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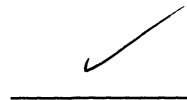
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“Synaesthesia and the Visualization of the Senses”

By: Caroline Peters

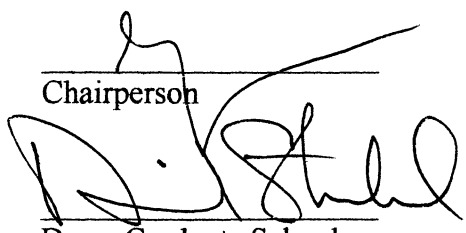
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**“Synaesthesia and the Visualization of the Senses”
Peters, Caroline M.**

Chair: Mary Ann Bonjorni 

In my work, I hope to capture fleeting sensations in abstract images. These images are modeled after sensory events I have had in real life. These experiences all share a quality similar to what has been called synaesthesia. When one experiences synaesthesia, the shared rhythms between distinct forms such as light, sound, and taste are revealed. For example, the analogous relationships between the fragrance of fall leaves, their color, and the way they feel against the skin. By making visualizations of simultaneous sensory experience, I attempt to, on one hand, make the viewer aware of the awe I experienced at these moments when I felt sensations at their apex. On the other hand, I want call the validity of these perceptions into question by creating compositions that may be considered harmonious and yet at the same time not overtly resolved. By doing this, I move towards a position that allows me to *point* to a truth that is *not overtly present*.

In order to make art that evokes simultaneity, I structure compositions to be self-perpetuating. In other words, I want the shapes to continuously activate each other rather than exist additively in order to unify into a large, often static form. This way, viewer’s eye is constantly being pulled to more than one area of the painting or drawing, causing the elements to move and shift in their visual importance.

There is a tenuous quality in all of my compositions that prevents them from seeming too overtly resolved. This unsettled feeling of being convinced and yet not quite resolved is made possible by remaining within the conventions of drawing, even in my largest paintings. This is because, traditionally, there is a public acceptance for drawing as an exploration made up of visual notations. When what is being looked for is found, the artist might call a drawing “done” even if it’s “not finished” per se. The two seemingly opposite notions of complete and incomplete exist together in the same piece, causing a tension that allows the viewer to engage and examine their own perceptions and points of reference.

In my work, I attempt to capture fleeting sensations with abstract images. These images are modeled after sensory events experienced in real life. Three factors shape how I perceive these sensory experiences. The first factor involves the relationships between the sensations themselves; their perceived overlapping, contrasts, or analogous qualities. For example, the overlapping of sensations that one experiences on a bumpy ride on a bicycle as a headlight is flashing in the eyes. Another example is the seemingly analogous qualities of the fragrance of dry leaves, their color, how they feel against the skin, and the way they sound when being blown by wind. Secondly, my individual experience is shaped by my personal *participation* in the event. Timing plays a large role in this because the overall experience is affected by when I enter into the event and also by what sensations I choose to pay attention to at any given moment. Finally, my experience is shaped by an awareness of the limitations of my interpretations. Am I experiencing the event freely and openly or if my experience has been somehow predetermined? This conflict allows an unknown to enter into the equation and shapes the experience. I believe that by including these three factors in my art making, I can provoke the viewers into an awareness that is similar to what I experience when witnessing a sensory event unfold.

Sensations are not transmissible, or rather, their purely qualitative properties are not transmissible. The same, however, does not apply to *relations* between sensations... Consequently only *relations* between sensations have objective value.¹

One important feature of the sensory events I draw from is simultaneous relationships. Artist Robert Morris wrote,

a single, pure sensation cannot be transmissible precisely because one perceives simultaneously more than one property as parts in any given situation: if color, then also dimension; if flatness, then texture, etc.²

The relationships between visual elements in my art evoke the feeling of simultaneity because they act to create self-perpetuating compositions. The various visual elements activate each other to create energetic movement. This energy does not employ a single focus point or gravitation towards a final, static image. The viewer's eye is pulled to more than one area of the painting or drawing, causing the elements to constantly move and shift in their visual importance. For example, since the compositional elements in the painting *double brink* (fig. 1) carry no definitive cues as to how they relate to each other spatially, the viewer determines the relationships on an individual and ongoing basis as they experience the painting. Thus, the way the viewer mentally experiences the space in the painting is dependent upon the rhythms and the movements the shapes take on. This notion is similar what is found in a dance,

¹ Piet Mondrian quoted by Morris, Robert, "Notes on Sculpture 1-3," in Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Edited by Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul. Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993 Page 815

where the rhythmic movements of the dancer define the space around him or her. Since these rhythms establish themselves at the viewer's entering point, the viewer can have a completely different spatial experience each time they enter. This kind of spatial shifting has a simultaneous quality. Numerous possibilities for spatial configurations are present at any given point.

