old preference for Florentine *disegno* over Venetian *colore* that dates to the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> One is tempted to think of Swain in Matisse's school, studying Cézanne closely, only now the class was being held at the Phillips Collection. In any case, we can trace the formal start of American color art to 1908, in the Matisse school, where Cézanne's principles were widely disseminated.

In his famous "Notes of a Painter," also published in 1908, Matisse called for an art of calm and repose, an art to soothe the tired businessman in his armchair.<sup>10</sup> Matisse was speaking of a meditative, spiritual condition that recalls eastern thought, but it has always been misunderstood. Instead, it led to the simplistic idea that color is "too decorative" in the pejorative sense, too easy, devoid of emotional or intellectual content. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth; color art is as demanding and difficult as any other type of art. As Swain's education demonstrates, it requires long, dedicated, and arduous study to develop a fine-tuned color sensibility. (As of today, Swain has developed his own color system, which consists of 4,896 colors, made up of thirty hues and thirty-three value steps, each with nine or more saturation steps.) Color is energy, a "firing of the eye" and the psyche.<sup>11</sup> The energy conveys emotions and feeling in both the artist and the viewer; therefore it is as intensely moving and poetic, as emotionally potent as any other kind of art.

Swain was also taken by the color and composition in the work of a now little-known artist, Karl Knaths (1891-1971), who was collected in depth by Duncan Phillips. Knaths should be better known, for the quality of his art is immediately apparent and one can see why Swain was attracted to the work. Knaths's colors are deep and rich, loosely arranged about a partial Cubist scaffold; they are lyrical and highly expressive, and clearly reflect a lengthy practice with and deep understanding of color. Swain went to Provincetown and worked there for thirteen months for Knaths, doing the usual studio tasks of a young assistant, much as young men would be apprenticed to Renaissance artists. It was just what he needed, for Swain thereby gained practical experience with the art of painting, as well as a deeper knowledge of its compositional elements, including color, and the basic issues confronting the artist in his studio. Knaths worked from the Ostwald Color System, one of the most advanced and widely used color systems in modern art. Based on harmonies, it was a reliable way to get the painting going in terms of its color structure, then allowing the artist to build on that to achieve his own personal canvases. Knaths had a highly developed musical sense and a wide knowledge of artists' writings. Together Knaths and Swain would

read canonical texts by Kandinsky and Klee. From here, it is no surprise that Swain's first real paintings were based on cubism, in the manner of Albert Gleizes. His mature paintings didn't come easily or quickly. For at least a year Swain was stuck, and depressed, until he found a way to liberate the color he had come to love, to find a way to let it speak, even to sing. This breakthrough finally came in 1966 with the discovery, in the "bands" painting, that color could make its own shapes and thus truly stand on its own and be the real subject of his art.

Color is often thought of as essentially theory, easily transferred to canvas, as something done by rote and by formulas. This too is wrong, as Swain's difficult, even laborious journey demonstrates with such force. It is done as much by feel and touch as any other art. Color theory is based on laws of color science, but it is real: simultaneous contrasts and film color really do work and the effects are immediately apparent to the human eye. Rather than thinking of "color theory" we might best think of Swain's art—and the art of all good color painters—as formed by a set of working principles of color usage, of how art is made, and through the tools the professional artist learns over many years. They come from long experience with color, constant investigation, ever-expanding consciousness of the possibilities of color usage, a practice now as natural to Swain as the very act of breathing. His art is finally the result of long practice, experimentation, trial and error: empiricism raised to a working methodology. These principles are all based to large extent on old color techniques developed in the nineteenth-century, then adopted and transformed in the twentieth century as the means to a modern, abstracting type of art. Lest we think of color as predictable, we need to remember it is always subjected to constant changes in light conditions. Finally, no matter how elaborate the preparations (and in Swain's case, they are considerable), the artist can never predict just how a work will turn out. The result is always a surprise, both for him and the viewer. (We think of Josef Albers and his twenty different reds; or Donald Judd, not knowing why red enraged a bull but knowing it made the sharpest definition of an edge.)

By the early 1970s, Swain was a well-known and highly respected artist, as well as a much-admired teacher at Hunter College, where he continues to serve in a department that has long supported color painters. His paintings became more complex, more filled with the energy and light that only color of such intensity can generate; and they have evolved into new formats, well described in the other texts in this catalogue. But shifts in taste and art practices that no longer value the expressive and structural uses of pure color, or even painting itself, have pushed color into the background. In recent decades color came to be identified almost exclusively with the painterly color-field artists associated with Clement Greenberg, all of whom—artists and critics alike—are now vilified. Swain was never associated with Greenberg or his circle, but color painting of all kinds, including Swain's type of hard-edge art, was and continues to be widely dismissed as emotionally empty, "decorative" in the pejorative sense, and even worse. This will remind us of the turn against Impressionism in the early twentieth century, when it was widely considered structurally weak, too easy, and without real substance. But soon enough, Impressionism was re-evaluated; the same will happen with color painting. Good art always wins out.

By 1910, Cézanne's art, especially his late work as seen through Matisse's eyes, had inspired a new generation of American artists. The great Cézanne retrospective of 1907, held in the annual Salon and at Vollard's, were turning points in the history of American art no less than world art, for in his work artists were accorded instant access to the most advanced modernist interpretations of color and the grid.

Matisse's most important lessons, however, were not those about Cézanne that he

conveyed to students but were most readily and indelibly apparent in his own art. His work was first on view in America in April 1908, at Alfred Stieglitz's famous gallery 291, and while only one painting was included in that debut presentation, it was enough to demonstrate the possibilities his art offered to aspiring younger artists. After 1908 his art could be seen in the collections of Gertrude and Leo Stein in Paris, where their open houses were obligatory stops for emerging American modernists on their trips abroad. At the groundbreaking Armory Show in 1913, America saw the full expressive and formal range of Matisse's art; no less than thirteen paintings were on exhibit, including the now canonical *Red Studio* of 1911, a work which has its own special history in American art. It is a touchstone for color painting, the first true color field painting; that is, color as a full field, the panel of red acting as a full sheet or envelope of color that carries the painting as a single entity. It had an immediate impact, for very different reasons, on a wide range of Americans. In 1917, the young Stuart Davis initiated a practice he continued throughout his life of engaging with artists and particular works that he found offered special challenges. Davis created his own version of the *Studio* in which he introduced more color variation and pictorial incident, as if to try one-upping Matisse. This began a lifelong dialogue with Matisse's color, accounting in great part for the development of Davis's own special gift for color. The history of *Red Studio* took a crucial turn in 1949 when the Museum of Modern Art acquired the painting and put it on permanent view. There Mark Rothko, one among the countless artists affected by it through the years, studied it intently for extended periods and found in it the last and determining factor

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Henri Matisse  
*Red Studio*, 1911  
71 1/4 x 86 1/4 in.  
Oil on canvas  
The Museum of Modern Art  
Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund  
© 2010 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

that enabled him to break through to his mature style of floating rectangles of luminescent color. We do not associate Matisse or the *Red Studio* with the gestural branch of Abstract Expressionism, but an examination of the all-over red surface of de Kooning's *Gansevoort Street*, c. 1949, suggests just how closely others had been looking at the recently acquired painting.

By 1914, American painters, Patrick Henry Bruce and Arthur Frost among them, as well as the Synchronists Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright, were at the forefront of the drive towards an abstract art based on pure color. American artists were often considered behind the times, but in the years before World War I they were known and respected members of avant-garde circles in Paris, and were an intrinsic part of the international drive towards a new and modern art. Together with the French artists Robert and Sonia Delaunay and the Czech painter Frantisek Kupka they helped to forge a visionary art of color abstraction, termed Orphic Cubism by Guillaume Apollinaire, which included some of the best painting being done in Europe and America.

By 1914, the broad movement to color abstraction was in full view in public exhibitions in Paris. This development was widely commented on by the leading critics of the day, and its influence spread quickly and widely. High-keyed color was soon apparent in the work of Marsden Hartley, who was also influenced by the color used by Wassily Kandinsky and the Germans Franz Marc and Emile Nolde, among others. Arthur Frost and Stanton Macdonald-Wright were forced by the outbreak of war in 1914 to return to New York, where they began to spread the principles and possibilities of the new color painting to other, surprisingly diverse groups of artists. Indeed, by 1918, color painting had already been seen in some depth in New York. Macdonald-Wright and Russell had shown together at the Carroll Galleries in New York in 1914; Macdonald-Wright's show at 291 in 1917 attracted wide attention, and among those who drew from his example was Georgia O'Keeffe, whose palette immediately took on the luster of high and intense color. Even as improbable an artist as Thomas Hart Benton, Wright's close friend and student in those days, was prompted to do a series of color abstractions in 1917-1918. To be sure, this episode did not last long, but from it Benton learned key lessons of color application that were at the core of his painting throughout his career. Benton's style of mannerist *contraposto* had come from Wright as well, and in the 1930s Benton passed this on to Jackson Pollock, which was one source of Pollock's famous all-over poured compositions of 1947-1950.

So, too, Arthur Frost passed on the methods of color painting at the same time to a group of artists working in New York. Chief among them was James Daugherty, who quickly adopted these techniques as the basis for a series of abstractions and quasi-figurative murals that he continued until his death in 1974 and that mark him as one of our important modernists. Indeed, Daugherty's art flourished again in the 1960s just as the young Swain, fifty years his junior, began to explore color in his own way. A crucial event for Frost and Daugherty was the arrival of six of Bruce's latest paintings from the artist in Paris in 1917, the "Compositions," now at Yale and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, all dated 1916. These large paintings, still glorious today, are high points of color abstraction. They carried the same powerful color chords Frost had known in Bruce's art prior to 1914, but Frost was stunned by a new element, never seen before in Bruce's work: the extensive use of large areas of black and white, elements previously omitted from chromatic color but now employed as additional primaries, a practice used by Matisse and codified by Wilhelm Ostwald, a ranking color scientist. The use of black and white further extended the possibilities inherent in

color abstraction and further extended its expressive range. These paintings were acquired by Katherine Dreier for the collection of the Société Anonyme and were exhibited at the group's galleries in New York in the early 1920s. Daugherty learned quickly, and in turn spread the methods of color to his circle of friends, including Jay Van Everen, who did an extended series of abstractions during the 1920s. Although we still know very little of their exposure to color ideas, artists as distinctive as Joseph Stella and Morton L. Schamberg incorporated full color structures as the basis of their art by 1913.

This use of color, far deeper and more widespread in America than we supposed, makes it clear that as a formal and expressive methodology it has been as important as Cubism in the history of modern art. Yet we have been slow, reluctant, and even afraid to understand its full importance, a phenomenon that has a name: *chromophobia*. The reasons for its continuation are numerous. American and world modernisms were dispersed and fragmented by World War I, making these developments seem brief and of little consequence. On the contrary, they continued and gained new converts, and although modernism did not end in the 1920s, as is still widely and erroneously believed, the momentum of a perceived movement was no longer available, thus disguising its true importance. Rather, older artists continued their color explorations in the 1920s as independents, often isolated but no less productive. Patrick Henry Bruce, leading a solitary existence, critically and commercially forgotten, made a series of great purist still lifes based on a new investigation of color volumes that rank among the best paintings done by any American of the time. Daugherty and Van Everen continued apace, as did Alfred Maurer, whose still life paintings of the late 1920s are among the major monuments of Cubism and color painting. By the mid-1930s, major artists such as Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Stuart Davis had mastered a vivid and original use of color, which became the expressive force at the heart of their work.

We have missed much of this history, as a history, because of the long-standing prejudice against color. Florentine *disegno* was seen as more complex and intellectual, while color was viewed as too easy, too sensual, in a word, too decorative. For many, the strong graphic lines, fragmented planes, and dark hues of Cubism seem more difficult (and modern art was supposed to be nothing if not difficult) than the free-flowing sensuous colors of Matisse, who did not help matters with his famous remark about the armchair, a comment he instantly regretted. The graphic bites into the surface, giving line an apparent weight and density that is equated with complexity; but complicated is not the same as complex. Color, to cover the canvas, must glide across the surface, making it seem, at first, literally less weighty and less complex. We persist in seeing the decorative as inferior, not understanding its real meaning and its ability to establish an overall program or scheme for an interior or a single painting. Giotto's first task at the Arena Chapel was to design and install an overall decorative program. So, too, color appeals to our emotions, which terrify us, and, unable to confront them, we avoid the powerful and compelling stimulus of color and its effects.

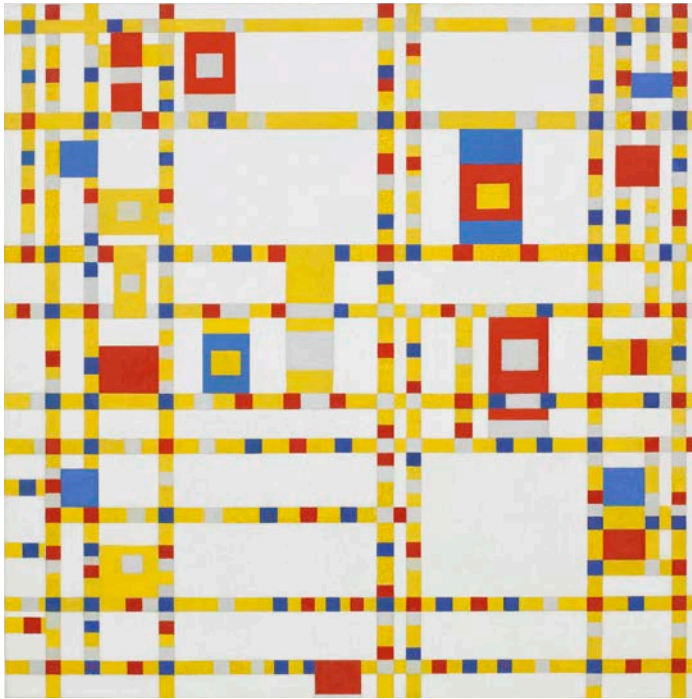
Among the primary color principles are the law of simultaneous contrast, by which juxtaposed colors will be influenced by the complementary of the other; the law of successive contrast, which states that a new color will be produced on the retina after the eye is shifted quickly from one color to another. Two other principles, the law of harmony of analogous colors and the law of harmony of contrasts, state that colors either adjacent or widely separated on the spectrum will each produce harmonious relationships. Related to this is the principle of gradation, by which colors in a given area are modulated to lighter or darker tones by small (or even no) intervals. Harmonies can also be produced by massing color in pairs

or triads, as the composer creates a musical score; the analogy between creating an abstract painting and crafting a musical composition was often evident in the work of many modern painters. These principles still remain in wide practice, augmented by other, more recent propositions such as that of film theory, developed by David Katz, which points to the way a color field will appear to detach itself from the canvas. This principle is particularly apparent in those paintings by Swain in which the color seems to appear as a separate, physical reality in front of the canvas.

Work from the 1950s and 1960s by two old masters of color, Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers, clearly demonstrated their continuing importance to color in America. In fact, their roles in American art can be traced to their arrival here, in the early 1930s, as the first of the émigré artists to escape Nazi Germany. No other artists actually working here had a greater influence on the spread of color in American art than Albers and Hofmann. More than any other artists they—and Matisse, of course—were responsible for the development of color usage on such a wide scale in America after 1950. Soon after their arrival they quickly became legendary teachers who had a profound effect on successive generations of artists, Hofmann in New York and Provincetown, Albers at Black Mountain College and, after 1950, at Yale. Indeed, Clement Greenberg once remarked that in the 1930s at Hofmann's school you could learn more about Matisse's color than you could from Matisse himself. It was as if Hofmann's classes were a later extension in America of Matisse's own school. No one has ever disputed their importance as teachers, but the greatness of Albers and Hofmann as working artists has never been fully appreciated, which is an unfortunate deterrent to our full understanding and appreciation of American art. For it is through their work as artists productive to the end of their lives that the advancement of the possibilities of color for abstract art had its most telling impact. In fact, both were making significant paintings much earlier than we have supposed, certainly by 1940. While still not well known, these are works of note that belong



Karl Knaths  
*Shacks*, 1964  
Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 42 in.  
Acquired 1964  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC



Piet Mondrian  
*Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942-43  
50 x 50 in.  
Oil on canvas  
The Museum of Modern Art  
Given anonymously  
© 2010 Mondrian / Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Virginia

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to the history of color painting in America.

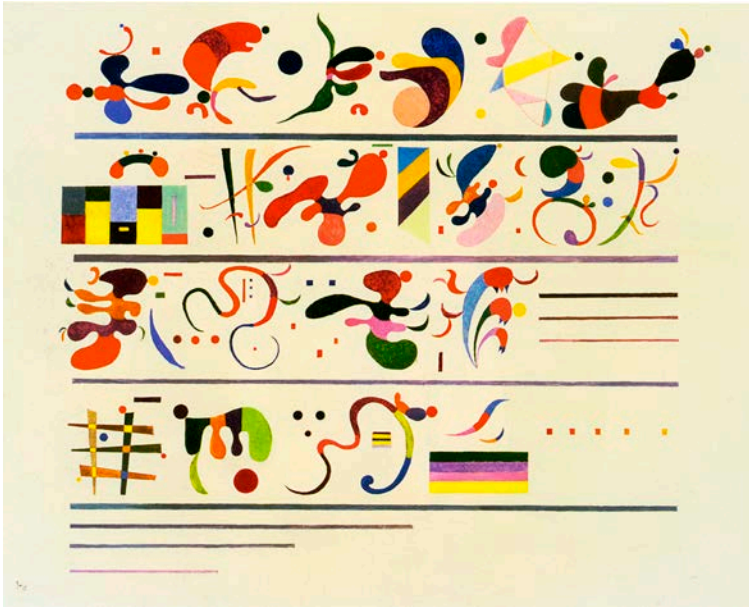
Albers and Hofmann were, of course, not the last artists to escape Nazi Germany and enrich American culture. The arrival of Piet Mondrian in New York in 1940 was also an event of great importance. That Mondrian's clarity and probity of structure offered new challenges is of course well known. Less understood is the valuable example his color offered, and a good case can be made for the optical vibrations of his seminal wartime painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as one of the first color field paintings. Together, these Europeans—Matisse, Albers, Hofmann, and Mondrian—were crucial to the introduction of diverse methods of color application that set the stage for the great burst of chromatic abstraction in America after 1950. To this list, we can add Knaths for his importance to Swain. The surge in color in postwar painting begins with Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Ad Reinhardt, Sam Francis and concludes fifteen to twenty years later with Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, Ray Parker, and Frank Stella. These later artists are identified as color field artists. But the term needs to be expanded to include artists such as Swain. Indeed, Swain should be considered a member of the Washington Color School, a fact that reminds us that we still need a thorough study of that cohort.

But however we term it, after forty years, Swain had compiled an enormous body of compelling work in which any artist could take pride. It would have been easy enough for him to continue in the same style, with new variations, new twists and turns, as he had for all those hard-won years. Thus it came as no small surprise to his friends and colleagues when

in 2006 Swain introduced a radical new format to carry his intense color. Gone, apparently, were the grid and single squares of high and individuated hues and values, replaced now by free-floating biomorphic shapes of, at first, two colors that seemed to move up and across the surface, from lower left to upper right. He began with two hues, and since then has moved to three and even four hues in action at once. Swain's surfaces were never totally matte, for granules of paint were always evident upon close examination, but in the new paintings, which he calls the "brushstroke" paintings, the presence of the hand is now clearly evident. The surfaces are distinctly built up with raised pigment; ridges and valleys ebb and flow over surfaces created by constantly changing densities of paint. We can feel the painting as a low relief, if we could run our hands over the surface, which gives his art a literal, tactile feel not present before. Swain had previously gravitated toward the linear and its precision, but it is a law of life that to get something one must give something up, and to get this order Swain had to give up drawing and brushwork, which evidently he missed. Indeed, he had tried a few brushstroke paintings in 1966, but he dropped the idea since he was not satisfied with them. Simply enough, we may say he reclaimed it for these late paintings.

