

Beauty, Order and Individuality

Good order is the foundation of all things. — Edmund Burke*

In complex abstract paintings that allude to music, science, maps, the realm of the spirit and more, the artists of Order(ed) describe relationships and structures that capture some truth about life in our busy, often turbulent, and always surprising world.

From a vocabulary of regular and repeating shapes and lines, the artists build visual structures that hint at chaos and point to the age-old need of humans to impose order on the world. The works in the exhibit range from hard-edged, bright and almost industrial in nature to soft, nuanced and obviously handmade. Throughout, each artist speaks with an individualized vocabulary of shapes, colors, and lines; yet this does not create a Babel-like cacophony. For the unifying spark that flows from one work to another is the idea of the mind ordering these mini-universes into visual relational databases, with hierarchies or perhaps non-hierarchical links, but networked, gridded, mapped and fixed as if in a snapshot from some ongoing greater whole.

I suppose this could be the anti-entropy show: The artist as warrior against the forces of inertia. The artists' personal constructs have almost free-associative charm. What you see is a circle, but what you get — unlike what Frank Stella said in his youth** — is not just a circle. The circles, squares and lines in these abstract paintings are not math or science, but painted visual hypotheses about the world.

Art itself has rules for ordering, both design principles and materials' dictates. Most but not all artists sketch — and some in this exhibit sketch on the computer. Sketching is a way to order thoughts about a design. Painters must adhere to the rules dictated by their paint and supports. Acrylic paint dries fast, oil paint dries slowly; some paint works better on panel; some techniques are great on Plexiglas; encaustic must be heated to be malleable. Success or failure follows the orderly use of materials. Each artist here is attuned to the process.

While the stream of geometric abstraction runs deep in 20th century art, these artists are no more making Malevich-like abstractions than they are making Mondrian-like abstractions, although both of those artists would be acknowledged by many as influences. Today's geometric abstract art comes out of the cauldron of the times and merges our need for personal expression with our need for a system, a way out of the clutter, chaos and overload that are a part of our world.

Beauty in this exhibit (and there is plenty throughout) is not the showboating variety of sublime sunsets or Op Art dazzle. Order(ed) beauty is the cool grace of a well-made system; the elegance that unfolds with study as relationships and harmonious interplay are discovered. Such beauty is meditative and can be found in aboriginal art as well as in these sophisticated Western paintings. Music, the organizing of disparate voices and instruments into a composition, lies beneath the surface of many of these works. It's there in the suggestion of flow and counter-flow, crescendo and diminuendo, all made manifest by line, shape, color and visual rhythm. Works by Howard R. Barnhart and Burton Kramer move with music's rhythms. Tim McFarlane's works, too, seem to be orchestrating.

The comfort of spiritual order is conjured in works of a slow, contemplative nature by Joanne Mattera, Gail Gregg and Tremain Smith. In each case, the use of sumptuous encaustic materials fosters the connection between comfort and beauty.

Spiritual questing is here in Mark Brown's and Vincent Romaniello's works that convey the void and a yin-yang universe. Marjorie Mikasen's fractured world also reflects a quest — to understand the chaos it seems to describe.

Ancient stone circles, carved runes and cosmic mysteries are suggested in labyrinth-like works by Grace DeGennaro, Cheryl Goldsleger, and Alex Queral. These pieces speak of ordering systems a thousand years old. On the other hand, works by Julie Karabenick, Steven Baris, and W. C. Richardson seem as contemporary as the latest tools to navigate the modern information labyrinth: maps, charts, grids, networks and data displays.

Works by Laurie Fendrich and Julie Gross look like they may have evolved out of thoughts about pop culture — or thoughts about channeling the zeitgeist. Ebullient and cartoony, the works by these two artists marry an almost child-like sense of wonder with a mindset far more advanced. Taxonomies employed by the Order(ed) artists to classify, organize and serve up truth about the world are as varied as each individual artist. The truth of this exhibit is that geometrically-based abstract art can provide stories that are relevant today. Here, what you see is what you see — and more.

Individuality

Each of these artists has a unique approach to his or her abstract art. Here, we will consider them individually.

Steven Baris's works evoke a benign world of zero gravity where families of rectangles float free, yet maintain connection, touching sweetly. Hierarchy, repetition and order are suggested in *Random Clusters #36* — a bulletin board-like piece populated by jaunty colored squares denoting, perhaps, tasks of varying importance. Baris's loose, almost lazy-day pattern implies drift and possibly-shifting hierarchies, the whole bound together by the slow flow of energy. Toys "R" Us colors add a layer of unreality and game. Yet the pink translucent soup in which these objects float holds secrets. Beneath its watery luminescence floats a layer of ghosts of ambiguous meaning.

