

Color as Experience of Color

With the proliferation of monochrome painting in the present time it becomes ever more apparent how significant the form, indeed the genre, is and has been in the context of 20th century abstraction. What in the early part of its time, with Malevich in 1918 and Rodchenko in 1921, was used to make a statement about painting is now a form which is used by numerous artists with many different purposes ranging from the minimal to the formal and continuing through to the deconstructive. Certain painters choose the form to present color as experience of color. Others use it to further the development of abstract painting which was begun early in this century, while still others bring it into play in their recapitulation of the history of abstraction.

Many devices have served the purposes of abstraction in this century, first has been the nearly universal acceptance of the square or rectangle of the stretched canvas as a field of action for the game. Clearly many artists have broken with this, but the breaking is yet another way of recognizing its dominance, and, in any case, serious abstraction has for the most part been presented on a rectangular support.

The grid used congruently with that square or rectangle is a second device used again and again in a multiplicity of ways both abstract and representational. Chuck Close demonstrates the latter, while having in mind the paintings of Agnes Martin we can see the grid and at the same time experience the essence of monochrome. Her paintings are square and usually of one predominant color, often a pale color, white and/or gray, perhaps pink. Lucy Lippard has discussed the square shape as neutral and therefore ideal for monochrome painting, as are, in her view, pale colors. The reading of such a format would be concentrated and absolute, and in that connection we could think of Robert Ryman, of Raimund Girke or of certain works of Olivier Mosset.

Other monochrome painters have worked with the many variations the format suggests. Size and proportion have been variable factors. Paintings have been medium sized, very large or very small. Their surfaces at times demonstrate brush strokes and again might hide the stroke entirely; the color may be clearly one, or it may be a selection of tones; the paint may be applied continuously or it may be broken into stripes or brush strokes. All of the work takes the wall into consideration as a ground, even being painted on the wall at times, or on canvases fitted to the wall.

Dieter Villinger's canvases are often quite big, two meters square and more, even as large as two meters by five meters though he does paint smaller works as well. The paintings I have seen have been off-square – rectangular – and more often horizontal than vertical. The off-square factor gives each painting an implied direction lining up with either the human figure or the horizon of our world. The size of the paintings makes us feel them as monumental while the brush strokes themselves are large, sweeping from side to side of the canvas and appearing to have been applied by a vastly oversized brush, and with an enormous energy. The size of the brush strokes contributes to our physical sense of the paint for we are able to see the brush working to form the surface.

A title is the painter's most subtle literary means of directing attention to significant information in a painting. „Untitled“ as a title implies something hidden, a subjective notion which the painter is not going to reveal. While many of Villinger's earlier paintings were untitled, the later ones are named by the pigment involved in their construction. This use of the name of the pigment as a title also deflects us from a personal reading as it leads us to focus our attention on the painting's objective presence, though here we are gently directed toward the painter's intention in the work – that very objectivity.

We are allowed to see that very specific pigment color demonstrating its properties in a vast expanse of paint while feeling ourselves immersed in the field of pure color which nearly surrounds us. The paintings are installed one to a wall, and, on the white wall where we usually see them the beauty and intensity of the color forms itself into an experience of confrontation with all that particular color can hold.

Villinger has accepted the rectangular format, and in avoiding the grid he has accepted the void inherent in the nearly undifferentiated canvas surface he presents. And yet the color remains tangible as we see the patterns of its having been dragged across the plane of the work, and our experience too is tangible as we stand near the painting and let it wrap around us or we move back to see it with a little more objectivity. Finally we see it on the white wall of the space it is in and this is what brings it to completion.

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