They are stunning paintings, giving us a new kind of experience. But what, we will ask, brought this about? The shift in Swain's art—undertaken when he was sixty-five—can be seen as part of a long tradition of old-age art in which, after a lifetime of labor, artists make dramatic shifts rooted in new experience, a newfound sense of freedom, a drive to push their limits, almost a devil-may-care attitude. They have nothing to lose. Often it comes from a new sense of spirituality, a coming to terms with oneself and the world, as it did for Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Titian, all famous for the loosening of their early art into a painterly haze that seems otherworldly to us. Cézanne sought a new classical monumentality in his late *Bathers*. After a near-death experience with an almost fatal illness and operation, Matisse let it fly, abandoning any limitations on his conception of color realization, plunging himself to huge areas of pure, unmediated color in his radical paper cutouts produced between 1943 and his death in 1954. Matisse virtually invented a new medium, a fusion of painting, drawing, and sculpture, by cutting directly into the paper with scissors, as a sculptor would carve into his/her material. In his last painting, Mondrian was clearly exploring new expressive territory by mixing paint and tape, making a new, built-up painterly surface. When his friend and disciple Charmion Von Wiegand saw the new painting, she exclaimed, "But master, the theories!" Mondrian smiled his quiet smile and replied, "Painting first, my dear, theories later," which tells us much about art in general, and color painting in particular.<sup>12</sup> So, too, Stuart Davis loved clearly drawn lines but he also cherished paint as a material and the surfaces it could generate, and his work is a fusion of line and surface.

The effects, as well as the format and technique, in Swain's late work are new, but they have their roots in the earlier work. It is certainly just as concerned with color as his earlier work, but now color is given more weight, density, and surface texture; there are varying amounts of pigment in different areas of his compositions, and there is a new freedom and movement to the shapes. The shapes start at the lower left, just as the lighter colors always did in the grid paintings, and then move to the upper right, becoming larger and more diffuse in their disposition on the surface. The movement is unmistakable, hurried on by a new openness and freedom of expression for Swain. Like Matisse and others, if in different ways, Swain lets the grid go, allowing color to literally explode upon and over the surface, filling the painting field with a new and more intense kind of energy. There is new playfulness to the brushstroke paintings, a kind of liberation, a new sense of possibilities and the willingness



Vasily Kandinsky  
*Succession*, April 1935  
Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 39 3/8 in.  
Acquired 1944  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

to pursue his instincts. It's a move that takes great courage. We will recall that this type of movement was evident in Kandinsky's 1935 painting *Succession*, which had been so important to him as he was first developing his color art. The shapes in Kandinsky's work dance and move with joy, controlled but buoyant, something like certain shapes in Matisse's late paper cutouts. In Swain's newest paintings there is an explosive release of the color that had been so carefully controlled for many years. It's as if color has entered into a third dimension, and we are given a color experience based on pure sensation. Seeing these works is a rare and beautiful experience.

We might look back even further to the Cézanne at the Phillips Collection, *Les Lauves*, a painting that had so deeply affected Swain. Here too the space is empty at the lower left, and moves towards a full density of paint in the upper right. Here also Cézanne's color patches move freely yet are connected to an overall order and structure. In certain of Swain's brushstroke paintings Cézanne's patches of color, clear and distinct and self-contained worlds in themselves, seem to have been reborn. So, too, we need remember, the influence of Tony Smith, Swain's mentor at Hunter College, and think of how Smith's paintings often feature free-form shapes that seem to move of their own accord while still anchored to the overall structure. At the same time we might say that this is part of a course his work has followed for more than twenty years, moving from a strict grid to variations of color areas that seem to skip and move over the surface in larger and smaller areas of light and hue.

We cannot say where Swain will go next with his work but we can be sure that he will, as always, take us into new realms of visual experience. His explorations continue, part of an approach to painting whose possibilities, as I had said in 1965, and confidently repeat here, are still being defined today, and will be for years to come.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 William C. Agee, *Synchromism and Color Principles in American Painting, 1910-1930* (New York: M. Knoedler & Co., Inc., 1965).
- 2 William C. Agee, "Synchromism and Color Painting in American Art," in *Color and Form: 1909-1914*, (San Diego: Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, 1971).
- 3 Klee's full statement on color was: "I now abandon work. It penetrates so deeply and so gently into me, I feel it and it gives me confidence in myself without effort. Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Color and I are one. I am a painter." Felix Klee, ed., *The Diaries of Paul Klee: 1898-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 297.
- 4 All quotes relating to Swain come from interviews with the artist held between October 2009 and June 2010. Hereafter they are referred to simply as Swain interviews.
- 5 Swain interviews.
- 6 Swain interviews.
- 7 Paul Cézanne, in many sources, and used many ways. See Gail Stavitsky and Katy Rothkopf, eds., *Cézanne and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 8 See *ibid.*
- 9 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000).
- 10 Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," 1908. Reprinted in Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 42.
- 11 See my essay on Sam Francis in *Sam Francis Paintings 1947-1994* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999).
- 12 See William C. Agee, *Charmion Von Wiegand: Improvisations* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2003).



Robert Swain, photograph of the artist  
Provincetown, Massachusetts 1965  
Painting destroyed



## COLOR PLATES



Untitled, 1968  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 ft. 7 in. x 16 ft. 3 in.  
Private collection



*Equilateral Triangle*, 1968  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 9 1/2 in. (side)  
Private collection



*Hexagon*, 1969  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. high  
Private collection



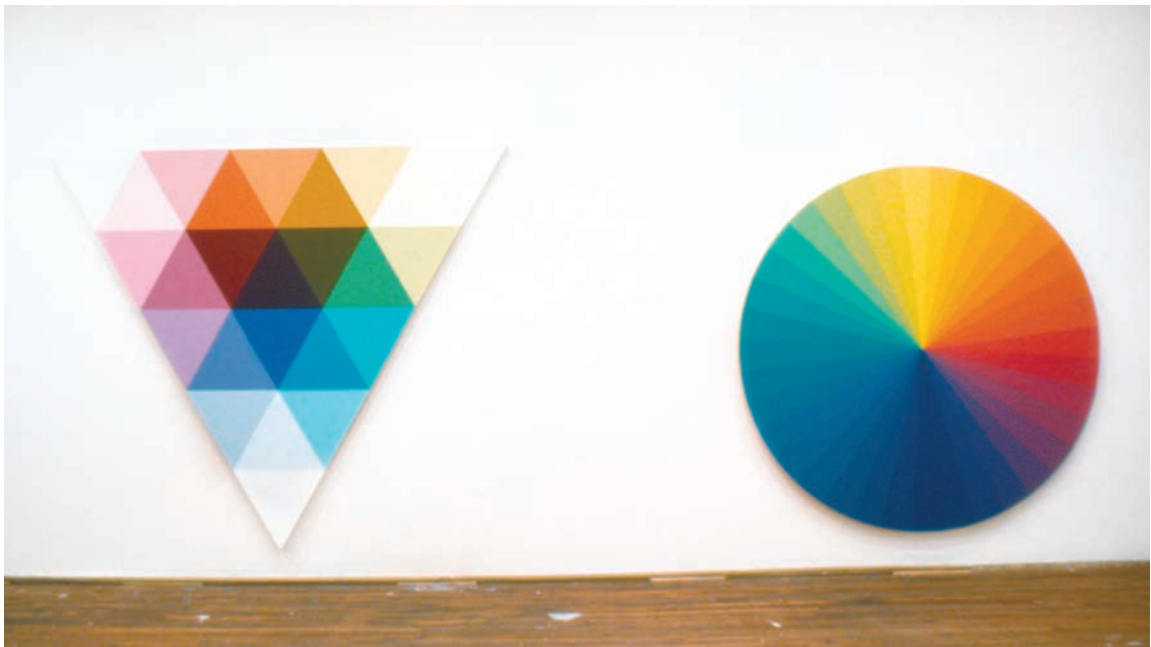
*Triangle*, 1969 (left)  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 ft. high  
*Hexagon*, 1969 (right)  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. high  
Private collections

*Triangle*, 1969 (left)  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 ft. high  
*Hexagon*, 1969 (right)  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. high  
Private collections

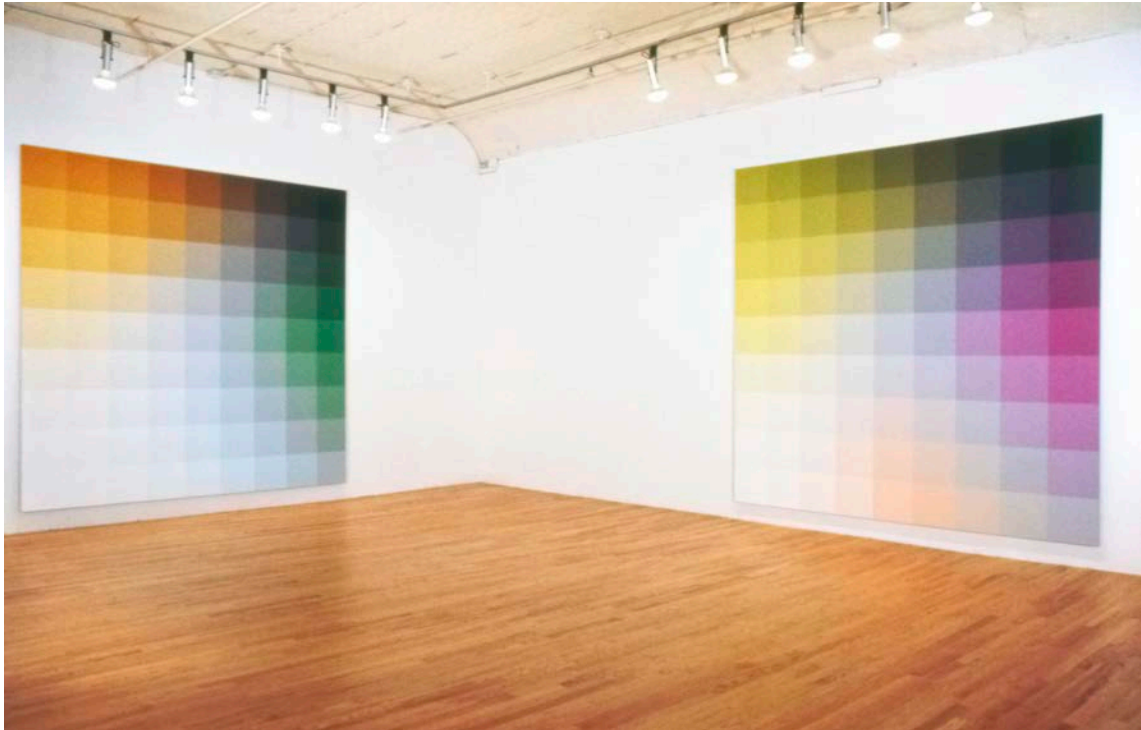




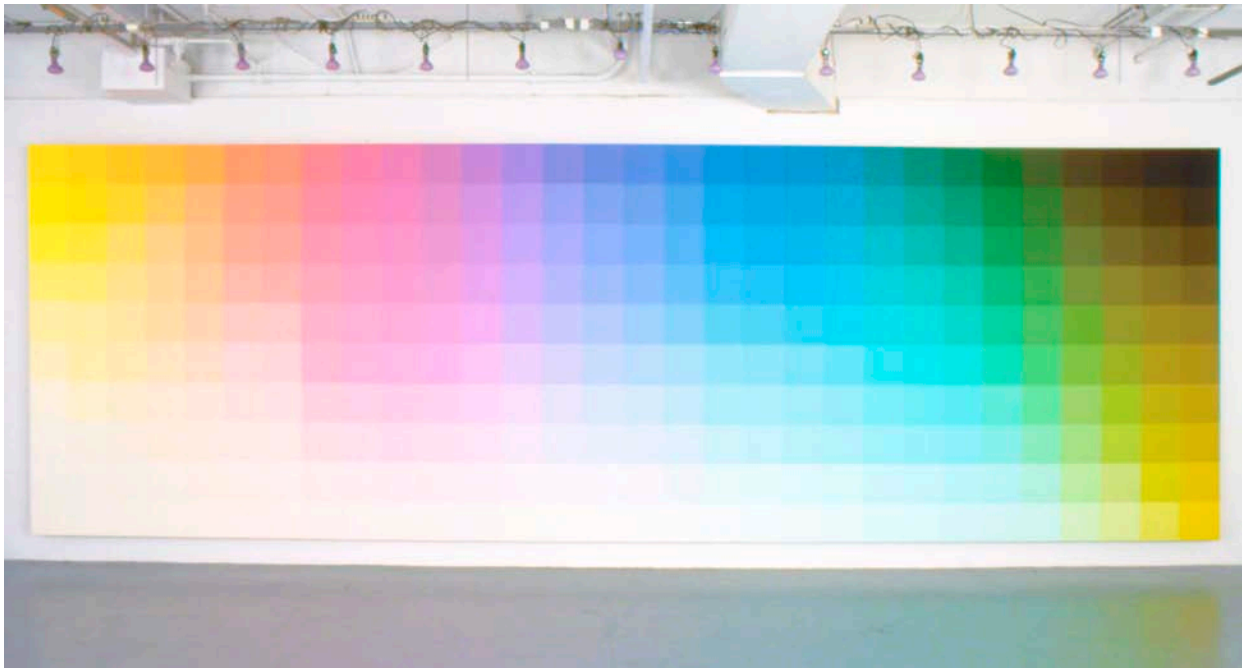
*Red & Green Circle, 1969*  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft., 6 in. diameter  
Collection of the artist



*Triangle*, 1969 (left)  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 ft. high  
*Circle*, 1971 (right)  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 ft. diameter  
Private collections



*Untitled, 908, 1977* (left)  
*Untitled, 910, 1977* (right)  
Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 9 ft.  
Collection of the artist

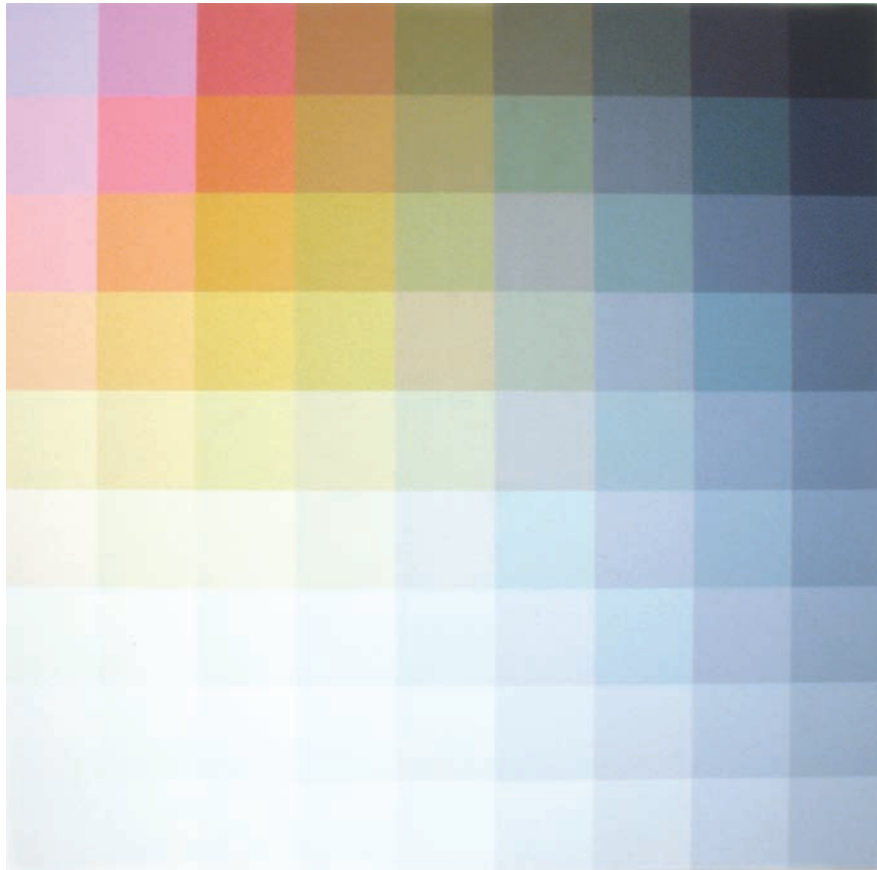


Untitled, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas, 10 x 30 ft.  
Collection of the artist

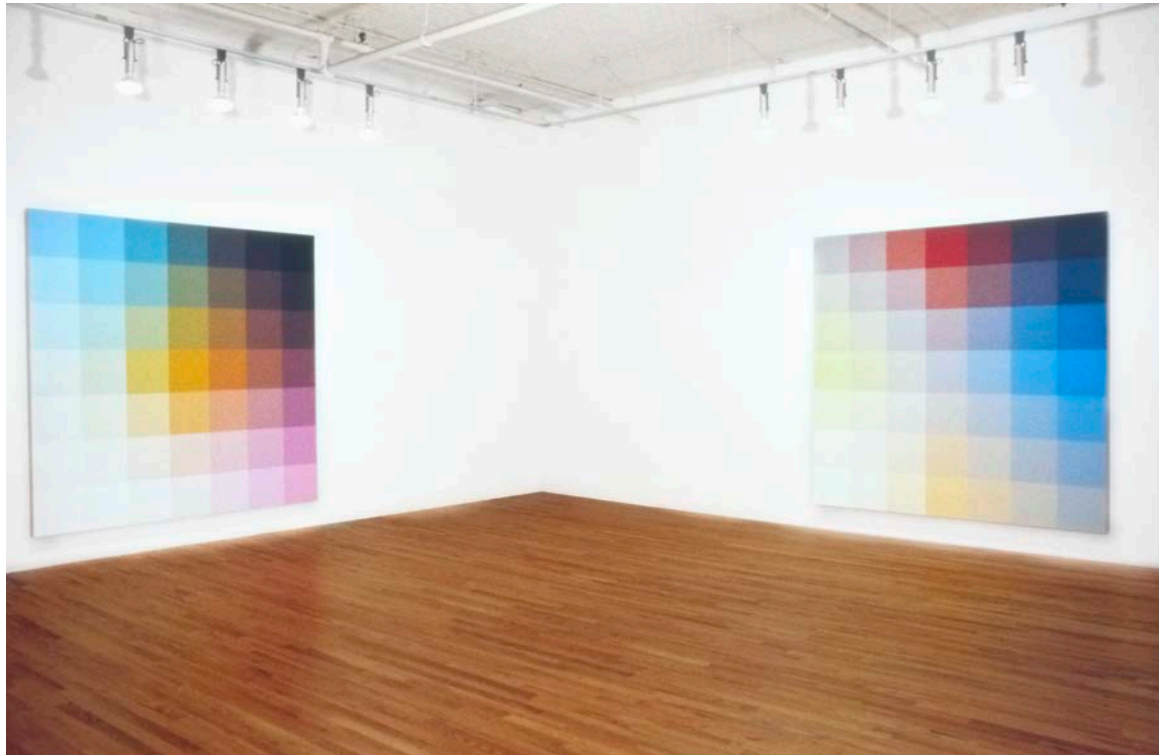


*Untitled, 919, 1979 (left)*  
Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 9 ft.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edith C. Blum Fund, 1982 (1982.12)

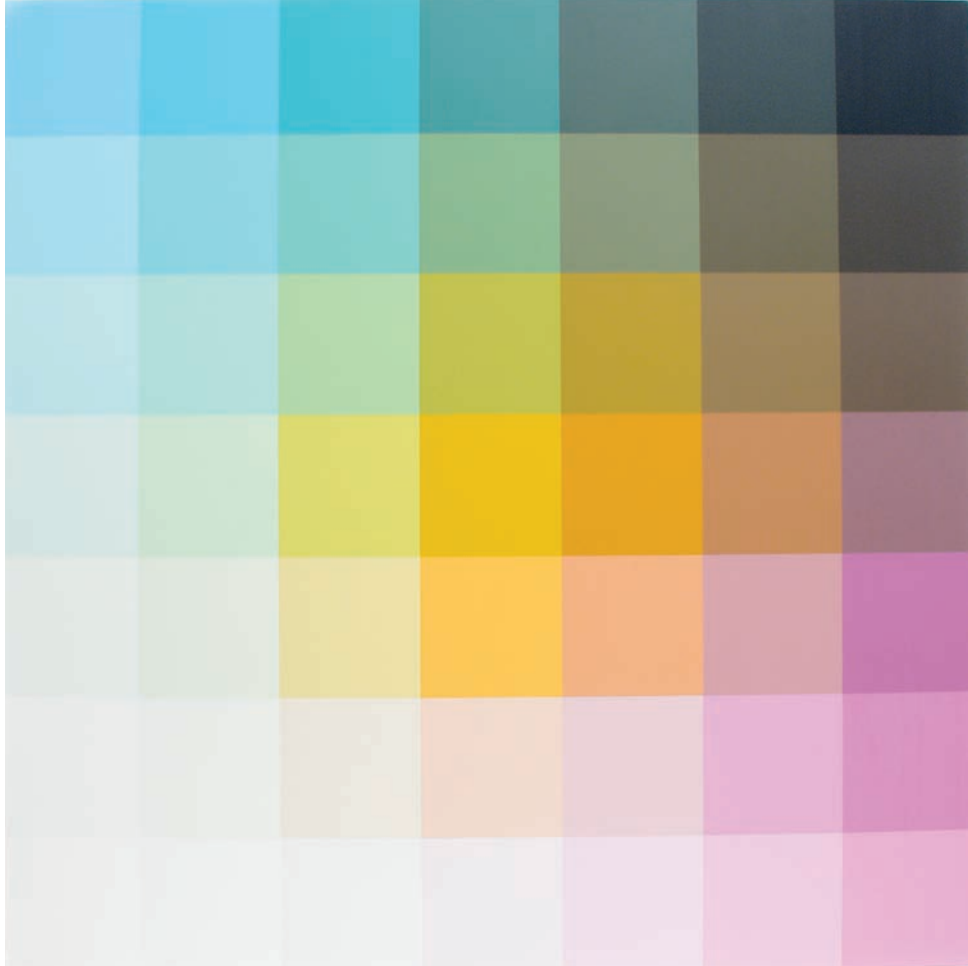
*Untitled, 917, 1979 (right)*  
Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 9 ft.  
Collection of the artist