Howard R. Barnhart calls his energetic relief constructions "compositions," and of all the compositions that come to mind, musical composition is the one most suggested by the lines, notes and jazzy swoops of works like *Construction 7*. This puzzle-like piece suggests a marriage of Mondrian and Mozart. With its arrow-like dynamism and frolicsome curves, the work is a ballet with muscle and en pointe delicacy. *Construction 7*'s unexpected, machine-bright colors pit the drama of red and black against the cool modern design colors of Ikea. It's the duet of art and life. *Winterreise 17*, Mark Brown's stripe painting on birch panels, is a trip into the void. Unlike Barnett Newman's zip paintings, which imply speed and a mystical state glimpsed through a sluice in a field of color, *Winterreise 17* — with its super-sized zip that is a vast black hole — implies stasis and existential questioning. The atmospheric oil and alkyd panels suggest architecture and perhaps the struggle of the weak and vulnerable against the strong and powerful. This is a world in which heroic action is needed to confront the unknown.

By amassing her shapes into repeat patterns of overlapping grids and veils, Grace DeGennaro's labor-intensive oil paintings create propulsive energy fields. *Pattern Memory (Spray)*, a golden yellow work with a radiating target on top of a dense chorus of smoky circles, conveys the idea of the veil beyond which lies a zone of energy and discovery. The piece's transparency is the gateway that reveals intersections between and among shapes. As new entities are revealed, new ways of experiencing the world are suggested. "Go deep" is the message.

Laurie Fendrich's paintings suggest the meander and flow of life lived in an urban zone: Rectangles of color are sidewalks or maps; rounded shapes evoke animals and humans. While the real world is implied, it's a world half-pixelated, a picture not quite resolved on the computer. His *Usual Philosophic Composure* is a *Colorforms-by-way-of-Pac-man* piece. Iconic and comic, the work's bright industrial colors and well-groomed edges suggest that order is achievable. But the puppy-dog-friskiness and sense of play add the p.s.: Chaos lies around the corner.

Cheryl Goldsleger's linear designs based on nested squares, circles and triangles are like fragments from ancient labyrinths. These shapes are pre-mathematical. They speak of crop circles, Stonehengian rituals and the human need to communicate with the realm of the spirit. *Exchange*, a wall-spanning 9-panel oil and encaustic, morphs the designs from one panel to the next, creating imbalance, flux, and a cartwheeling rhythm. Goldsleger carves the surface designs into the unpigmented wax, and the resulting surface may remind you of carvings in the real world, perhaps those found on Celtic crosses.

Tension between nature and the man-made is Gail Gregg's territory. From aerial note taking in travels over the Midwest, Gregg observes the big sweep of the land and she notes in particular the human attempts to order what is innately unorganizable — the earth, rivers, mountains and prairies. *La Crosse* suggests a utopian slice of life where striped crop plantings come together from perhaps two neighbors whose properties abut. Of course the earth is not flat and neighbors

will dispute, but Gregg's world of visual beauty is incantatory and her wish for peace as old as any mother's prayer.

Perfect sinuous shapes compete for attention in Julie Gross's works. The rush of life itself comes at you in her circles with tails, each touching and squeezing and promoting itself as the one.

"Choose me!" cry the yellow, purple and green globules in *Mercuree*, a lava lamp of a piece, its population dense and active as if propelled by some instinctual Darwinian need to be seen, fed, loved. Gross's painting has perfection on its mind. Its smooth surface and crisp delineation evoke life created in a laboratory by a human hand and mind striving for order, harmony and beauty.

Julie Karabenick's paintings, with bars of quiet color and tiny squares of what looks like confetti, evoke systems and relationships. *Composition 61* suggests that life is a cornucopia of big and small, slow and fast, weak and strong. Some will be anchors while others bungee around freely, taking risks and providing energy. The glue that holds it all together is relationships — one object touches another and helps it maintain its place. Question is, who are the anchors and who the free spirits? Do the large anchor the tiny — or are the tiny the sheep dogs herding the big? In this mutable world, order is achieved variously.

Burton Kramer's acrylic paintings are a waltz frozen in time, or perhaps musical chairs at the precise moment the music stops. *Bourée 2D*, with its astroturf green color and flag-like directionals, reads like a plan (circuit board perhaps) for a game in which stick-like players circle around a large central space that is a window, door, dance floor or gym. While machine precision and perfection are suggested, Kramer's composition also has rich human underpinnings about the beauty of stable relationships. In giving even the smallest member of the composition space, time and freedom to shine, Kramer brings harmony and balance to his utopian dance.

