

Major Formats: From Color to Light

by Carter Ratcliff

There was a time—not so very long ago, in the long span of Western art history—when many artists felt the need to divest their art of just about everything. Certain conceptualists went the furthest. Getting rid of tangible objects, they reduced works of art to ideas. To convey these ideas, they set them down on paper, often with a typewriter, and taped the resulting texts to gallery walls. Minimalists allowed the object to persist but only after expunging it of all formal complexity, leaving only the simplest geometric shapes: cubes, grids, and variants thereof. A small group of painters was applauded for reducing their art to pure color. In the aftermath of this divestiture, no line or linear perspective, no image or even the gestural ghost of an image, was supposed to have survived. Painting, it was said, had been reduced to its essence: purely pictorial relationships between high-keyed colors. All the artists included in this exhibition were singled out for this praise, and they were given a label: color-field painters.

Over the decades, this label did its job, which was to identify a small group of abstract painters who emerged in the 1950s and made a major contribution to the history of art in postwar America. Responding more to Jackson Pollock than to Willem de Kooning, these artists shared certain assumptions. Prominent among them was the idea that the canvas is not a blankness to be divided into the bits and pieces of traditional composition. Rather, it is a “field” possessing a unity to be preserved, as we see with particular vividness throughout this exhibition. See, for example, Jules Olitski’s *Monday Night Mark*, 1965, and *Stellar Wise*, 1969, by Kenneth Noland. Another assumption was that new imagery calls for new means. Dispensing with brushes, Helen Frankenthaler, Friedel Dzubas, and Larry Poons reinvented for their own purposes Pollock’s method of pouring his pigments onto the canvas. During the 1960s, Jules Olitski applied his colors with a spray gun.

Most important of all was the primacy given to color—and high-keyed color, at that. Hence the “color-field” label. Yet, despite its usefulness, this label has had one unfortunate effect. It

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suggests a uniformity of style that is simply not to be found in the work of these painters. At a time when an entire generation was producing close variations on de Kooning's gestural abstraction, the artists in this show were departing from Pollock's example in unprecedented directions. As a consequence, these color-field painters are far too distinctive to constitute a strictly defined category. Each is as individual, in his or her own way, as Pollock or Barnett Newman.

Again, all of them were determined to dispense with the balance and counter-balance of traditional composition. Perhaps the most elegant way to do this is with the introduction of symmetry, as in Noland's *No End*, a "Target" painting from 1961. When composition vanishes, so does much else, including the assumption that dark tones are recessive. In this canvas, the black circle refuses to recede. Or it might be better to say that Noland's command of tone and saturation gives the other colors of *No End* the power to keep this black form in their vicinity. In fact, the dark blue disk at the center of this painting may be the most recessive element here. However that may be, the interplay of these shapes and colors gives the black circle a kind of luminosity—or, if that sounds too paradoxical, at least a lightness, an airiness, that allows all the elements of *No End* to advance into the same plane and thus preserve the integrity of the surface. At first, this is surprising. How could the artist have defied so successfully so many of our ingrained habits of seeing? Surprise soon gives way to an exhilarated sense of the unity Noland wrought from seemingly irreconcilable disparities.

Look closely at *No End* and you see brushwork on the verge of vanishing, as it does in Noland's later painting, *Stellar Wise*. Marks of the brush are not smoothed away so much as supplanted in Olitski's *Monday Night Mark*. Here the painter's spray-technique permits modulations of color almost too subtle for the eye follow. Feeling our way into these chromatic currents, we almost forget that the painting is a palpable object—an oversight the artist would have appreciated. As the art historian Kenneth Moffett has recalled, "Olitski once said that he would like to spray color in the air and have it remain there." No longer dependent on a physical support, color would achieve complete independence. This was an impossible goal and yet a helpful one, for it guided Olitski to paintings like this one. As clouds of blue in *Monday Night Mark* turn red, its reds turn blue, and the painter redefines the very idea of the pictorial surface. No longer a flat, untextured plane, it is now a zone of indeterminate density vitalized by the shifting grain of his colors. Surface is depth,

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depth is surface, and we sense that Olitski has found, in his own way, a unity as satisfying as Noland's.

Olitski's *Hyksos Factor III*, 1975, differs from *Monday Night Mark* in one crucial respect. Instead of several hues it presents us with one: a grayish brown that would verge on dullness if it were not for its extraordinary luminosity. Face-to-face with *Hyksos Factor III*, I came to a sudden realization. Color-field painting is more about light than color—not light merely as a perquisite to vision but light as a generator of space and, just as important, as a correlate of emotion. Throughout this exhibition we see varieties of light, each of which implies a world and ushers us into an intuitive understanding of how it would be to inhabit that world. And we see that none of these artists is in the least reductive. For all the richness of their color, they did not dispense with gesture, line, or effects of spatial depth. Rather, they employed all these pictorial resources and, in the process, revitalized them.