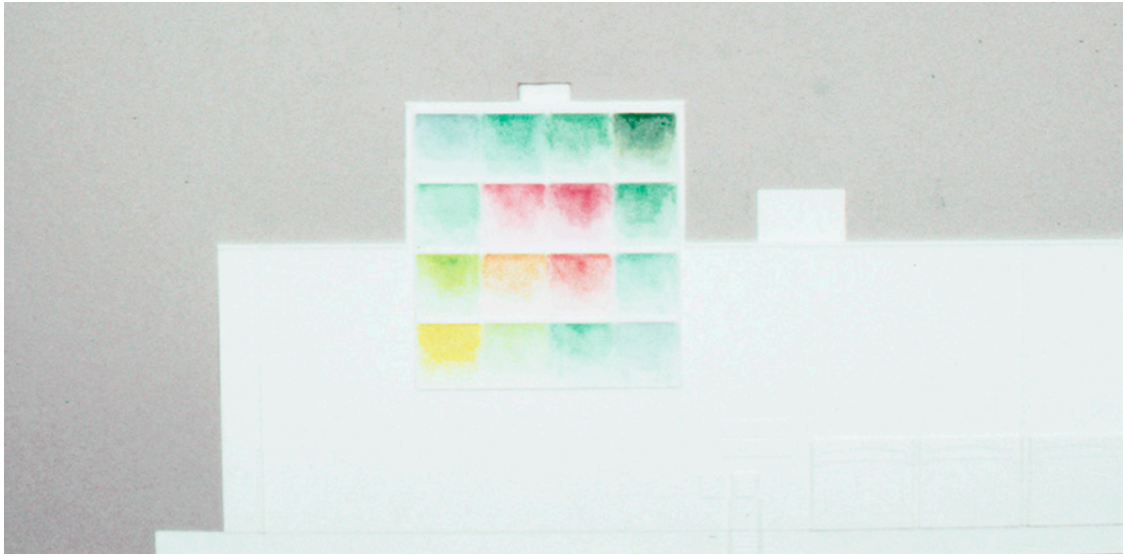
*For Tony's Jane*, 1979  
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 108 in.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edith C. Blum Fund, 1982 (1982.12)



*Untitled, 703, 1978 (left)*  
*Untitled, 702, 1978 (right)*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



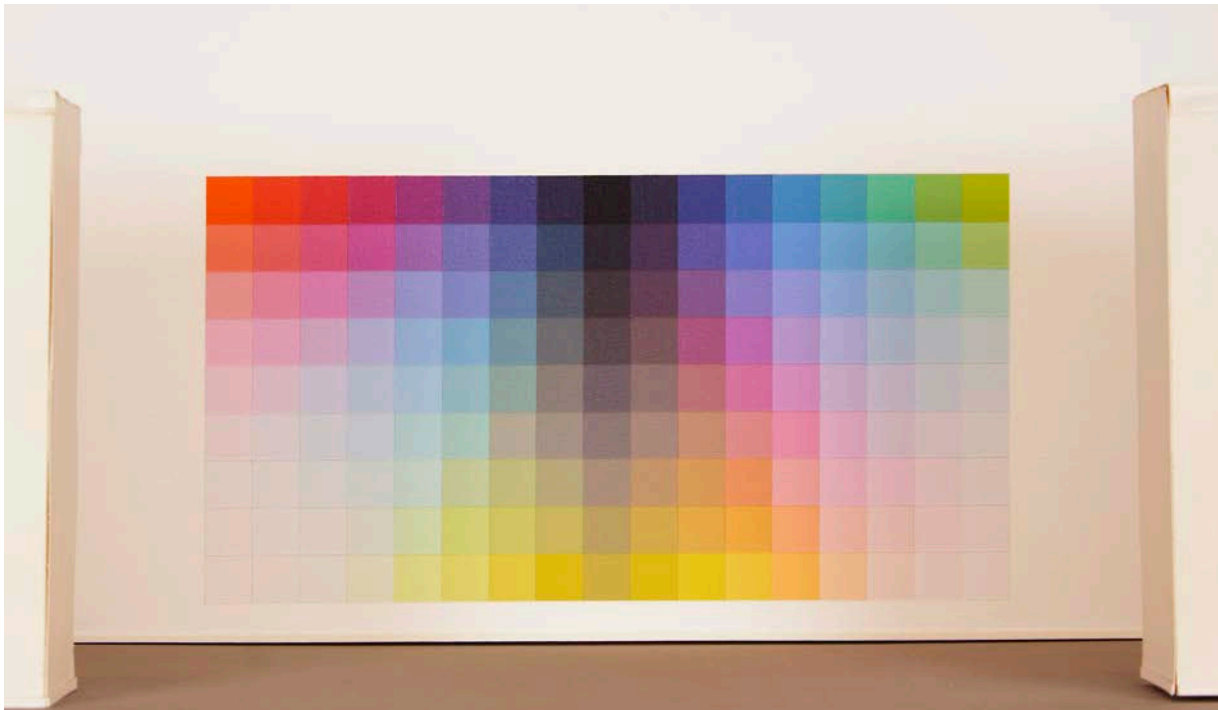
*Untitled, 703, 1978*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



Model for *Ocean Spray Light Piece*, 1981-1983  
Sulphur Springs, Texas  
Light piece, orchestrated by computer, 30 x 30 ft.  
Project was not realized  
Collection of the artist



Model for *Ocean Spray Light Piece*, 1981 - 1983  
Sulphur Springs, Texas  
Light piece, orchestrated by computer, 30 x 30 ft.  
Project was not realized  
Collection of the artist



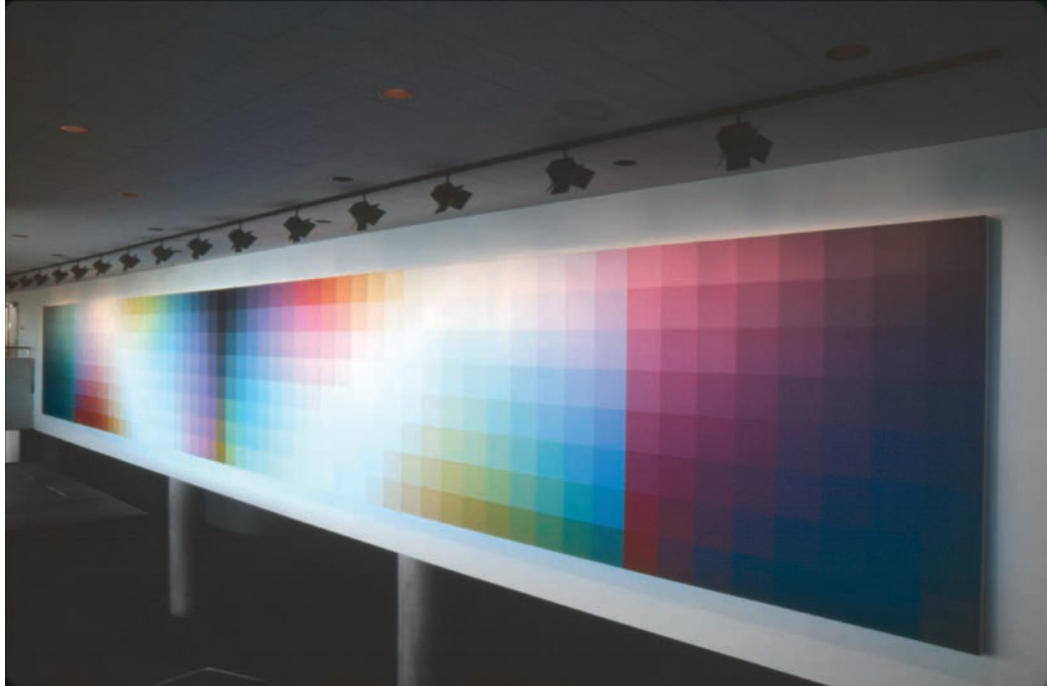
Model for untitled commission, 1982 - 1983  
Acrylic on Masonite, 13 1/4 x 39 7/8 x 15 3/4 in.  
Commissioned by Johnson & Johnson, New Brunswick, NJ. Architect: I.M. Pei



Untitled installation, 1982-1983  
Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 17 ft.  
Commissioned by Johnson & Johnson, New Brunswick, NJ. Architect: I.M. Pei

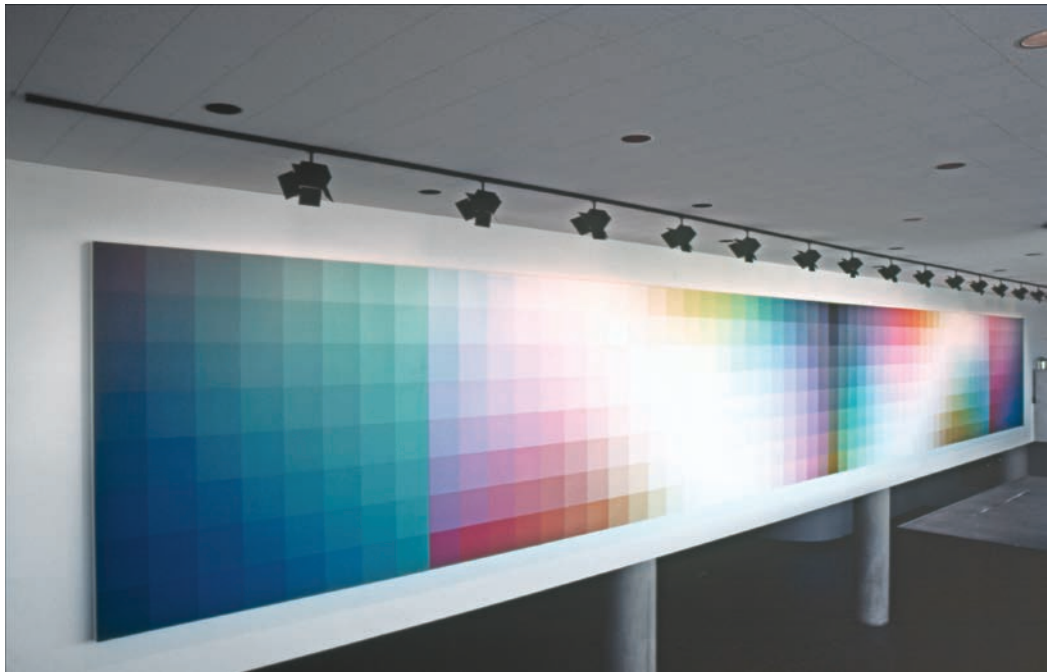


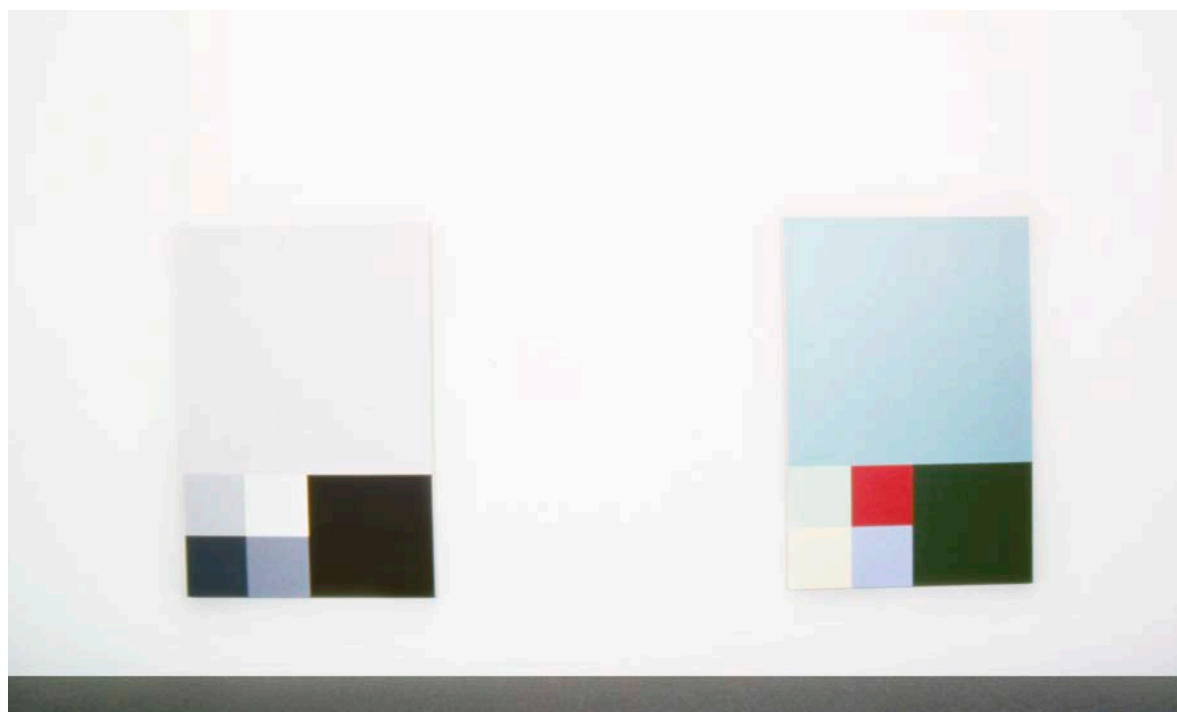
Model for untitled commission, 1982-1985  
Acrylic on Masonite: 11 3/8 x 55 3/8 x 14 in.  
Slee Concert Hall, University of Buffalo  
Collection of the artist



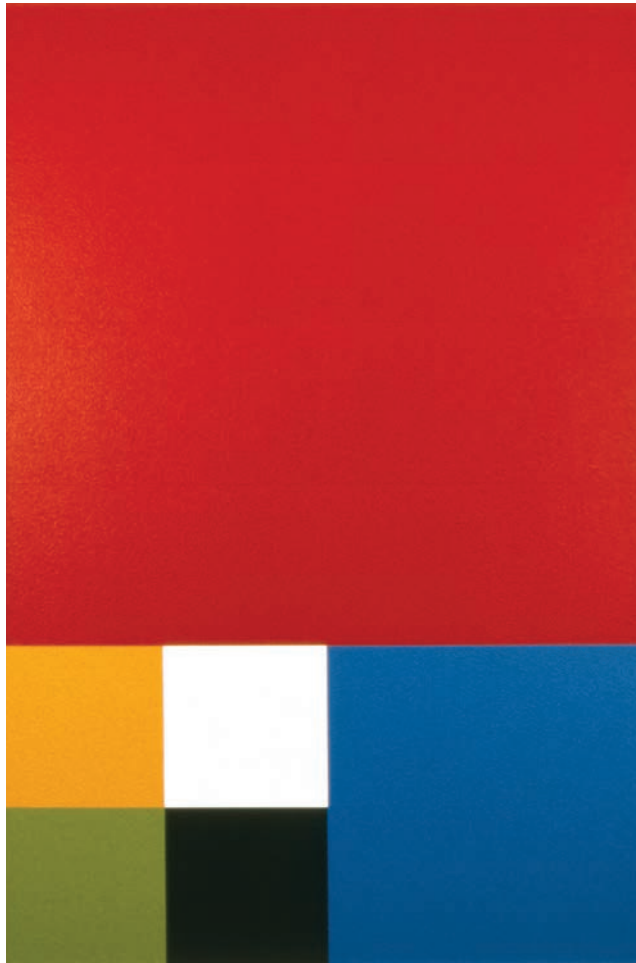
Installation for untitled commission, 1982-1985  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 61 ft.  
Slee Concert Hall, University of Buffalo,  
Buffalo, New York

Above: View from the right  
Below: View from the left





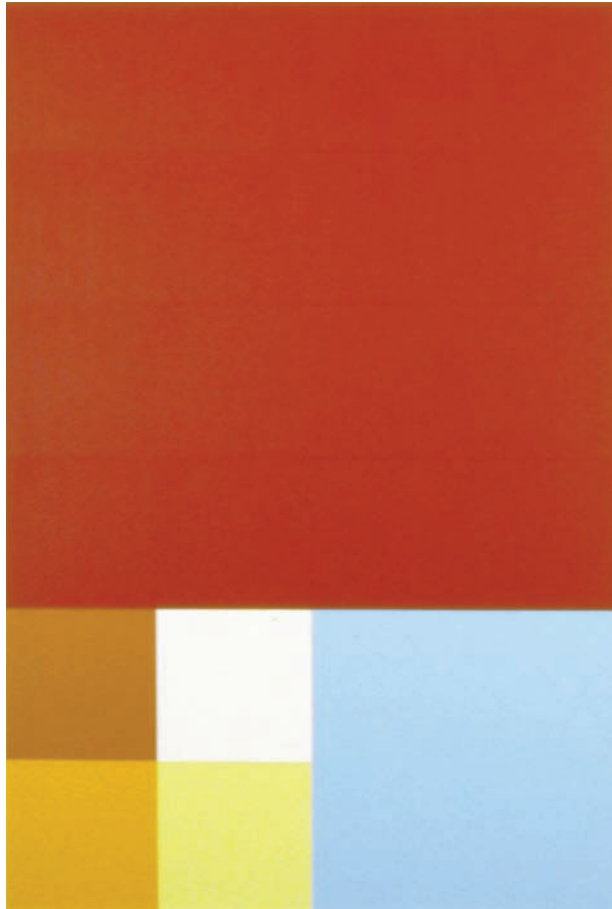
*Untitled, 6x4-02, 1986 (left)*  
*Untitled, 6x4-06, 1986 (right)*  
Both acrylic on canvas, 6 x 4 ft.  
Collection of the artist



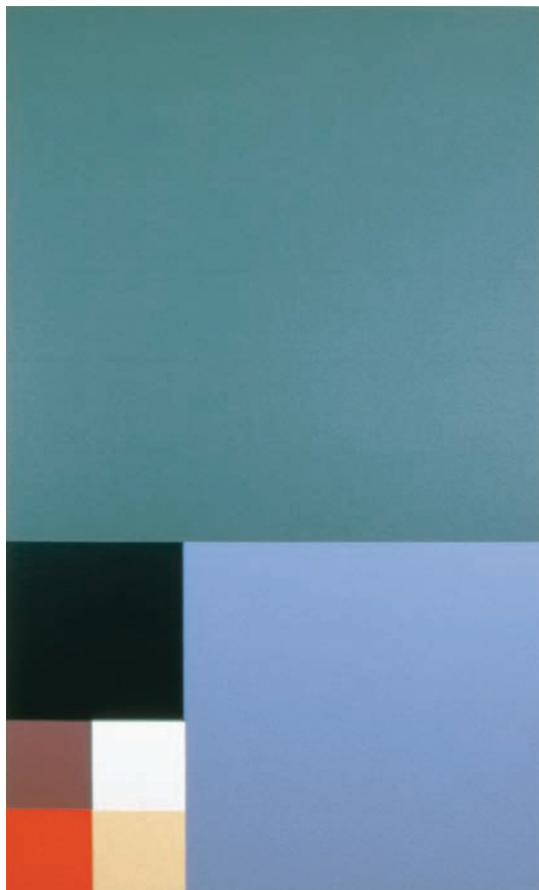
*Untitled, 6x4-20, 1988*  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 4 ft.  
Collection of Albright-Knox Art Gallery  
Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1989