Soft and suggestive, Joanne Mattera's *Uttar 135* is a grid so sensual it reads like a box of bonbons. Mattera, whose encaustic works have undeniably cheery colors and delicious handling of materials, is an artist who delights in the process. With a palette influenced by Indian miniature painting and with a love of non-narrative, non-objective expression, Mattera delivers a world of beauty and order in which individuals — with their spontaneous expressions of color, texture, drip, drop and slather — are valued. *Uttar 135* is a statement of peace and a meditation on life's wonders.

Tim McFarlane's architectural abstractions are imbued with energy and flow and a heightened color palette that suggests a big band. By repeating a single motif of a ladder in various colors and in directions both vertical and horizontal, *Folding in on History* conveys the overlapping, interweaving, competitive plenitude of urban infrastructure (bridges, roads, buildings) and its human community knit inextricably together. The order suggested is hierarchical. The biggest, loudest (and not necessarily the most beautiful) sit on top. The white layer, like a picket fence, stripes in the American flag, or a teacher or leader, orchestrates the vibrant world beneath.

Like an illustration for a journal article on chaos theory, Marjorie Mikasen's *Proprio* displays a fractured microscopic or macroscopic stew. The piece has a maze-like structure — few points of entry, many dead-end avenues and a center that's hidden. Is it a cubistic portrait of our complex universe? A graphic display of data processed by a Cuisinart? While *Proprio* suggests the chaotic, the arrhythmic and the dysfunctional, its lines, shapes and colors have somehow achieved harmonious interplay. Indeed the piece seems to celebrate the natural world and its crystalline, multi-faceted beauty.

It might be a honeycomb, a crystal or a tissue section under a microscope, but in all interpretations, Alex Queral's *Linear Accumulation of Light IV* conveys the beauty of structure and light. The grisaille acrylic painting eschews the colors of the natural world. Yet the hard-edged work, begun by laying down a line and responding intuitively, evokes the patience of nature building a whole from an accumulation of small events over time. There's a hint of threat from the spiraling, forward-moving beam of light hurling itself through space, unstoppable in its trajectory. Order can be a lightning bolt or the creation of new life.

Vincent Romaniello's works set up a tension between the flow of nature and the hard-edged circumscription of the man-made. *Black Portal 502* includes vaporous areas of paint delicately applied, encased by precise rectangles that imply window, door or other man-made portals (television, computer, etc.). Romaniello casts no value judgment on the opposite poles of his paintings. He loves them both and sees them as the yin-yang of life. In this geometric equation,

the ruled area dignifies the flow and the flow kisses the edge, and while the viewer herself may treasure the flow or ruled edge better, life dictates the embrace of both equally. Like a *mélange* of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and the New York subway map, W. C. Richardson's *Low Buried Wild* is musical and urban. But whereas Mondrian's stutter-step grid is a flatlander, Richardson's network is deep and fluid, with spiral jetty transit lines that — if you stare long enough — will mesmerize. My MTA map won't mesmerize and will get me somewhere. Richardson's nodes, lines and layers are, on the other hand, a more beautiful mode of transport — right into inner space. Richardson achieves optical pop with delicacy. His painting is an elegant subversion.

Working within a self-imposed rectilinear structure, Tremain Smith finds the freedom to experiment. With stroke, color, materials and ideas about the sublime, the painter builds up irregular, sumptuous grids. *God is in the Details* is a picture that evokes a stained glass window. Its vertical design is a quilt of quiet bars of earth tones punctuated by areas of dense, saturated red and one area where a thin veil of blue reveals the wood grain beneath. Human vulnerability (bruising, blood) plays off against the flow of nature and some aspect of the divine in this work of spiritual questing.

Art is a lens that distills life's bumpy ride into visual metaphors. Art reflects the times — its colors, textures, structure, ideas, and emotions. Nobody organizes this—it just happens. For years now, art has been mirroring the jittery conditions of a world fueled by too much caffeine and information whose balance is shifting and whose disharmony is a daily front-page occurrence. Art now is increasingly consumed by ideas of aggregation, accretion and the grotesque. And while it's not a soothsayer or doctor, art can speak to people about their times. An exhibit like *Order(ed)* is a great opportunity. It brings together artists whose work communicates ideas about order and beauty, and it provides a platform from which to discuss the art — and to discuss the world from which it springs.

Roberta Fallon

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*Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790

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