Most color-field paintings are serene. Helen Frankenthaler's *Untitled*, 1978, is less so. In fact, this is a vigorously painted canvas and—as vivid as its various shades of red undoubtedly are—it may well have its most powerful impact by confronting viewers with a counterpart of themselves. What I'm getting at is this painting's suggestion of a standing, gesturing figure: the artist herself, transposing her presence into an elegant flurry of vertical brushstrokes. Of course, I'm not denying that the colors in Frankenthaler's *Untitled* can stand up to sophisticated scrutiny as pure color. They can, indeed, and yet our experience of this painting is not complete until we have felt the energy of the artist's brushstroke and allowed this feeling to morph into a sense of her as a presence in her art: a creative force at once forceful and subtle, confident and questioning.

If Frankenthaler insinuates a figurative presence into this untitled canvas from 1978, then it is tempting to see an evocation of landscape in her *Untitled*, 1984, a small work on paper with horizontal brushstrokes. And this temptation is irresistible when we turn to Friedel Dzubas's *Cairo Bay*, 1965. The title of this painting names a place and its large patch of blue seems to map it. Though it would be too literal-minded to read architectural form into the small black shape at mid-canvas, the meeting of blue and salmon-pink surely defines a horizon. But that is not all it does. Dzubas has deployed his colors in shapes that work against a landscape reading as much as they encourage it. Moreover, the play of tone does not comport with our usual sense of the sky as the

most luminous element of any scene. In *Cairo Bay*, color is high-keyed throughout, except for the black area. Dzubas evokes landscape, one of painting's traditional subjects, and then transcends it with an efflorescence of sheer color.

As in *Cairo Bay*, so in Noland's *Stellar Wise*: hints of a horizon imply a landscape. Yet these implications are even more tenuous in Noland's canvas than in Dzubas's, in part because *Stellar Wise* invites us to focus first not on its horizontal strips of color but on the expanse of warm beige that fills most of this canvas. Running along the upper and lower edges of the frame, the narrow strips eventually attract our attention with an interplay of color too ambiguous to pin down. Because no pictorial logic confines this image within the physical limits of the canvas, *Stellar Wise* generates a powerful expansiveness—a strong intimation of the infinite. At a certain point, looking becomes physical as well as visual. We are drawn into this painting and our sense of ourselves adjusts to the immensity we have entered. This is a quietly astonishing sensation and a triumph of the imagination over literal fact.

Also large, horizontal, and linear, Dan Christensen's *Yellow Bumper*, 1970, offers the same triumph in a different mode. Focus on any one of the forms in this painting and it looks rather substantial, especially the dark blue and rusty stripes that reach from one vertical edge of the canvas to the other. Yet, when we step back for a look at the entire image, a warm, almost shimmering incandescence spreads across the surface. Nonetheless, rectilinear forms do not become vaporous. They remain strong, as if the artist had built an architecture of light. Christensen makes it possible to imagine the palpable canvas as a structure built of chromatic luminosity. A structure of this kind is thoroughly imaginary—and only recently imaginable.

Until the first color-field painters achieved their mature styles, light never functioned as a generative force. It was just one of painting's many subjects. There was direct light from a single source, usually the sun; reflected light; and ambient light of the kind that we see most often in the depths of landscape—a light that is often faint and, “as it were, confounded by the thickness of the air,” to quote Charles Le Brun's commentary on a painting by Nicolas Poussin. Made in 1667, Le Brun's remarks find an echo three centuries later in the poet Stéphane Mallarmé's essay on “Manet and the Impressionists,” 1876. These painters, says Mallarmé, lay on color with a delicacy that enmeshes their subjects in “a harmony of reflected and ever-changing lights.” Light is a motif—a

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depicted subject—even in non-figurative paintings of the 1950s by Philip Guston, Sam Francis, and others dubbed “Abstract Impressionists.” And so when I say that Christensen invented an architecture of light or Olitski made darkness radiant, as he does in *Monday Night Mark*, I am saying that they were genuinely innovative. Unlike any painters before them they used color not to depict light as we see it but to evoke luminosity itself and charge it with metaphorical possibilities not available to earlier traditions.

In work from the late 1950s and early '60s, Larry Poons measured off his canvases with grids more insistent than any we see in Christensen's paintings and inflected them with scattered dots of color. In *Untitled*, 1966, the grid has fallen away and the dots have become large ellipses at once diaphanous and richly textured. We could see these shapes as playfully competitive: which of them glows alluringly enough to arrest our attention? As it happens, none does, for Poons has adjusted hue, tone, and saturation with a precision that renders each of them singular and equal to the others in pictorial power. This is an allover field of inexhaustible subtlety. So is Poons's untitled canvas from 1976, though his method of applying paint has changed utterly. Pigment now cascades in thick rivulets from top to bottom of the canvas. In place of airiness he has put physical density. Yet color still works the same way. Here as elsewhere in this exhibition, a painter has used color to generate light—to celebrate, in other words, not just the pleasures but the very possibility of vision.