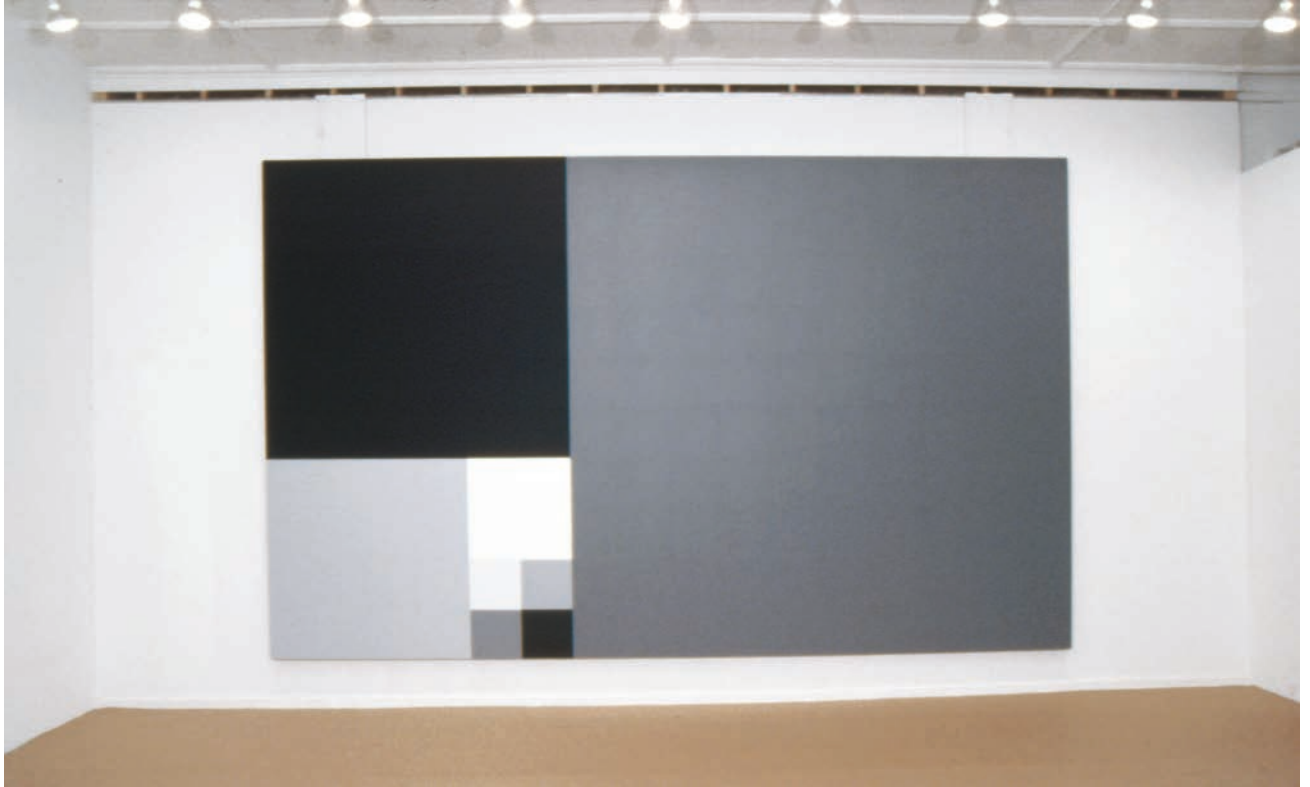
*Untitled, 917, 1979 (left)*  
*Untitled, 6x4-07, 1986 (right)*  
Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the artist



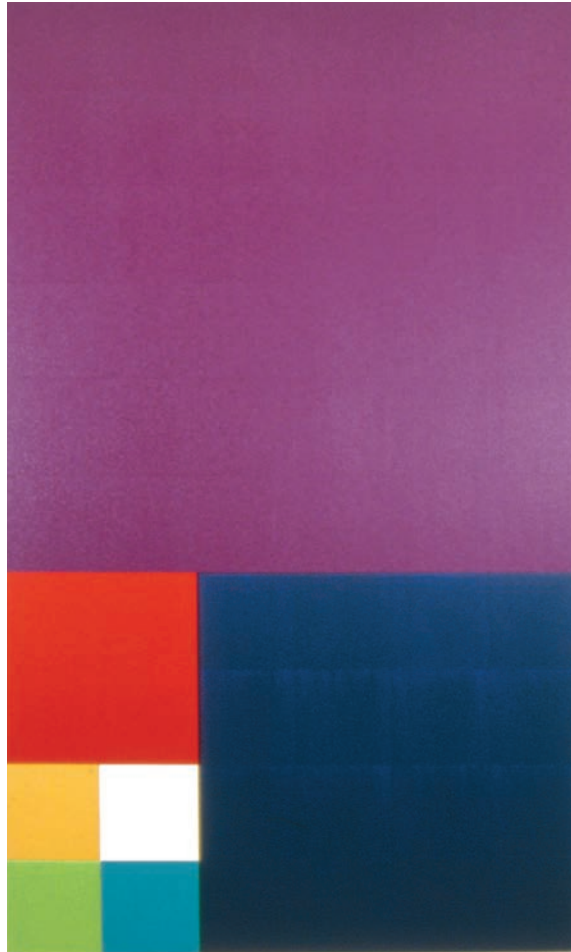
*Untitled, 6x4-11, 1986*  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 4 ft.  
Collection of the artist



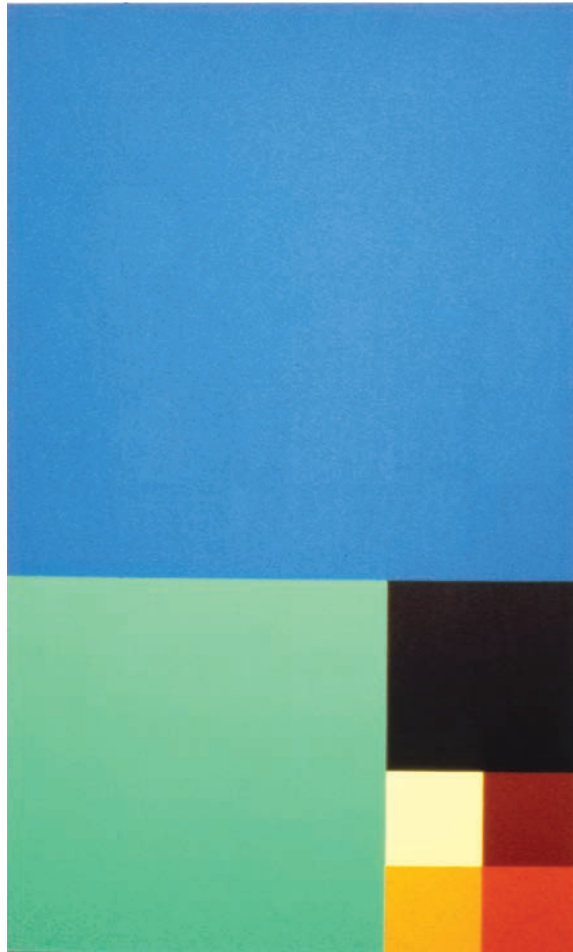
*Untitled, 10 x 6-11, 1990*  
Acrylic on canvas, 10 x 6 ft.  
Collection of the artist



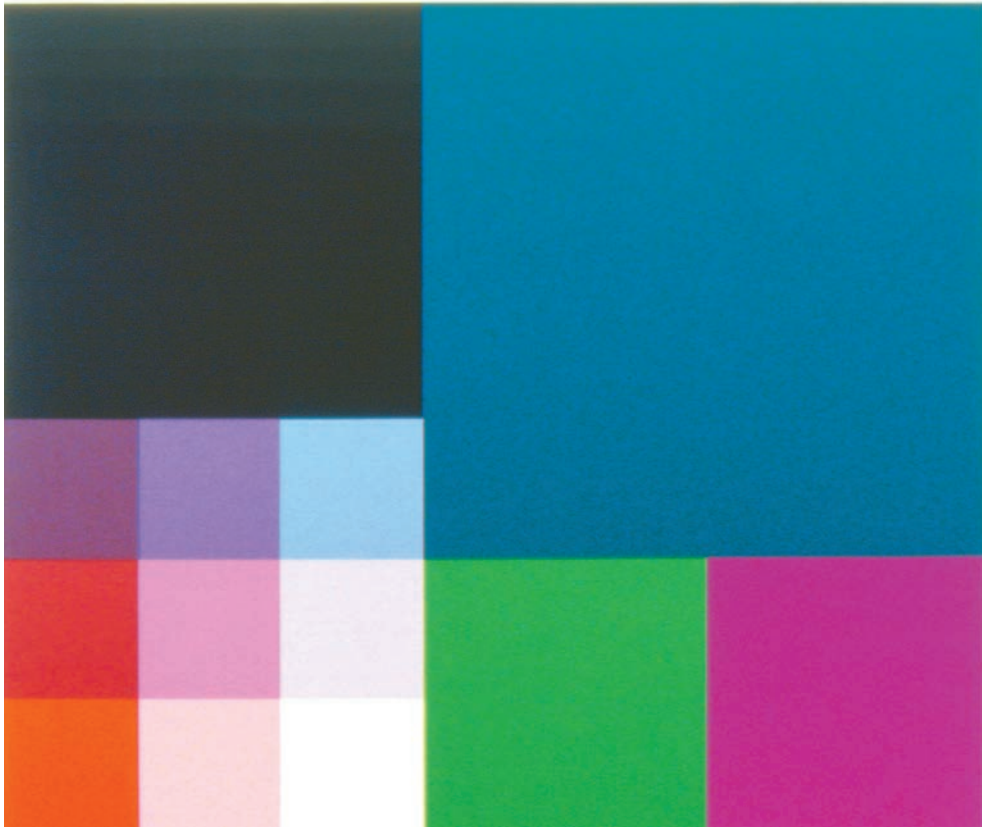
*Untitled, 10 x 16-01, 1986*  
Acrylic on canvas, 10 x 16 ft.  
Collection of the artist



*Untitled, 10 x 6-12, 1990*  
Acrylic on canvas, 10 x 6 ft.  
Collection of the artist



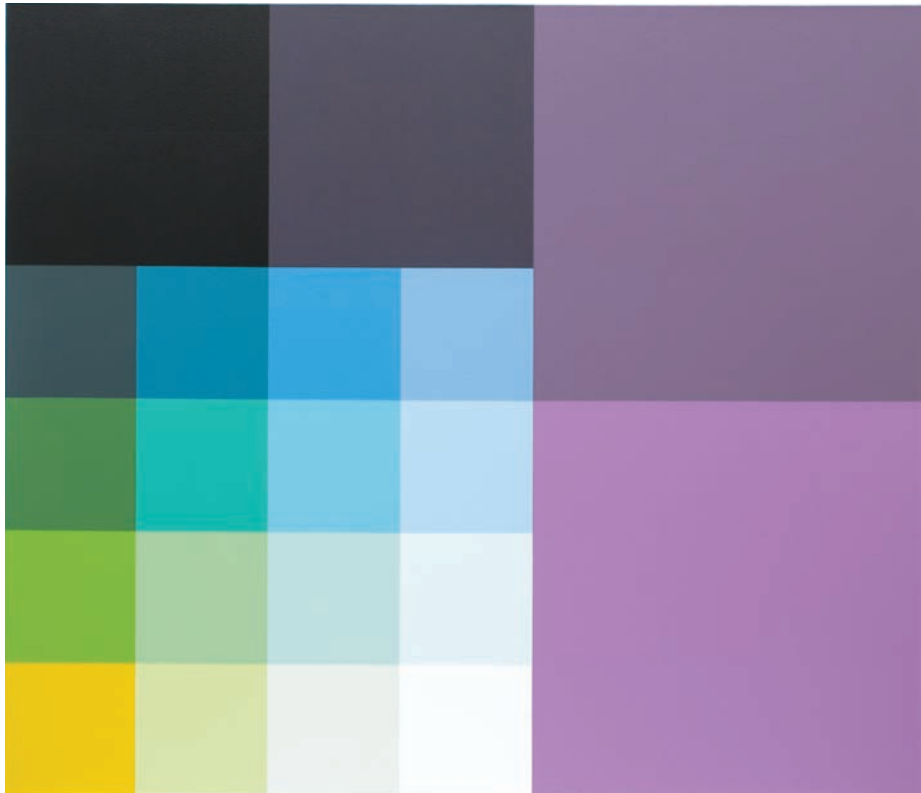
*Untitled, 10 x 6-01, 1987*  
Acrylic on canvas, 10 x 6 ft.  
Collection of the artist



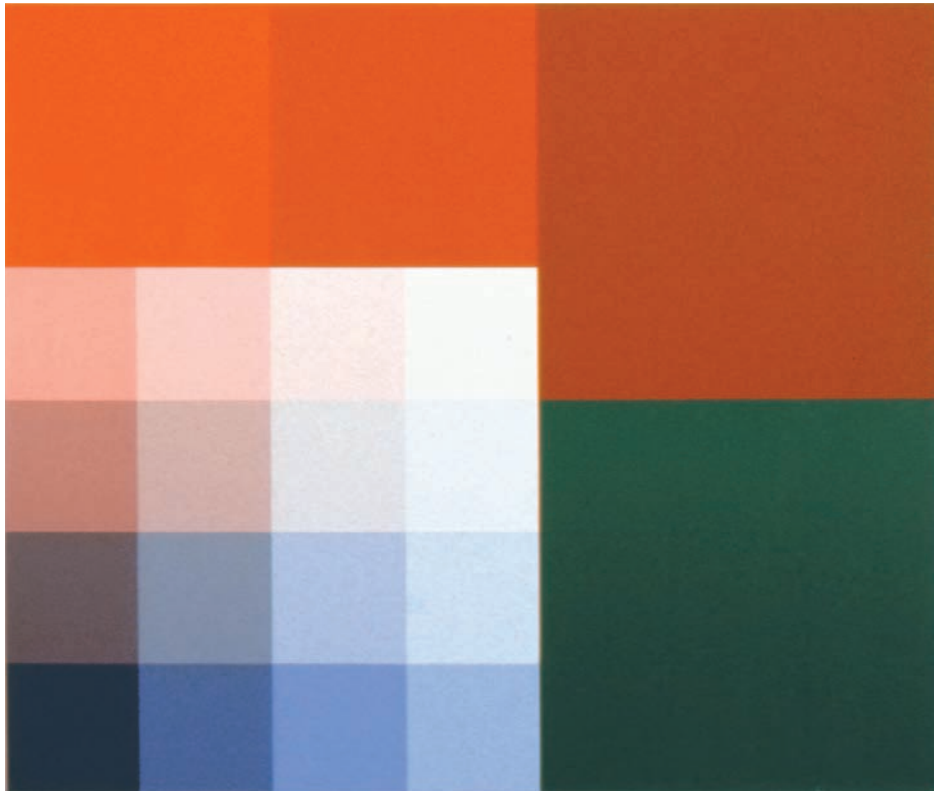
*Untitled, 6 x 7-10, 1991*  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



*Untitled, 6 x 7-01, 1988-1989*  
Acrylic on Canvas, 6 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



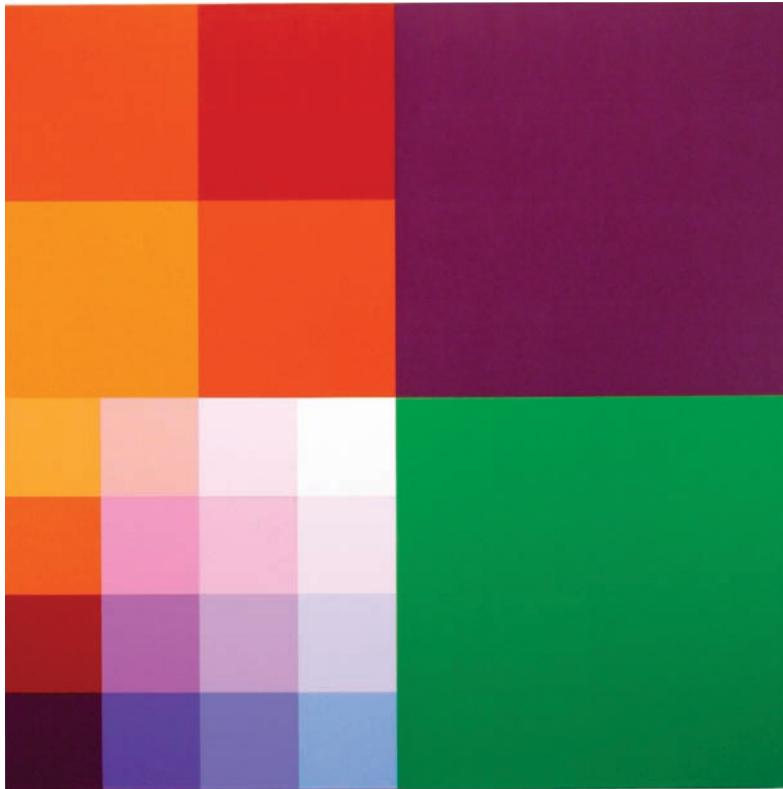
*Untitled, 6 x 7-5AA, 1992-98*  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



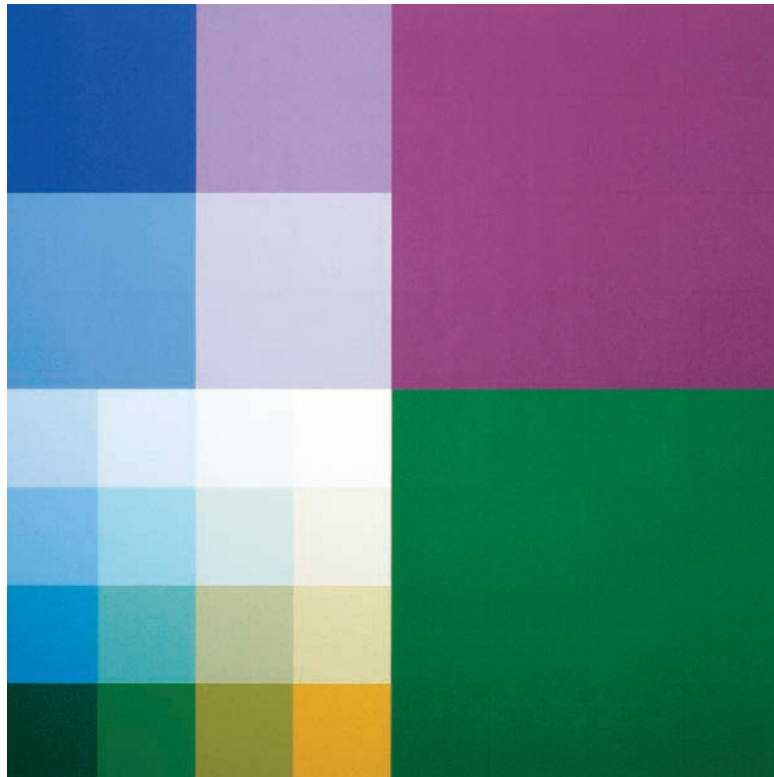
*Untitled, 6x7-5A/23Work#3\*\**, 1999-2001  
Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



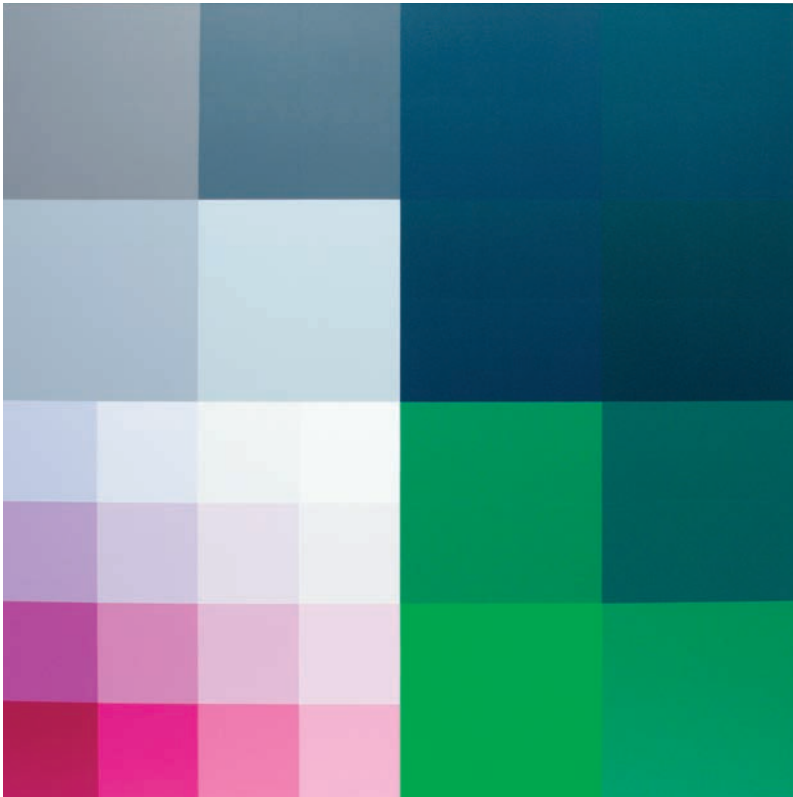




*Untitled, 8x8-RO#3, 1999-2001*  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 8 ft.  
Collection of the artist



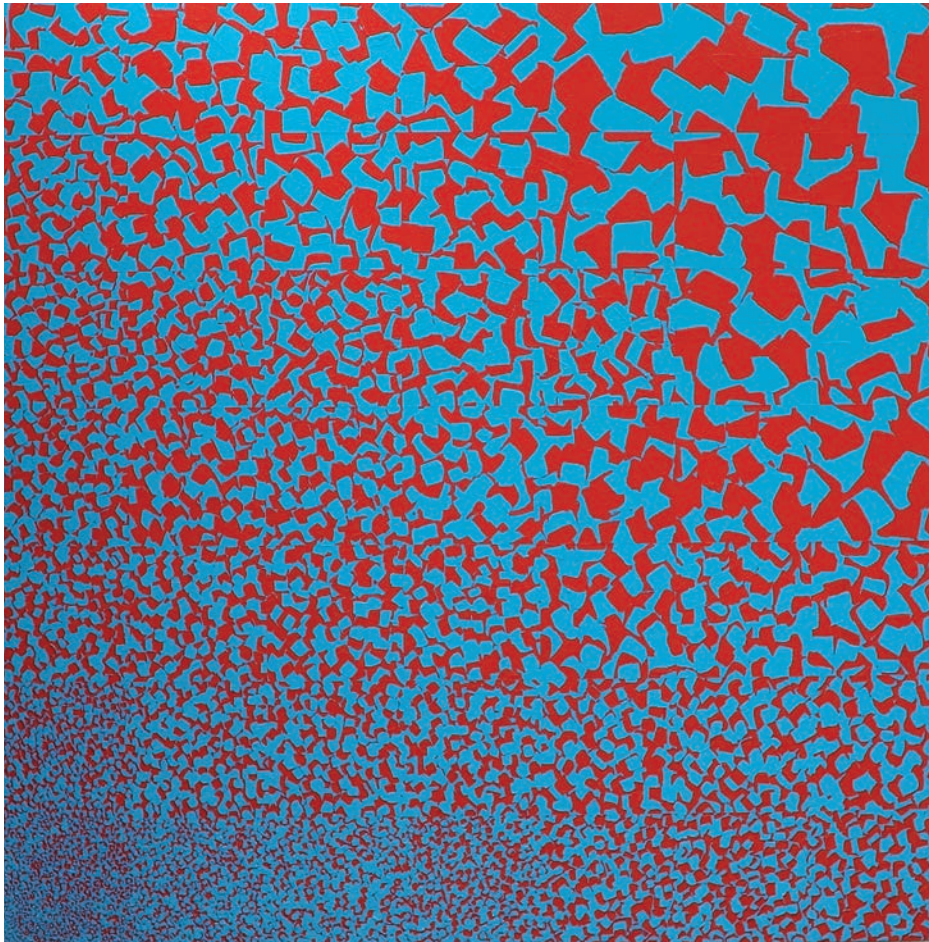
*Untitled, 8x8-5A 4A 117B/117B x-4A, 1999-2001*  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 8 ft.  
Collection of the artist



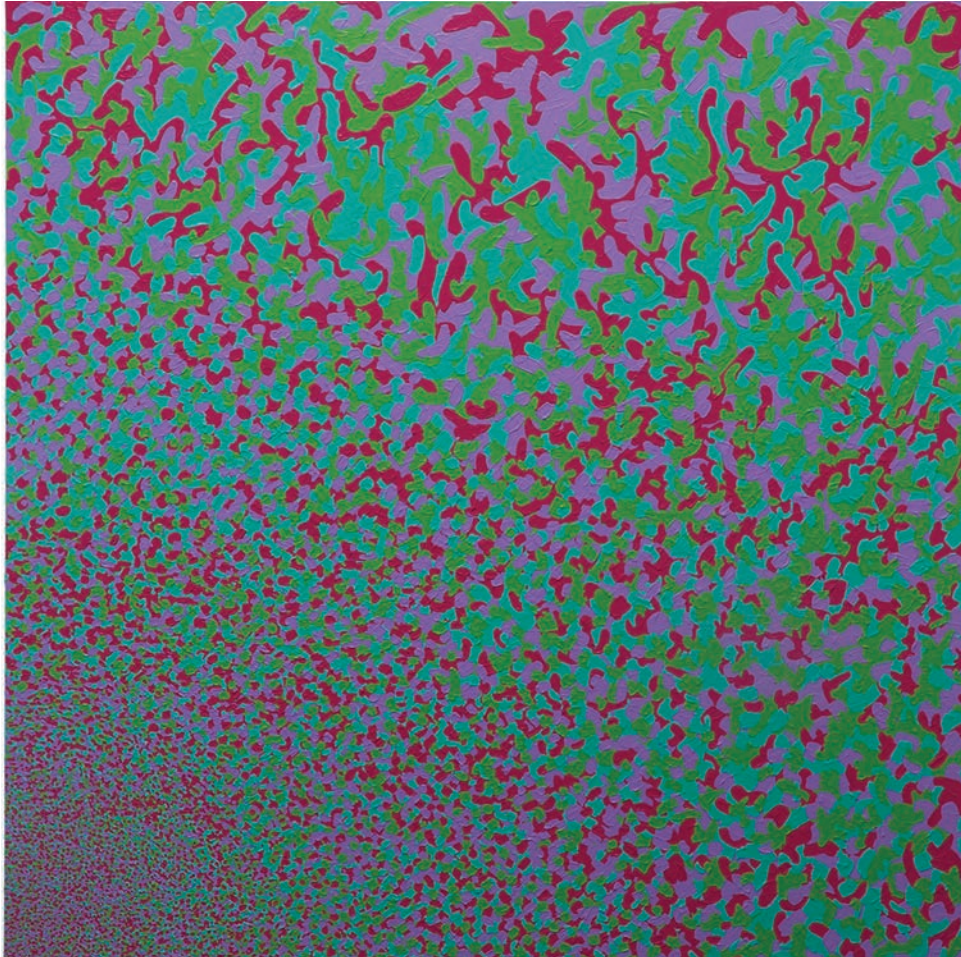
*Untitled, 8x8-9AAA, 2005-06*  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 8 ft.  
Collection of the artist



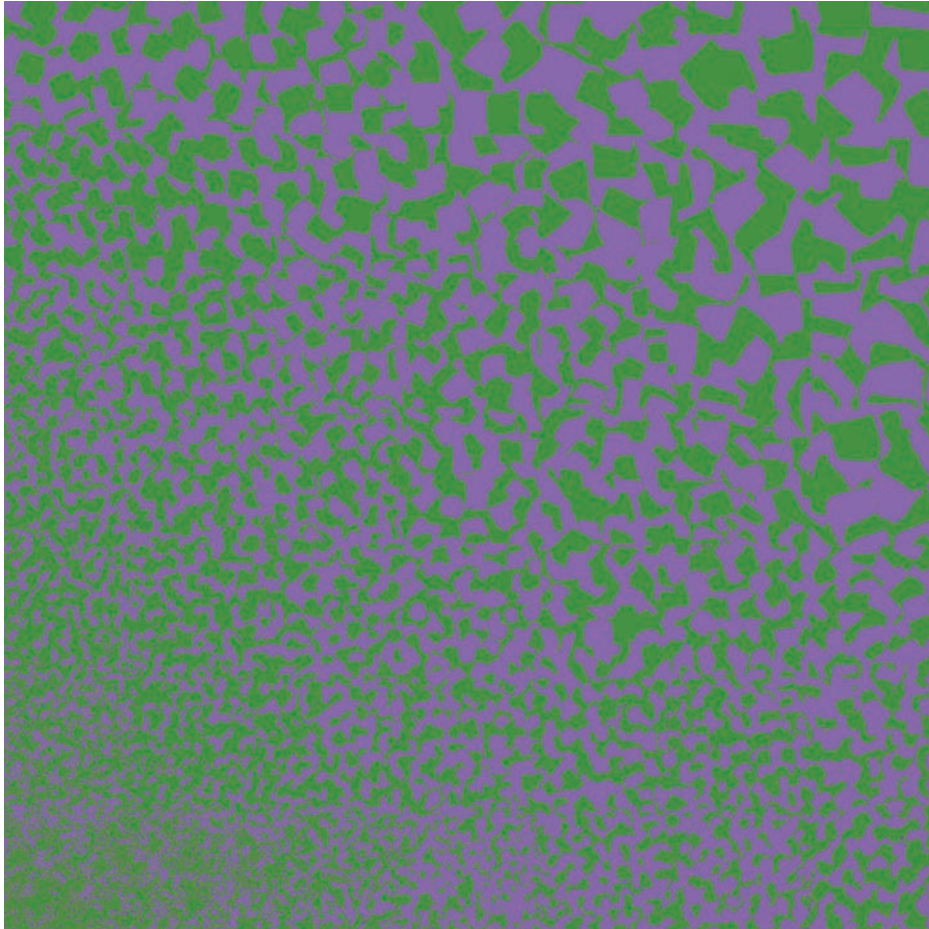
*Untitled, 8x8-27C, 2005-2006*  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 8 ft.  
Collection of the artist



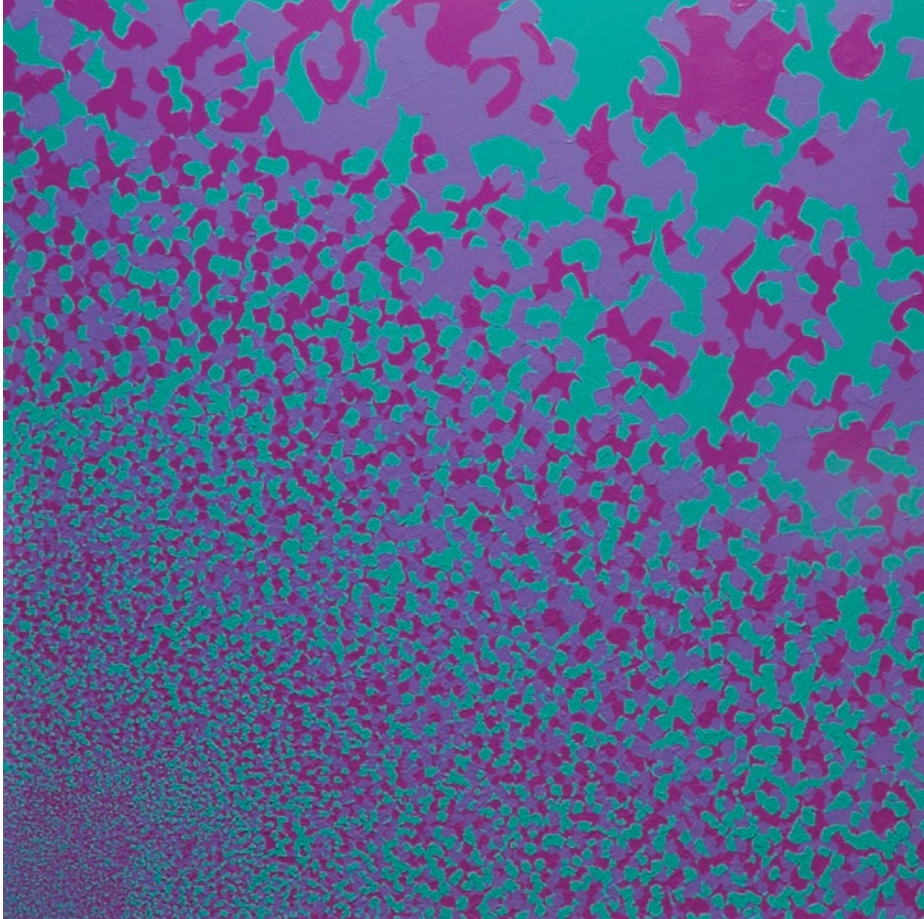
Untitled, 2007  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of Albright-Knox Art Gallery  
Philip J. Wickser Fund, by exchange, 2008



*Untitled, 9-25-8 x 13-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6, 2010*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



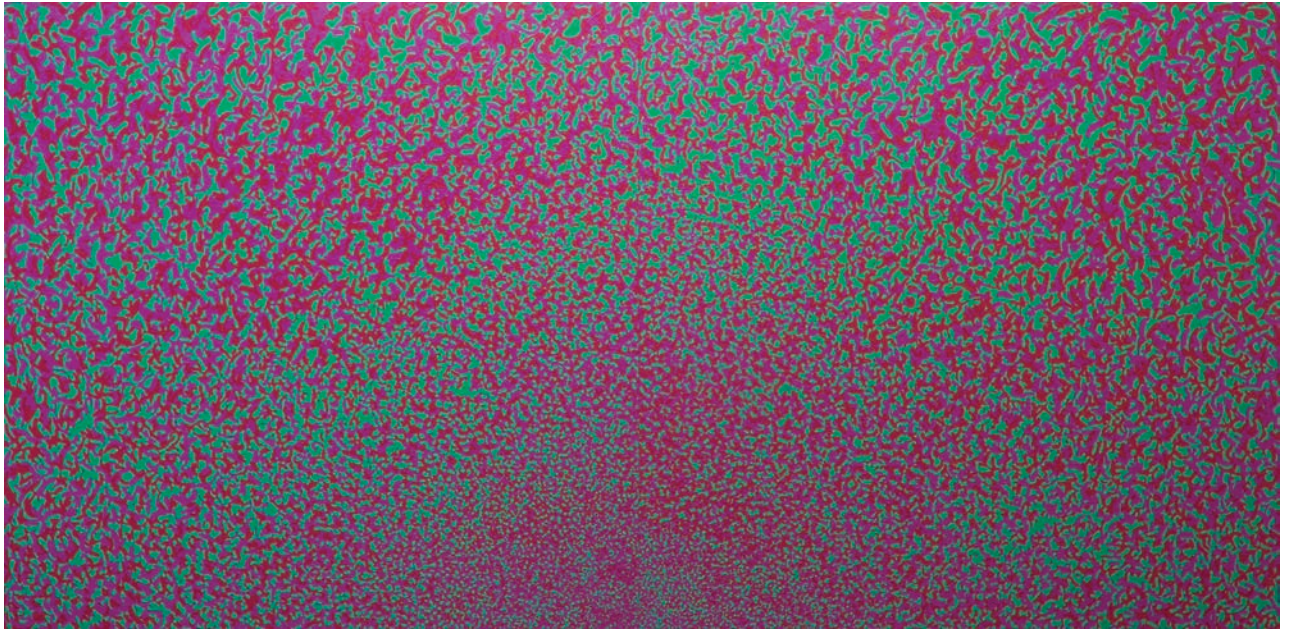
*Untitled, 13-25-7 x 27-25-6, 2007*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



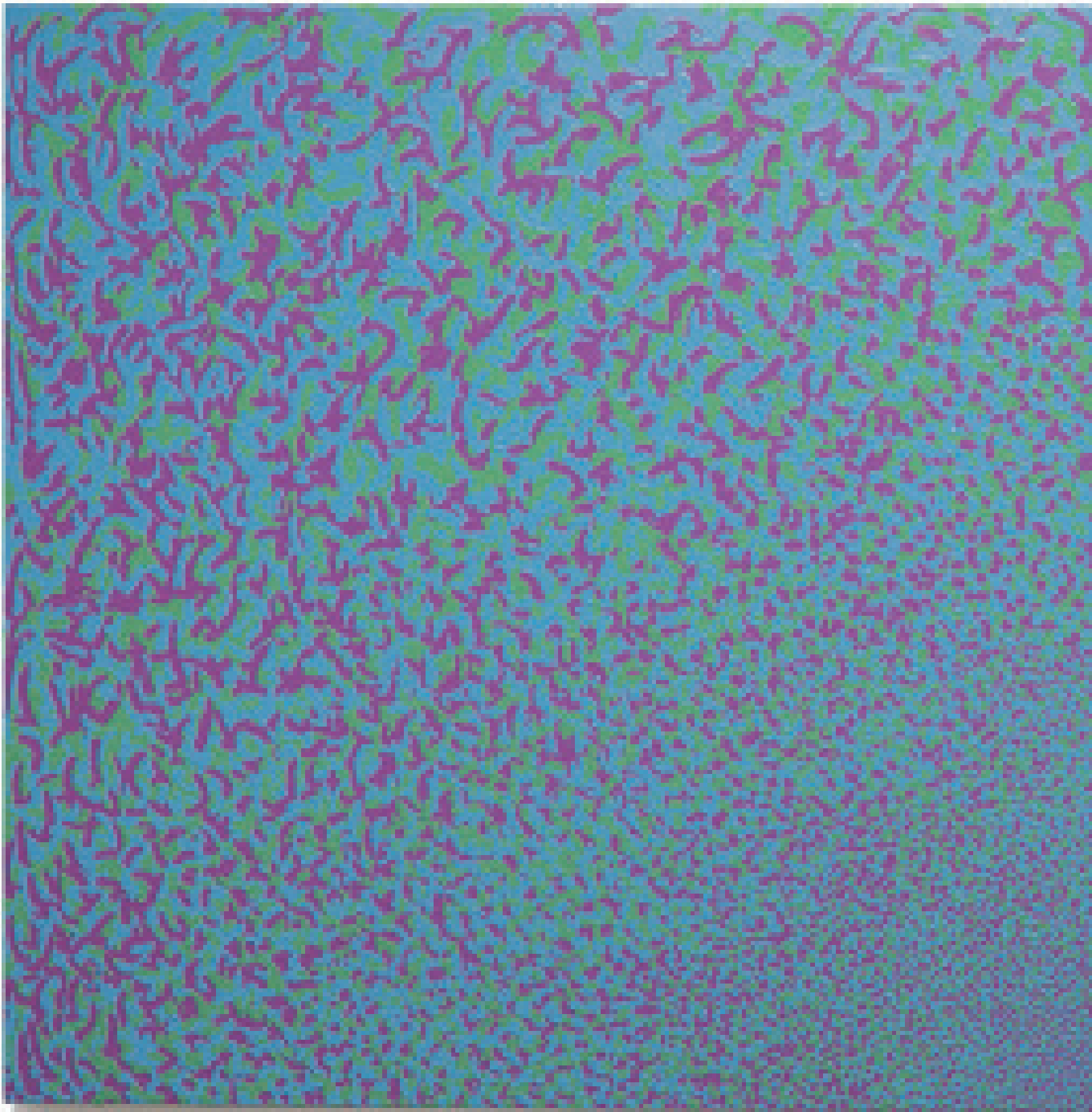
*Untitled, 11-25-7 x 13-25-7 x 23-25-6, 2010*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



*Untitled, 11-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6, 2010 (left)*  
*Untitled, 9-25-8 x 13-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6, 2010 (right)*  
Both acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.  
Collection of the artist



*Untitled, 7-25-6 x 11-25-7 x 25-25-6, 2010*  
Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 14 ft.  
Collection of the artist

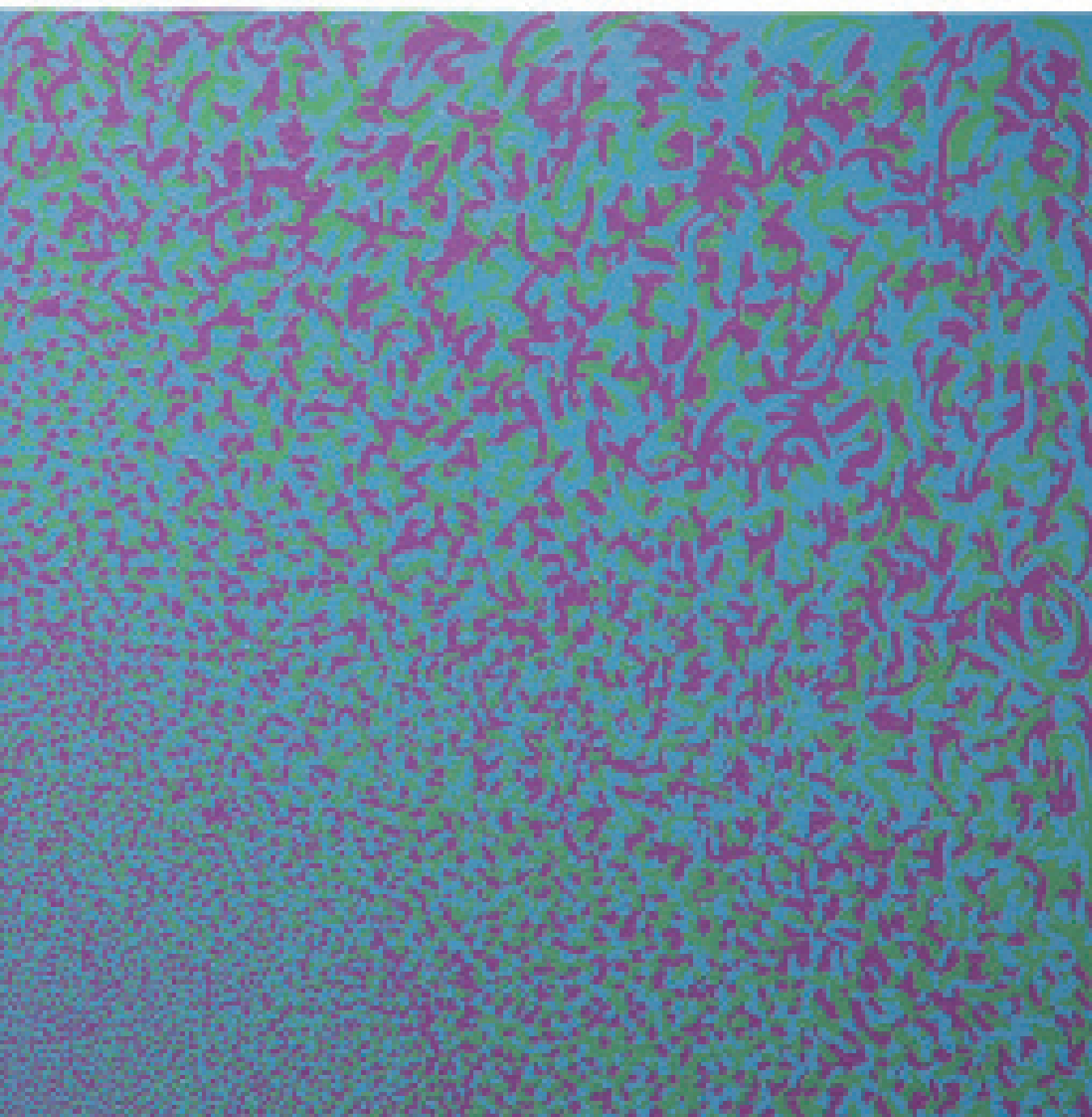


*Blue Double #2, 11-25-7x21-25-6x25-25-6, 2010*

Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 14 ft.

Collection of the artist

Detail on next page









Robert Swain c.1960s

## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SWAIN

by Matthew Deleget

**Matthew Deleget:** Our subject matter as painters is color and I often think about how intricate your research into color has been over the years. In fact, I think of you as a color researcher that makes paintings and not the other way around. Why is painting the best method for presenting your research?

**Robert Swain:** Well, first of all, I never entered into it in a scientific way. I became interested in color in the late 1960s. During that decade, I began trying to understand something about color. There wasn't a great deal of written information about it, and consequently a great deal of what I do is based on intuition. I started to look at color and to make charts and experimental work in an attempt to understand the phenomenology of color. I don't look at the work as being objective. I simply look at it as a way of trying to get into the subject matter of color and trying to understand through experience, through phenomenology, what color is about.

**MD:** And you entered this conversation not so much through a scientific background, but rather through a visual arts background. What's interesting is that a lot of people try to compare color to other fields of study, other disciplines, other things: mathematics, music, flavors, etc. But I know you don't think of color in its relationship to other things. You think of it in terms of what exactly?

**RS:** It's kind of strange. I think about color solely in terms of color. It's not about music. There are comparable aspects of music, such as its sense of modulation or of structure. I did, however, actually study with a man who based a lot of his work on the diatonic scale, which is the basis for all music.

**MD:** Who was that?

**RS:** Karl Knaths. He was an American Cubist who lived in Provincetown. The reason I don't like comparing color to other things is that then it becomes *about* those things and about the associations we have with those things. There are many pioneers who began to define what color phenomenology was in the 1960s. It still is a wide-open field; it hasn't been finished. But again, I throw my weight on the side of perception and phenomenology, trying to experience what it is and putting that into a frame of reference.

**MD:** Who has had an influence on your practice?

**RS:** I think that goes way back. At a certain point, my family moved to Arlington, Virginia, and I spent a lot of time in the National Gallery in Washington, DC. I used to look at certain paintings there very carefully. I was very involved and still am involved with Vermeer. I think that his sense of color is really remarkable. I look at a lot of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, a lot of people that came out of the Bauhaus, a lot of people like Albers. There is a whole host of people who have pioneered the idea of color as the primary subject matter in painting.

**MD:** In framing your work, thinking about what your painting does and how it provides a viewer the opportunity to see pure color, I had a difficult time coming up with comparable examples in the real physical world, objects that offer pure color, unmitigated, uncompromised, and uncontextualized in relation to a broader environment. There are very few examples of places or experiences in which isolated color is orchestrated for maximum effect. How does one experience color in your work? What kind of experience are you trying to elicit?

**RS:** One thing that fascinates me about color is that each individual color has its own connotation, which can be perceived as emotional or can affect you in some particular way. I strive to bring out the uniqueness of color itself as an expressive force. Color is involved with radiant energy. It's not passive, and in that sense, when you look at color, it's actually transferring energy into your physical self. So one of the things I try to do is to isolate some kind of configuration that allows color to speak of itself and for itself. When I go to a paint store or a hardware store, I always stop by the paint chip section and I always marvel at the people who stand there and pull out chips and look them, saying "No, this isn't right. I like this. Put these two together." That's one of the instances in which color frees itself from its associations, from its object, and people look at it for its own value. What would this be in my environment? I think that my painting over the years has been concerned with trying to allow color to be its own sense of expression without being attached to other obligations or associations.

**MD:** I like the idea of color literally being energy and how that energy can affect someone's emotional state, mood, or thought process. When experiencing your work first-hand, I am always sensorially, emotionally, and intellectually overwhelmed. I often have a hard time remembering what your work looks like. I'm immediately struck by the color experience washing over me. Once that subsides, however, I have the chance to *see* the work. I don't mean looking at the work. I mean seeing the work. The work then functions on a secondary level. The longer you let your rods and cones adjust, the more rewarding your works become. They start with a very quick hit, but they also have a slower, smoldering quality. I would love to hear from you about the experience of seeing your work. What do you expect from the viewer?

**RS:** I think your description is pretty close to what I would like a viewer to experience. I like that initial impact. I think there are things that have been described, for example, in the idea or concepts of the sublime in which you are confronted with something for which you have absolutely no explanation. It's ineffable. It consumes you and in one particular moment, you

are taken to some other place. The secondary experience is that, yes, there is some kind of relational idea behind it, one that carries you to another place. I spent a time working in a museum and it had, for example, Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881). One of the amazing things about that painting is that it happens in real time. In other words, you're looking at it at that moment and understanding it. It isn't something you have to learn a language for or know an iconographic tradition to decipher. It happens in that moment and it's the radiant energy that does that. I have a pet theory: Impressionism and Post-Impression are so popular because people step up to them. It's not an illustration of something, but it actually demands that the perceptual processes operate. People have a rapport with it because, as the physicist Ogden Rood pointed out, your rods and cones are very active and you're engaged as a participant in this work of art. You are not a voyeur standing outside of it, but it requires you there, present, to look at it. I think your description is quite adequate in what I would hope a viewer would get out of viewing my work. The other problem in dealing with color is that it's very elusive. It's about sensation and is very hard to describe or classify.

**MD:** That makes me think about the binder I have of images of your work. In that binder, you state clearly that digital color printouts are by no means representative of what the work actually looks like, which is true. It's not anywhere near it, in terms of experience, of color, of saturation. What is it about color that needs to be seen first-hand?

**RS:** It requires you to see it in real time. It's not something to which you can attach a memory. You can say, well that's red, but red is an aspect of experience. To actually experience means that you confront it and allow it to operate physically and emotionally and so forth through a perceptual process. I think it's very difficult to have a color memory. I devised a numerical system so that I would be able to sort of track what color relationships are, but there isn't a clear descriptive way to say what happens when you put this blue next to this orange. You could say, "Well, they are complements or split complements." On the other hand, you could say, "These colors are harmonious, so they're analogous." But it's very difficult to understand that—even knowing that it happens in real time. You can describe a thunderstorm, but that's much different than being in it.

**MD:** That's a great analogy actually, a thunderstorm. You can kind of describe the color range in a work, but words are just as inaccurate as the memory of a painting. *Red, orange, blue* doesn't really describe what you are seeing. For the past forty, almost fifty years, you've been working in many different formats to display color. I'm thinking of your sliced circles, square grids, and the triangular and hexagonal pieces made in the 1960s. I'm thinking of your grid progressions. Most recently you've been making brushstroke paintings. Does color function across all of these different formats in the same way? Does, say, a cadmium red function the same way as a triangle, as a red square, or as a brushstroke?

**RS:** Each configuration orchestrates color differently. The initial problem I faced during the 1960s was culturally complicated. Abstract Expressionism was coming to the end of its heyday. A lot of younger artists I associated with were looking for paradigms, ways of painting that did not depend on pictorial space, and they wanted to break the association that high Modernism had with that space. You had, for example, the Minimalists trying to change the way that we deal with sculpture and space and painting. I decided that I was not going

to pursue color through pictorial space. I wanted to have it be an object on a surface that had its own limits and its own character. One of the first things I began to do was a series of paintings, now destroyed, that were basically linear grids organized spectrally. The spectrums themselves made the shapes; I was trying to get rid of the idea that I had to have a shape to rationalize the use of a color. So I started looking at circles, triangles, hexagons, equilateral triangles in individual components, units, modules. I wanted the color—yellow, say—to be painted on a square module and be connected to others, in some cases, a hundred other squares, yet maintain its identity.

**MD:** These were literally painted on structural units that you bolted together.

**RS:** Structural units, either stretchers or plywood that was stretched with canvas, primed, and painted with a paintbrush. In some instances, I left the brushstrokes in there. I was trying to say that this color has its own boundaries, its own area or location. Several things followed from this. I found that the triangles and the hexagons worked beautifully. The points of the triangles where they came together created a different sensation than the adjacencies at the wider end of each shape. A single color could have many connotations because of its varied relationship with the edge. And this goes back to Michel Eugene Chevreul's idea of simultaneous contrast and other technical terms, but essentially it means that color is always seen within a relationship, a relationship that changes its entire appearance. For some time I tried many different forms, before I finally settled on the square grid or rectilinear grid built of squares, a neutral format where color, not shape, was given a voice.

**MD:** You also moved away from these structural units because they became unwieldy and heavy.

**RS:** The individual units, yes. I did a very large painting for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. The physical weight of the entire piece was outrageous and difficult to deal with. So I started to move back to working on a single canvas.

**MD:** You mentioned something earlier about some of the artists that you were working with. During the 1960s, whose studios were you visiting? Who were you sharing ideas with? Who did you feel you had a critical relationship with? Who were you palling around with?

**RS:** There was a group of young people that came to New York at about the same time I did, in the mid-1960s, a lot of them from California. Everybody was trying to establish a new language, a new vocabulary, a new paradigm. Several things happened. The "Primary Structures" show at The Jewish Museum, which I was not in, had a lot of new sculptural work that established a different paradigm and changed art's relationship with the viewer. Those artists were people like Ronald Bladen, Tony Smith, Robert Grosvenor, and Forrest Myers. There was also a non-profit gallery, Park Place Gallery, which I exhibited in but was not a member of. A lot of the work there was very experimental, using experimental materials. A lot of these materials were found on Canal Street. Plastic, fiberglass. I think Claes Oldenburg once said that Canal Street, with all its hardware stores, plastic stores, electric stores, was the palette for artists in the 1960s. A lot of this work was experimental. It was not produced to be sold in the art market. Pieces were made out of cardboard. It was an attempt, above all,

to organize new experiences. Later in the 1960s, I became a friend of and worked for Tony Smith and found a great deal of satisfaction in the conversations that Tony and I would have about art.

**MD:** You mentioned a number of sculptors and described a lot of installation work. You were making paintings, primarily about color experience. Did you share notes with any painters?

**RS:** I was close to David Novros, Bob Duran, and Gay Glading, all of whom I was looking at because they were doing experimental work. I ran into some problems because my work became more and more about color. This was at a time when interest gravitated towards material substances, work in which the content was either inherent in the process or the materiality of what you were looking at. For example, something would be a shape painted with glitter. I wasn't involved with that. I was more involved with the sensation of color.

**MD:** It was at about this time that you began indexing color. You spent many years mixing, measuring, and mapping color and all its inherent qualities. From what I understand, you started that in the early 1970s and you've currently got more than four thousand individually mixed and painted color chip samples in your studio. What motivated you to start this process?

**RS:** A lot of people think this process is quite unusual. I don't think it's unusual at all. I was trained from an early age, and studied realism, anatomy, and painting of that nature. When I began to work with non-representational concepts, I discovered I didn't really understand anything about color. So in a very primitive way I painted color charts to try to get some fundamental understanding of how colors related and contrasted and things like that. Also, there were a couple of art stores in New York. One called David Davids was owned by a very eccentric individual. He would actually let me put samples of all his oil paint on a little piece of paper. There were paint brands from Europe and the United States, and I became fascinated by color charts. I started to look at them. I started to try to understand what the difference was between this red produced in Germany and that red produced in France. And not unlike Albers collecting all these paint samples, at a certain point I started envisioning what I was doing as being like studying anatomy. You really have to know the entire muscle and bone structure. So I said, "Well, I'll develop a hue circle." I looked at a lot of different people who had built hue circles. They go back for centuries and because of that my next thought was, "Well, if you're going to deal with this as subject matter, you'd better develop some way to record it, index it, document it, analyze it." It seemed a natural thing. I started building a color system, which right now has 4,896 pieces—and I'm hoping to add to it.

**MD:** Is your research into color complete at this point? It sounds like it's not.

**RS:** No, I don't think so. It's a domino effect. Once you start to look at something, it leads you right into something else. I ask myself what a certain yellow looks like in combination with blue and green and something else. It becomes a very compound problem.

**MD:** Tell me about the thirty-part hue circle. How did you arrive at a circular format? Why does it have thirty parts? How does this circle operate?

**RS:** When you begin dealing with color, you have to decide how many yellows, reds, oranges, violets, and blues are going to be in your color system. So you start to look at the history of color and you find that certain color experts decided there should be ten or twelve or twenty-four. And I struggled with that for a long time. I actually did some eight-and-a-half-foot paintings that were based on color circles. They looked like pie-shaped hue circles. Munsell, who's a leading color theorist and artist himself, built a color system that uses five primary colors. Other systems of color use six. I was in an awkward position. Did I believe there are six primaries? Three primaries and three secondaries? Or five primaries? I combined both systems and decided there would be thirty. Also, I found the interval relationship moving from yellow to red to orange a very smooth one, with each color retaining its identity, while still relating to the one next to it. I settled upon my system visually. It wasn't done mathematically. There was no logical progression. It was simply done by painting color charts, looking at them, and deciding that X would be the correct component for Y. It was different from systems based upon ratios or mathematical formulas.

**MD:** And how long did you spend wrapping your brain around this system?

**RS:** Each step of it represents a certain group of paintings, and it's still ongoing. It took me a few years just to decide on the hues.

**MD:** Your thirty-part hue circle includes only pure hues, right? I've seen color charts that you've created that map not just pure hues, but also saturation and value shifts. They tend to be gridded forms, mapping a yellow, mapping an orange, mapping a blue, mapping a violet. How many of those charts are there?

**RS:** There are supposed to be thirty of them, each of which has an individual color like yellow and a breakdown of its components made by adding white to it, adding black to it, or gray. And color is three-dimensional. It has three dimensions to it: hue, value, and saturation. These are technical things with which I'm engaged, but the normal viewer simply has to know that there are light colors, dark colors, colors which are unsaturated, and grays—things of that nature. I broke this down into thirty-three different hue steps, ranging from light to dark and up to nine different saturation steps, meaning that you could have a pure orange and then, by adding gray to it, it eventually dissipates in its purity and becomes sort of a brown, a word I never use.

**MD:** The word *brown*.

**RS:** Yes.

**MD:** Why is that?

**RS:** I think a lot of words are not very accurate, not very descriptive. If I said to you, "You're in Italy, you have a brown house"—what does that mean? Is it red-brown, orange-brown? How can we define it? In the 1960s, a group of people came up with the idea that you describe color either by its hue, value, or saturation, and doing that generates a more accurate

idea of what that color is. I took that notion and assigned it to a number, which a lot of other people dealing with color also did. I know what color #15 is. I know #25 is kind of dark. When you say, "Its saturation is #5," I know it's not quite pure and it's not quite unpure either. There are ways that you can delineate and describe color with a numerical system that enables you to understand some of the relationships. It doesn't give you the whole content, but it gives you an idea.

**MD:** When I first visited your studio a few years ago I was surprised to discover that you have a lot of computer equipment in it. I know that you've been working with a color spectrometer to measure the light characteristics of the paint you're mixing. I would love for you to talk a little bit about how technology assists you in mixing and measuring the qualities of the paint you're ultimately using in the paintings. What motivated you to get a spectrometer?

**RS:** One of the problems in working with color is keeping tabs on it. People who manufacture color for artists change the quality of the color because they buy pigment on the open market. My quest was to keep the color consistent so that I could analyze the sensations it evoked. If you bought a yellow and it had a little more orange in it, you would lose the necessary consistency. Computer technology is very interesting. I'm sure that if Monet was alive today, he'd have five computers. Da Vinci would probably have ten. They're instruments. People don't realize that the revolution in the history of oil paint, at a certain point, was the discovery that it could be put in tubes. Artists could go out in the field with a tube of paint. It was a big learning curve for me to get into computers. I use them as an extension of the way to calibrate, to look at, and to document color. The technology you're talking about, a photo spectrometer, an instrument that measures the wavelength of color, cost \$500,000 back in the 1960s. You can buy one for your home computer these days for probably less than \$1,000. It only measures wavelengths of color. It tells you what the color is, what the wavelength is, and things of that nature. It's very helpful, when you're handling 4,896 colors, to keep them organized. Ultimately, my quest is to put into categories color sensations.

**MD:** Are you premixing all of those paints, all 4,896 of them?

**RS:** Sure.

**MD:** You have tubes or jars that are ready to go that have been mapped and measured?

**RS:** I have a lot of jars of paint.

**MD:** I've seen that this kind of work is very difficult for people to understand. The point of entry can be hard to access. A lot of people think that this work gets beamed in from outer space, that a living, breathing, human being couldn't have made this work. Can you tell me about your process for making a painting? Where does the painting start in terms of your studio, your mindset, your worldview?

**RS:** It begins with the idea that in looking at a lot of colors, I'm fascinated, for example, by a certain green. Then I try to find how this particular green can be placed in relationship

with some other colors to bring out its characteristics. The green might be placed next to its complement, a red, and it might also modulate to other colors that have some relationship to the red or green. Essentially what I am looking for is a window, an opportunity to use the special characteristics of a particular color and some of its other related relationships. For example, you might modulate from green into blue into violet and end up in red, but you are looking for ways that you can orchestrate the experience of looking at a particular color. It's kind of like landscape painting: you would say, "I'm going to paint under this light, under these circumstances, and I'm going to use the excuse, or the armature of the mountain to get at some of these colors or sensations." I just skip the landscape part and go right to the color.

**MD:** So a painting may begin with a specific color, and you follow the choice of it with a question: What if? What if it's combined with a violet or a blue, or juxtaposed with an orange? Do you work these questions out in your head? Are you working with a computer? Are you working with paint chips? How do you go about laying out what ultimately becomes a painting?

**RS:** First, I think of it in my head, and then I lay it out numerically with my color system. I jot down some relationships, numbers. Since a lot of colors are involved, I've developed a kind of logic for dealing with numbers. I know how a #3 relates to a #17. And for a certain value, I have another number. If I think it's going to work conceptually, then I will do a study of it on a computer, look at the image very carefully, actually print out an inkjet print to see the relationships. During the 1960s, 1970s, and for much of the 1980s, I would paint these studies by hand. It would take me maybe a month to mix up the paint for the study. Many times I wouldn't like three of the colors in the study so I'd have to go back and redo the whole thing—over and over again. Computers allow you to expedite decision-making. For one painting, I might make fifty or sixty studies. I can change them that quickly. It allows me to get access to the structural organization immediately. After I do that, I paint a study and I look at it. Sometimes I have to paint several studies because the pigment is not the same as an inkjet print, which I like a great deal. You can't reproduce the aura of painting with inkjet mechanics. It has to be done in reality with pigment.

**MD:** Nor viewing it solely on a computer screen. It's a very different experience. Are the studies large? Small? Are they on paper? On canvas? What do they look like?

**RS:** Initially, they are inkjet prints. Then I paint studies of different sizes. And if I think a small size, say a twenty-four-inch painting, is going to work at a larger scale, I will move it up to seven or eight or nine feet. But it's done in steps, and every step is judged perceptually. If I think there is any flaw in it, then I'll change it. In the past I would try to paint these things flat out in scale and a lot of them wouldn't work at all.

**MD:** And then would you go back into it and repaint it? Or just scrap it and start over?

**RS:** Sometimes I go back and repaint it, a fact that in part comes out of my traditional background. In classical painting, the artist makes a drawing. He does a preliminary study. He does a small painting. Georges Seurat's painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a good example of an intermediate step that Seurat took before painting *Sunday Afternoon on*

*the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-1886). I've always followed that traditional process.

**MD:** What does that process look like from start to finish? How long will you sit with a painting before you make the decision to paint it?

**RS:** I've worked on paintings for two or four years before I decided to paint them. A lot of this is done through color studies, which may take six months to a year. I don't have a time schedule. I wish I did. I wish I had some way I could do X, Y, and Z, and be finished. It seems that most paintings have their own particular lifespan and they want to be served in a certain way. Some of the larger things I've done, ten by thirty feet, have taken me over a year of uninterrupted work. Mine is not a particularly productive process, but that's what it takes to do it.

**MD:** In looking at forty years of your work, it becomes pretty clear that your exploration hasn't been linear. Your investigation has been more helix-shaped or coiled spring-shaped: you looked at something in the 1960s, returned to it in 1970s, tweaked it again in the 1980s or 1990s. What are the key concerns, in addition to color, that keep you going back into the studio and revisiting earlier work? Are you consciously thinking about the work you made in the 1960s and 1970s? Does your earlier work play a role in the work you're making now?

**RS:** I think a main thread runs through all of it, although it's one that's influenced by many different things. I think, for example, that there is a general cultural paradigm that influences all artists. Back in the 1980s, I designed a large light piece for a site in Texas. It was never built, but it was supposed to be on the outside of a building and be controlled by a computer that displayed color to people driving by in trucks and cars. My influence at that time was a kind of cultural influence: people were getting out of the studio, people were building earthworks, people were working outside of the frame of conventional art. But I am mainly driven by how color can be presented in a new way to people. There are inherent problems in that. People are still struggling to understand non-representational art, abstract art. But I'm trying to get to a position where I can give to the viewer greater access to this subject matter. It's governed by a lot of factors.

**MD:** I want to discuss the works you made during the 1960s and 1970s. A lot of your earlier work has shifts in saturation that go from one edge to the opposite edge or from one corner to the opposite corner; a pure color runs along one side and then it dissipates. I've really only seen one example of your work, the Johnson & Johnson commission, that is organized down the middle and is bilaterally symmetrical. I remember you referring to your preferred mode as dynamic equilibrium, which is about organizing things asymmetrically. Tell me a little bit about it.

**RS:** Dynamic equilibrium is a concept that has been used since the Renaissance. It is a way of describing a type of internal tension in a work of art. That tension is such that it gives a presence to the work of art that the viewer can acknowledge. It distinguishes itself from pure design; instead of having everything be harmonic, it aims for tension. The Johnson & Johnson painting is symmetrical. It does have on opposite sides saturated and unsaturated colors, so the symmetry, in a way, is kind of challenged and torn apart. There is some tension there. A

lot of my work, as with other artists, strives to achieve a kind of tension through dynamic equilibrium, either through spatial relationships or through color relationships. I've always admired, for example, Pierre Bonnard, who will put two hues together, say orange and blue, but will add white to both. The orange and blue are complements, but the white is a unifier pulling the two hues back together. He will also add the same amount of saturation to two hues, to create an interesting relationship. In a sense, he is creating the perfect relationship, a certain amount of tension and a certain amount of stability, or equilibrium. I've worked asymmetrically by placing large against small. I've worked with harmonies or colors that are analogous against contrast. The idea is to strive for some type of dynamic equilibrium. Piet Mondrian is another good example of an artist who talked about disturbing the symmetry of something through spatial relationships.

**MD:** I think that quality is why your work, even when it's forty or fifty years old, seems so current, so dynamic. The compositions are not staid or stable or set in any way. They're in a state of being, a state of transforming, which I find really compelling.

**RS:** That's what I strive for. I think all artists strive for that.

**MD:** In structuring the paintings themselves—particularly with the grid-based paintings—you are using squares. I know you are zeroing in on a few different sizes: seven-inch squares, nine-inch squares, and 13.75-inch squares. I'm assuming color functions pretty differently at each of those sizes.

**RS:** Yes.

**MD:** Is it about the *area* of that color, or is it about the *length* of the side of that square and its relationship to the other colors adjacent to it? Is there an ideal size for color interaction?

**RS:** It's kind of strange. For years, I tried to figure out how the viewer could see the original color in the middle of the square when different colors are placed in the four adjacent squares. When the different colors interact, they create different color sensations. Initially I thought nine-inch squares would allow that to happen, but it seemed that the color relationships with the other squares dominated the one on which the viewer concentrated, so I began increasing the size of each square. The larger I made the square, the more the initial color retained its identity. And the adjacent colors created other colors. I began to look at them from a certain viewing distance and changed the size of the square over and over again. I finally ended up with what I thought was the ideal square simply by sitting and looking at it; it turned out to be twelve inches. I don't know why.

**MD:** Twelve inches was the ideal.

**RS:** Yes, at a certain viewing distance.

**MD:** Is there a size at which that breaks down, either a square being too small and almost becoming pixilated or too large and almost becoming a field?

**RS:** Yes, but that led me also to move away from a symmetrical grid and start to have big blocks of color next to small blocks of color.

**MD:** And that began in the 1980s, right? The mid-1980s?

**RS:** Yes.

**MD:** What motivated you to do that?

**RS:** I wanted one big block of color to remain and have its own identity. I would paint, for example, a big block of violet and then smaller colors that created different phenomenological sensations. You would see a passive large violet square next to a small, interactive one. It's a perfect description of dynamic equilibrium, a balance between passive and interactive.

**MD:** Many of the paintings you made during the 1980s were divided into elements with two-thirds of the space at the top and a third at the bottom. It seemed like distinct activities happened in each of those spaces. It's almost as if four paintings are working in concert within the same painting structure. What was your motivation for having multiple things happening simultaneously in a single painting?

**RS:** That goes back to an earlier part of the conversation. You want a painting to be durational. So it starts out looking one way and then it modulates or changes its configuration through a relationship to create a different experience. A large passive violet square leads through modulation to other sizes; it steps up and down.

**MD:** And I think that the color decisions you made in these paintings from the 1980s have bigger, broader steps. They tend to be less spectral and use much more disparate colors. In some cases, almost discordant color.

**RS:** That's a marvelous description of what I ran up against when I was dealing with only the grid paintings. There was a lot of phenomenology in the color, but we weren't seeing the individual color itself. We weren't seeing its characteristics. We were seeing a lot of fluctuation of light, radiant energy. So I decided part of the painting should be static, and it should be about a particular color. The other part should have this phenomenology within it. That was the rationale.

**MD:** Let's move on to the work you've been making for the past half decade, the brushstroke paintings. I felt this was another new and radical step forward for your work—to create visible brushstrokes and a surface that was no longer flat but rather built-up depending on how the brushstrokes were laid down. Many of these works have a grid-based progression that goes from a very, very small, almost Pointillist dot, for lack of a better term, to larger, very expressive brushstrokes. How did you arrive at this new strategy? How did you decide that the brush needed to come into it in a more visible way? That the surface needed to be built up?

**RS:** One thing I'm consistently concerned with is releasing the energy of color—because it is about energy. I began to think about the grid paintings as being a little too passive. They released some of the energy. I had done some brushstroke paintings back in the 1960s that

got destroyed. They didn't really work that well because I didn't understand color that well. But I took up the brushstroke again and I began to make parts of the paintings big and parts very small so that when you scan the surface of the painting, you had access to the radiant energy. But that energy changed as I made the brushstrokes smaller. When the brushstrokes became almost Pointillist, the colors mixed and combined in a completely different way than they did when the brushstrokes were larger. I really wanted to focus upon releasing the energy so that each painting was very much about being in the same environment with the viewer and the energy was radiating off the surface—in addition to being something to look at. I also became fascinated with the electronic age, in which you are bombarded with energy. A great deal of the content is inherent in how this energy is released to you as the viewer.

**MD:** So tell me about your approach to making a brushstroke painting.

**RS:** First, I got rid of all my art brushes. I went out and bought very cheap horsehair brushes. I use them once and throw them away. The mark you make with it, you can't make a good a mark. The brush is made so crudely. I remember this thing that Frank Stella and Willem de Kooning were once discussing. De Kooning was talking about how he took such good care of his brushes and saying that he soaked them in lye. He tried to shape them and make them. At the other end of the table, somebody said to Stella, "Well, what do you do?" He responded, "I don't know. I just hire a bunch of guys and get some paintbrushes." I've been struggling to figure out whether I should use a more subjective brushstroke or whether it should be more mechanical. I painted a couple that were more mechanical and I didn't like them. It's very hard to figure out.

**MD:** Have you ever used studio assistants to make your work?

**RS:** They've never painted any part of a final painting. They've helped me paint preparatory stuff.

**MD:** Let's discuss the impact of the brushstroke format on color itself. The paint is put on relatively thickly. The very top edge of a stroke is highlighted and the bottom edge is shadowed, which again throws the color into a few different directions. Was that your intention?

**RS:** Yes. I was trying to get at different characteristics of color by using an active brushstroke. Also, the brushstroke is, in some instances, very material, so there's a dialectic between sensation and material, and again it goes back to the idea of dynamic equilibrium. There is something that looks very visceral, and then something that's very elusive and kind of flickers across the edge. The changing scale also helps achieve this. The durational process of comprehending it requires you to sort of scan the surface.

**MD:** Do you feel that these paintings are more physical than your earlier, grid-based paintings?

**RS:** Yes.

**MD:** How did you develop the specific brushstroke you are using in these paintings? I know you have a pre-planned underlying progression in terms of its scale, one that gives viewers the opportunity to see the color in multiple ways.

**RS:** First of all, I grid off the paintings. I start up at the top with very large squares and then go down to very small squares. I use a series of brushes, some large, some small. I don't necessarily adhere to the grid. I simply use it as a point of orientation. But it's just my brushstroke. It's just the best I can do to put on the paint. I am trying to not have uniform brushstrokes, but to have what would be not really a random brushstroke either, but one that would not bring a great deal of attention to itself. I haven't really resolved the problem of the brushstroke. I started back in the 1960s using brushstrokes in these grid paintings, but it got to the point where I wasn't happy with how it worked.

**MD:** The brushstrokes themselves are not ordinary. They retain their hard edges and they're not transparent or painterly in any way. They are like monochrome blobs of color. How are you putting the paint down?

**RS:** Initially, when I started using fine-art brushes, they seemed to create a very reserved brushstroke, so, like I said, I switched to very inexpensive brushes. They didn't allow me to put a lot of aesthetic emphasis into my marks, and I liked that better. But keeping the edges clean is important. That's then where the colors can interact. If the edges aren't clean, then the color becomes muddled a little bit. There is, during the transformation from one spot in the painting to another, quite a significant change in each color's appearance. You'll see colors emanating one kind of energy and then as your eye moves towards the bottom they'll emanate another. I've also always had this idea that the upper right and lower left, or the top and bottom of the painting, should be different. They should constitute some kind of context wherein the activity occurs.

**MD:** How did you arrive at that? Why the upper right and the bottom left, or the top versus bottom?

**RS:** I started out with the idea that color has three dimensions. I thought, "If I'm going to use color, it should have an element of black in it and an element of white"—to show contextually the three dimensions of color: dark and light; saturated and unsaturated; and different hue relationships. It came out of that idea.

**MD:** I suspect many viewers will see a vast difference between the grid-based paintings and the brushstroke paintings. Do you want to offer a few words about the relationship between those two strategies?

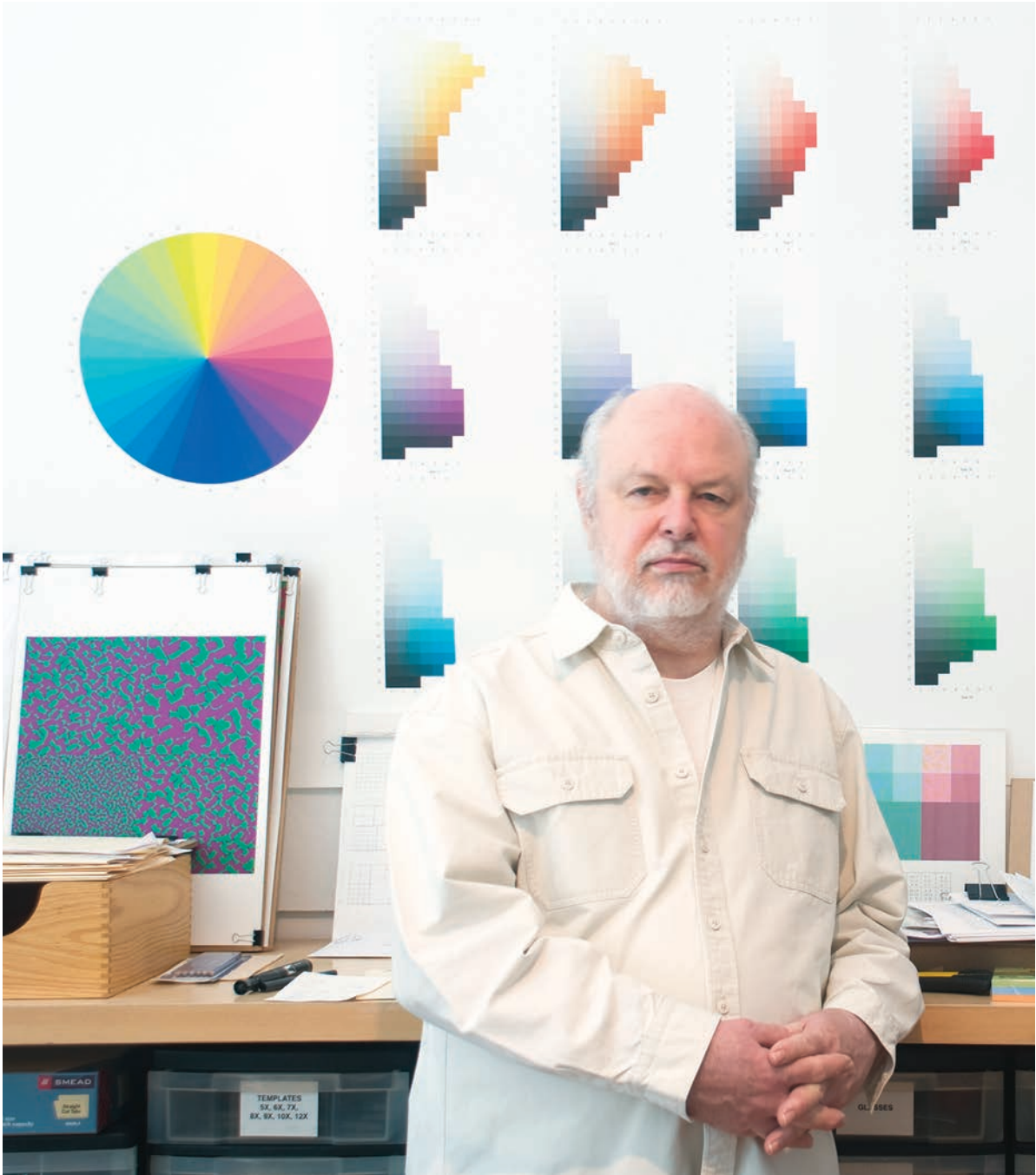
**RS:** Initially many of the grid paintings were an attempt to understand and develop a knowledge of color and how color actually had the ability to be expressive. And I think the brushstroke paintings represent an approach in which color assumes a completely different posture. It's not passive, it's active. I think that's an important aspect of color, that it can actually generate all this energy.

**MD:** Finally, you are going to be showing at Hunter College forty or fifty years' worth of work; a huge span of time, a huge body of work. Many ambitious paintings, many ambitious projects. But I don't really think of this as being a retrospective. This is a mid-career survey and I'm wondering where you're going with the work over the next few years. What's piquing your interest? Where are there opportunities for exploration?

**RS:** You know I've been working a lot with these brushstroke ideas. And I have some conceptual ideas about expanding the paintings to include more aspects of the phenomenology that comes out of the spectrum. So it would require larger scales. I think probably different configurations. I'm kind of shocked that I ended up with forty or forty-five years' worth of painting. I never looked at it in retrospect that way. I think most painters pursue their work as a type of educational experience. I'm adding language, vocabulary. I'm trying to better define my logic. I'm trying to let my intuition determine how my paintings should be developed. I think intuition is a very strange thing. It operates independently of your intellect. You may think you know something, but at some point, your intuition will let you see some other aspect of it. I have depended most of these years on my intuition to lead me to the next body of work, to the next thing I might do. I am always working with certain variables and then all of a sudden it says to me, "Well, there is this opportunity. Why don't you look into this?" I'm not worried about my intuition's ability to generate new directions for me. I'm worried about the ability to understand what my intuition is conceptually forming for me and how it's going to lead me to the next step.



*Interview conducted on May 14, 2010 at Robert Swain's studio, 57 Leonard Street, New York City*



Robert Swain in his studio, 2009



Filing system of Robert Swain's color chips



16

HUE 17

16

HUE 17

VALUE 21

HUE 17

VALUE 23

HUE 17

VALUE 25

HUE 17

VALUE 27

HUE 17

VALUE

## Robert Swain Chronology

By Teri Lehner

- 1940** Birth of Robert Oliver Swain, Jr., on December 7, son of Elisabeth Anne Brower Swain and Robert Oliver Swain. Place of birth: Austin, TX.
- 1941 – 42** Moves around with his family to various army bases.
- 1944 – 46** Swain's father is stationed in Germany and he moves with his family to his grandmother's house in Mercedes, TX.
- 1946** Moves to Arlington, VA. His brother, Peter John Swain, is born.
- 1955 – 56** Attends two years of public high school.
- 1957 – 59** Transfers to The Hawthorne School, Washington, D.C. Graduates in 1959.
- 1956 – 58** Works in construction on the Pan-American Highway in Guatemala, June-August, 1956; in Nicaragua, June-August, 1957; and at a summer camp in New Mexico, 1958.
- 1959** Attends The American University, Washington, D.C.
- 1961– 63** Spends the summer after his sophomore year in Western Europe. Travels to Spain and lives there for two years while attending the University of Madrid.
- 1963 – 64** Returns to The American University and receives a Bachelor of Arts Degree (BA) in Fine Art in the spring of 1964. Works as a guard for The Phillips Collection, assisting in the installation of exhibitions and other museum activities while completing his college degree.
- 1964 – 65** Moves to Provincetown, MA, and works as a studio assistant to Karl Knaths. Produces a series of untitled paintings during this time that are seen by Olga Thenen, who gives him his first one-person exhibition at Thenen Gallery, New York.
- 1965** Moves to New York, briefly lives on Twenty-third Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, and then moves to 5 Lispenard Street in Tribeca, where he establishes his first studio.
- 1966** Initial interest in contrived shapes is quickly abandoned in favor of color. Paints an untitled five-foot-square work consisting of stripes running in various directions that reveals unique shapes solely through color interactions.
- 1967** First group exhibition, "Light and Line," Park Place Gallery, New York. Swain first experiments with a grid format.
- Group exhibition, Bennington College, Bennington, VT. This exhibition is pivotal in Swain's career. Swain meets his eventual colleague, close friend, and mentor Tony Smith.
- 1968** Hired as an adjunct professor at Hunter College, the City University of New York. Begins assisting Tony Smith, with whom he works for several years. Moves to 57 Leonard Street, New York.
- 1969** Group Exhibition, "The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1968," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 3-September 8, 1968. Exhibition travels to Grand Palais, Paris, November 14-December 23, 1968; the Kunsthaus, Zurich, January 19-February 23, 1969; and the Tate Gallery, London, April 22-June 1, 1969.
- "Thirty-First Biennial Exhibition of American Contemporary Painting," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, February 1-March 20. *Untitled #7* (1968-1969) is acquired by the Corcoran Gallery of Art from the biennial.
- Receives a grant for painting from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.
- Receives an honorarium from Virginia Commonwealth, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA.
- Swain's first commission. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Des Moines, IA, invites him to create a large-scale architectural installation at the American Republic Insurance Company, Des Moines.
- Jane Holzer selects a large-scale work by Swain for N. K. Winston Corporations, Smith Haven Mall, Lake Grove, NY.
- Marries his high school sweetheart, Annette Leibel.
- Begins to develop his own color system. Eventually, he arrives at approximately 5,000 components.
- 1970** Architectural installation of an untitled painting commissioned by Schering Laboratories at their headquarters in Kenilworth, NJ, in conjunction with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.
- Receives an honorarium from Drexel Institute of Technology, Philadelphia, PA.
- 1971** Group exhibition, "The Structure of Color," curated by Marcia Tucker, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, February 25-April 18.
- Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, acquires *Untitled* (1968), as a gift of Donald Droll.
- 1972** Architectural installation of an untitled large-scale work at Kahn & Mallis Associates, New York.
- 1973** Receives the first of ten grants from the Research Foundation of the City University of New York's Faculty Research Award Program, which aides in the development of his color system.
- 1974** First one-person museum exhibition, "Robert Swain: Paintings 1973-74," The Everson Art Museum, Syracuse, NY, April 19-May 20. Swain's work enters The Everson Art Museum's collection.
- Susan Caldwell becomes Swain's dealer, until 1981. One-person exhibition, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, October 5-October 23. This is the first of four one-person exhibitions at Susan Caldwell Gallery.

- The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts acquires *Untitled* (1974).
- Group exhibition, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York. This is the first of seven group shows at Susan Caldwell Gallery.
- 1974 – 75** Group Exhibition, "Color as Language," organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Exhibition travels to museums throughout Central and South America, including the Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogota, February 24-March 30; Museo de Arte Moderno de São Paulo, April 18-May 18; Museo de Arte Moderno, Rio de Janeiro, June 12-July 20; Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, August 3-September 14; and Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, October 2-November 23.
- 1975** The Detroit Institute of Arts acquires *Greg's Yellow* (1973) for its collection.
- 1976** The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, OH, acquires *Untitled* (1975) for its collection.
- Receives his first grant for painting from the National Endowment for the Arts.
- Untitled #901* (1975) enters the permanent collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.
- 1977** Commission, *Untitled #5 (Two Yellows)*, Harris Bank, Chicago, through Powell/Kleinschmidt, Chicago.
- Commission, Travenol Laboratories, Deerfield, IL, through Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Chicago.
- 1978** The Corcoran Gallery of Art acquires *Study for a Painting* (1974).
- 1980** The Milwaukee Art Museum acquires *Hexagon #2* (c. 1969) as a gift of Schwartz Associates.
- The Denver Art Museum acquires *30 Part Circle* (1971). The work remains in the collection until 1995.
- 1981** Commission for the Tupperware world headquarters, Orlando, FL. Consultant: Art Sources, Inc., Jacksonville, FL.
- Commissions for IBM, Charlotte, NC, and Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback and Associates, Atlanta, GA. Consultant: Art Sources, Inc., Jacksonville, FL.
- 1981 – 83** Develops design for a thirty-by-thirty-foot, computerized, outdoor light piece commissioned by Ocean Spray, Sulphur Springs, TX, for its manufacturing plant. Creates models but the work is not realized.
- 1982** Receives a CAPS Grant for painting from the state of New York.
- Promotion to full professor, Hunter College, New York.
- Group Exhibition, "Given and Promised: 36 Painters: New Acquisitions," January 26-March 14, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. For *Tony's Jane* (1979) enters the museum's collection.
- 1982 – 83** Commission for Johnson & Johnson Headquarters, New Brunswick, NJ, at the direction of the architectural firm I.M. Pei, New York.
- Commission for the Slee Concert Hall at the University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY.
- 1987** Albright-Knox Art Gallery acquires *Study for Slee Concert Hall* (1982-85).
- 1989** Receives his second grant for painting from the National Endowment for the Arts.
- Albright-Knox Art Gallery acquires *Untitled (6x4 #20)* (1988).
- 1989 – 91** On March 13, 1989, a steam line bursts in the basement of 383 West Broadway, where Swain's work was being stored. Steam and 200° F water soak all of his paintings. It is discovered days later and the inspection of several hundred paintings takes months. Ultimately, it is determined that ten mural-size paintings and another twenty-six of Swain's major large works have been so severely damaged that they are beyond repair.
- 1991** Swain's father dies, October 27.
- 1998** 45<sup>th</sup> Biennial Exhibition, "The Corcoran Collects 1907-1998," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, July 17-September 28.
- Receives the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association.
- Participates in artists' panel "Tony Smith: Artists' Responses" at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 2003** Group Exhibition, "Seeing Red, Part II: Contemporary Nonobjective Painting," curated by Gabriele Evertz and Michael Fehr, The Times Square Gallery, Hunter College, New York.
- Participates in panel discussion "Seeing Red, Part III: Color as an Experience," part of a two-day symposium on contemporary nonobjective painting and color theory at the Goethe-Institut Inter Nationes, New York, March 14-15.
- 2004** Swain's mother dies, September 21.
- 2006** Begins his "Brushstroke" series.
- 2008** Albright-Knox Art Gallery acquires *Untitled* (2007).
- 2009** "Alternative Abstraction," featuring Dan Crews, Peter Demos, Gabriele Evertz, Pierre Obando, Shawn Powell, curated by Robert Swain, Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY, March 14 - April 21.

## Robert Swain Exhibition History

### Solo Exhibitions

- 1964 – 65 Thenen Gallery, New York.
- 1968 "Robert Swain: Paintings," Fischbach Gallery, New York, September 10-October 3.
- 1969 "Robert Swain: New Paintings," Fischbach Gallery, New York, October 18-November 6.
- 1974 "Robert Swain: Paintings 1973-74," The Everson Art Museum, Syracuse, NY, April 19 - May 20.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, October 5-October 23.
- 1975 Texas Gallery, Houston, TX, May 3-May 31.
- 1975 – 76 "Paintings by Robert Swain," The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, OH, December 5, 1975-January 4, 1976.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- 1976 Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- 1978 "Robert Swain: Two Installations of Recent Work," Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum, Norwalk, CT, and Darien Library, Darien, CT, September 10-October 13.  
Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- 1980 Toni Birkhead Gallery, Cincinnati, OH.
- 1981 Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- 1988 Toni Birkhead Gallery, Cincinnati, OH.
- 1989 "Robert Swain, New Paintings," Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY, January 28-February 22.
- 2008 "Robert Swain," Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY, March 29-May 14.
- 2010 "Visual Sensations: The Paintings of Robert Swain: 1967-2010," Hunter College/Times Square Gallery, New York, October 7-November 13.
- "Barry Flanagan/Robert Swain," Fischbach Gallery, New York, September 27-October 16.
- "Art on Paper," Weatherspoon Art Gallery, The University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC.
- 1970 The George H. Waterman III Collection, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI.
- 1971 "The Structure of Color," curated by Marcia Tucker, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, February 25-April 18.  
M. Knoedler & Co., New York.  
Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY.
- 1972 Fourcade, Droll, Inc., New York.  
Benefit Exhibition, New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, New York.
- 1973 Fourcade, Droll, Inc., New York.  
"Eight Contemporary Painters and Sculptors," The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY, June 30-July 29.
- 1974 "Painting & Sculpture Today," Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN.  
Texas Gallery, Houston, TX.  
Fourcade, Droll, Inc., New York.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- 1974 – 75 "Color as Language," organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Exhibition travels to museums throughout Central and South America, including the Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogota, February 24-March 30; Museo de Arte Moderno de São Paulo, April 18-May 18; Museo de Arte Moderno, Rio de Janeiro, June 12-July 20; Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, August 3-September 14; and Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, October 2-November 23.
- 1975 "Fourteen Abstract Painters," Frederick S. Wright Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, March 25-May 25.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.
- "Contemporary Paintings: A Review of the New York Gallery Season, 1974-1975," Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse, NY.
- "Contemporary American Painting," Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA.
- 1976 Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.  
"Ten Painters," Georgia State University Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA.

### Group Exhibitions

- 1967 "Light and Line," Park Place Gallery, New York. Bennington College, Bennington, VT.
- 1968 "The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1968," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 3-September 8, 1968. Exhibition traveled to Grand Palais, Paris, November 14-December 23, 1968; the Kunsthau, Zurich, January 19-February 23, 1969; and the Tate Gallery, London, April 22-June 1, 1969.  
"Robert Swain/Stylianos Gianakos," Fischbach Gallery, New York.
- 1969 "Thirty-First Biennial Exhibition of American Contemporary Painting," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, February 1-March 20.

- 1977 Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, May 11-June 4.  
 "Art in Public Spaces," Organization of Independent Artists, US Court House, Brooklyn.  
 "The Geometry of Color," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.
- 1978 "Robert Swain/Alan Uglow," Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, April 5-29.
- 1979 "Generation: Twenty Abstract Painters born in the United States Between 1929 and 1946," organized by Michael Walls, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York.  
 "From Allan to Zucker," Texas Gallery, Houston, TX.
- 1980 "Geometric Abstractions," curated by Clifford Singer, Organization of Independent Artists, Brooklyn Law School, Brooklyn.
- 1981 Gala Art Benefit for The Lighthouse, The New York Association for the Blind, 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, March 12.  
 "Ciba-Geigy Collects: Aspects of Abstraction," Sewall Art Gallery, Rice University, Houston, TX, September 8-October 24.  
 "Criss-Cross at Yellowstone Art Center," Yellowstone Art Center, Billings, MT.
- 1981 – 82 "Works for Winter," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.  
 "8 New York Artists," Art Sources, Inc., Jacksonville, FL.
- 1982 "Given and Promised: 36 Painters: New Acquisitions," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 26-March 14.  
 "Made in New York," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.
- 1982 – 83 Creative Artists Public Service Program, Painting Recipients Exhibition: Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY.  
 Brainerd Art Gallery, State University College, Potsdam, NY.
- 1984 Jeffrey Hoffeld & Company, Inc., New York.
- 1985 "Repetitions: A Postmodern Dynamic," organized by Maurice Berger, Hunter College Art Gallery, New York.  
 "Ten Gallery Artists," Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY.
- 1986 "Art from the City University of New York: Approaches to Abstraction," organized by Sanford Wurmfeld, Shanghai University College of Fine Art, Shanghai, China.
- 1988 "The Geometry of Color," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.
- 1989 "A Debate on Abstraction: The Persistence of Painting," curated by Vincent Longo, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, New York, February 1-March 10.  
 "Autumn on West Broadway," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.
- 1990 "Grids," curated by Ellen Carey, Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York, September 15-October 13.
- 1993 "MFA Faculty Artists, 1981-1993," curated by Susan Edwards, Hunter College Art Gallery, New York, February 28-March 30.
- 1993 – 94 "Centennial Greetings," Denver Art Museum, Denver CO, February 6-January 16.
- 1996 "Hunter College Faculty Exhibition," Hunter College Art Gallery, New York, February 28-March 30.
- 1997 Alliance for Young Artists & Writers Benefit, New York.  
 Coalition for the Homeless Benefit, New York.
- 1998 "The Corcoran Collects: 1907-1998," Forty-fifth Biennial Exhibition, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, July 17-September 28.
- 2000 "The Faculty Show," curated by Tracy L. Adler and Sanford Wurmfeld, The Times Square Gallery, Hunter College, New York.
- 2002 "Sparks Selects," Sparks Gallery, Denver, CO.  
 "Faculty Small Works," Hunter College, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, New York, April 4-May 11.
- 2003 "Seeing Red, Part II: Contemporary Nonobjective Painting," curated by Gabriele Evertz and Michael Fehr, The Times Square Gallery, Hunter College, New York.  
 Washington Art Association, Washington Depot, CT.  
 "Painted Parameters," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York.
- 2004 "Works on Paper by Painting Faculty," Glasgow School of Art and Hunter College Department of Art, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, New York.
- 2005 "Department of Art Faculty Exhibition," The Times Square Gallery, Hunter College, New York, February 16-April 16.
- 2007 "The Optical Edge," curated by Robert C. Morgan, PhD, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York.
- 2008 – 09 "Op Art Revisited," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, February 2008-January 2009.
- 2009 "Core of Substance," Andre Zarre Gallery, New York, September 12-October 17.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1969

G1

## AN INTUITIVE SPECTRUM



## Look at Robert Swain's Painting. It Grows Stranger.

By Paul Richard

The Spectral Painting of Robert Swain seems—at first glance—some sort of formal exercise. As ordered as a rainbow or a color chart, it looks impersonal, standardized, machined.

But slowly, as the eye becomes accustomed, its obviousness fades. It grows stranger. Eventually it demonstrates interwoven color truths we've never seen before.

Robert Swain is one of the 22 not-yet-famous artists included in the Corcoran Gallery's 31st Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting. Of the more than 80 works exhibited, his is the first selected for purchase and addition to the permanent collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

The historical and esthetic reasons for its selection are not obscure.

Now 28 and a New Yorker, Swain was brought up in the Virginia suburbs and educated at American University. He's a local artist. The tradition that he works in, that he has clarified and extended, is local, too.

The geometry of his work is pure and so is the color that activates it. His is the most significant new Washington Color Painting exhibited here in years.

His Spectral Painting is not one but many.

It consists of 208 separate pre-fabricated canvases, each the size of a record jacket, each a different hue.

The colors march across the wall. They look precisely ordered, and they are. Their order looks machine-measured and mathematical, but it is not.

The picture is wholly intuitive. The paints were mixed by trial and error. The colors were "eyeballed in." No cut glass prism cast the spectrum that controls them. Their spectrum is of Swain's design.

Despite the guesswork that produced them, Swain's colors seem to shift in two rigid and predetermined ways.

They darken as they rise. Each vertical, 12-square row begins at almost white and ends at almost black.

They march, ordered by the spectrum, from left to right across the wall. Each 24-square horizontal row moves from blue, through bluish-green, through yellow, through red and violet and back to blue again.

Those two perpendicular movements are the first thing the viewer sees. It is only after he has observed them that he begins to see the curves.

Swain's curves are never rigid. They are soft

and zoned and smeared. They are determined not by lightness or darkness, but by purity of hue.

Look for a moment at the vertical row of blue that marks the picture's left-hand edge. The third blue from the top, or maybe number four, is the truest, bluest blue.

The yellows work in different ways. The truest, yellowest yellow is far closer to the floor. It is the viewer's eye, selecting the richest colors, that establishes those broad parabolas that sweep across the wall.

Had Swain not guessed his colors, had he followed a standard color system, his picture would have died. Most such systems are based on paint-mixture, on the mechanical addition of so many drops of black or white to brightly colored paint. Had he followed such a system his truest hues would have stretched in straight lines across the wall.

Equally imprisoning would have been reliance on the natural spectrum. Swain's intuitively proportioned spectrum is evenly balanced; the natural, prism-generated one is not. The yellow of the natural spectrum is a narrow band framed by two broad smears, one of bluish-red, the other of bluish-green. Swain has regularized these proportions. He's given his yellows, his

reds, his blues and his greens a standard balanced weight.

Though the painting violates natural order, it exhibits no mistakes. Where science and judgment deviate, Swain always trusts his eye.

He's changed his vision—and the viewer's, too.

The painting draws the viewer in. He stands there testing it. He measures and compares. The colors of the picture do not jump. They are everywhere symmetrical, flawless, even, smooth.

His eyes now sensitized, his color sense improved, the curious viewer discovers something stranger still. None of those evenly painted squares, not a single one, looks flat.

Each seems scalloped, hollowed out, deflected. Each responds optically to the four colors that surround it. Colors butted edge-to-edge not only meet, they mix. Each square, tugged at by its neighbors, seems to warp and bulge.

Things happen before the viewer's eyes. The picture does not rest. But despite all of its activity and changes, nothing seems arbitrary, error-ridden, false. Each new optical discovery only deepens the ordered beauty of the system that Swain has so carefully and consciously designed.

Swain has specialized in color-study for most of the past six years. He's trained his eye the way a musician trains his ear. His pitch is very

See SWAIN, GR, Col. 4

## Corcoran's Color Painting

SWAIN, From G1

good. It still took him more than three months of full time work just to mix his paints.

The sale to the Corcoran is Swain's first major break. He's shown infrequently before: He supports himself by teaching (at New York's Hunter College) and by constructing giant plywood structures for sculptor Tony Smith.

Swain, like Smith, avoids the arbitrary. His work is systematic and rigorously conscious. It is perhaps ironic that in years to come his

work is likely to be considered representative of the Corcoran's 31st Biennial, a controversial show charged by its critics with harboring work that is both fraudulent and dull.

Swain's picture is radiant. It is difficult to imagine a painting more self-disciplined or less tolerant of mistakes. It was selected for purchase by gallery director James Harkins. The necessary funds were provided jointly by the Friends of The Corcoran and gallery trustee Mrs. G. Howland Chase.

## Exhibition Checklist

All works are courtesy of the artist.  
All works are acrylic on canvas, except where noted.  
The paintings are organized chronologically by size from small to large, to reflect the grouping of the exhibition.

### Paintings

#### 6 x 4 feet

*Untitled, 6x4-01, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-05, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-07, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-10, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-11, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-16, 1986*  
*Untitled, 6x4-18, 1988*  
*Untitled, 6x4-19, 1988*

#### 6 x 7 feet

*Untitled, 6x4-01, 1988-89*  
*Untitled, 6x7-10, 1989-93*  
*Untitled, 6x7-13, 1991*  
*Untitled, 6x7-15, 1991*  
*Untitled, 6x7-LN/29, 1992-99*  
*Untitled, 6x7-LN/29AA, 1992-99*  
*Untitled, 6x7-5AA, 1992-98*  
*Untitled, 6x7-111A/225A Pair #1, 1999*  
*Untitled, 6x7-5A/23Work #3c\*\*, 1999-2001*  
*Untitled, 6x7-5A 15 B3-Five, 1999-2001*

#### 7 x 7 feet

*Untitled 703, 1978*  
*Untitled, 13-25-7 x 27-25-6, 2007*  
*Untitled, 9-25-6 x 23-25-6, 2009*  
*Untitled, 13-19-7 x 9-19-7 x 19-19-5 x 25-19-5), 2010*  
*Untitled, 1-13-7 x 16-13-4 x 7-13-OS x 25-13-OS), 2010*  
*Untitled, 11-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6, 2010*  
*Untitled, 11-25-7 x 13-25-7, 2010*

#### 8 x 8 feet

*Untitled, 8x8-5A RO #3, 1999-2001*  
*Untitled, 8x8 3C Double Square 9N, 2005*  
*Untitled, 8x8 27C, 2005-06*

#### 9 x 9 feet

*Untitled, 9AAA, 2005-06*  
*Untitled, 914, 1979*  
*Untitled, 915, 1979*  
*Untitled, 917, 1979*  
*Untitled, 920, 1979*

#### 10 x 6 feet

*Untitled, 10x6-B&W-01, 1986*  
*Untitled, 10x6-01, 1987*  
*Untitled, 10x6-04, 1987*  
*Untitled, 10x6-05, 1987*  
*Untitled, 10x6-06, 1987*  
*Untitled, 10x6-10, 1990*  
*Untitled, 10x6-11, 1990*  
*Untitled, 10x6-12, 1990*

#### Other

*Red and Green Circle, 1969, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 6 in. Diameter*  
*Untitled, 7-25-6 x 11-25-7 x 25-25-6, 2010, 7 x 14 feet*  
*Blue Double #2, 11-25-7x21-25-6x25-25-6, 2010, 7 x 14 feet*  
*Untitled, 10x12-02, 1994-95, 10 x 12 feet*  
*Untitled, 1, 1973, 10 x 30 feet*

#### Models

*Color Luminosity Project-Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc. Model, 1981-83, Wood and acrylic paint, 36 x 46 x 28 in.*  
*Color Luminosity Project-Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc. Model, 1981-83, Wood and acrylic paint, 36 x 46 x 28 in.*  
*Color Luminosity Project-Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc. Wall Chart, 1981-83, Inkjet on paper, 38 1/4 x 57 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.*  
*Johnson and Johnson Model, 1982-83, Foam core, paper, and acrylic paint on masonite, 13 1/4 x 40 x 16 in.*  
*Slee Concert Hall Model, 1982-85, Wood and acrylic paint on masonite, 16 x 55 x 16 in.*



Robert Swain overseeing the installation of *Visual Sensations* at the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery



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