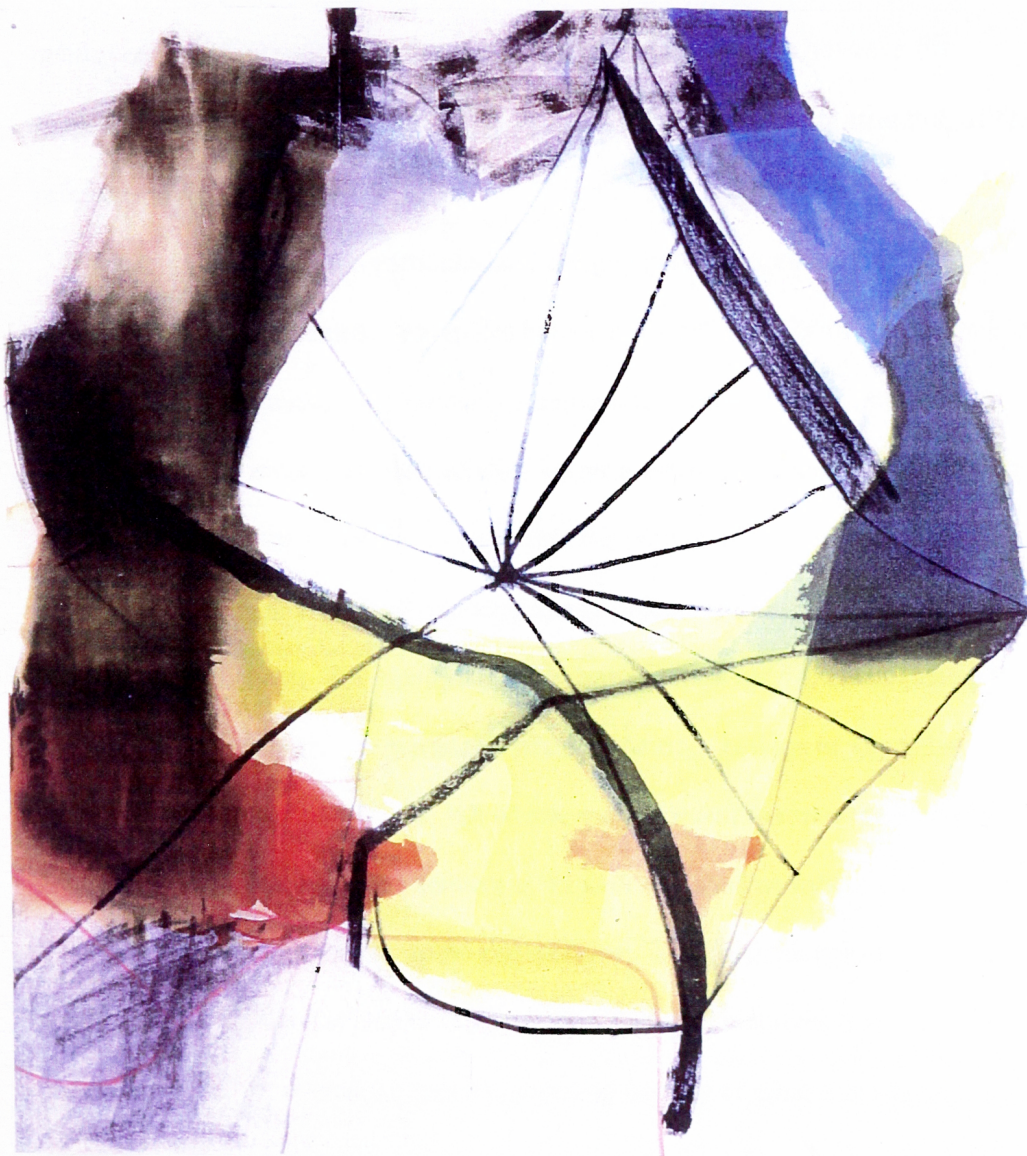


Fig. 1

² *Ibid.*

The focus on the relationships of elements verses the individual elements comes through in my process. When I make the first mark I allow myself to be spontaneous. Initially, it doesn't matter what the mark looks like, because I'm not counting on that information to visually carry any of my ideas. The deliberation comes, however, as I make each subsequent mark. In order to build a certain configuration of sensation, I must be sure that the relationships between the shapes and/or lines hold together in a way I feel best translates the structure of the referred event.

The presence of both the particular and the general increases the range of relationships-i.e. the contrast that exists between a mark made with smaller marks, a more finite line quality, or a uniquely intense hue verses a broad, translucent area of color that exist in proportionately larger areas of the composition. Though I want the *idea* of the particular to enter into the painting, I do not want that particular to bring in any ideas referring to any objects or things beyond the sensory configuration. For example, in the drawing *honing* (fig. 2) the postage stamp becomes a specific or particular without inciting feelings or ideas that are *political, historical, or nostalgic*. All of this is superseded because the stamp's image and postal cancellation, carriers of its aura, are used as formal elements, no different than any other mark in the composition. The particularity of the postage stamp exists and, thus, is able to relate to other pictorial elements that may or may not be as finite, yet evokes no specific meaning outside of what it exists as visually.



Fig. 2

The presence of the particular is also important in helping to engage the viewer. For example, in the painting *songs for one ear* (fig. 3) the blue dot is a unique and particular element because of its highly keyed color. It also has the aura of particularity because of its sharply defined edges and self-contained shape, which, in turn, allude to a very specific and tightly controlled movement of the hand. The viewer's eyes focus on the blue dot and continue to return to it. This ignites a momentum in the painting similar to that which I experience in sensory events. One particular bit of information becomes a sensation that catches my attention, setting a focus point by which other sensations react.



Fig. 3

Another way that I hope to bring the viewer into a more intimate relationship with my work is through the use of titles. I believe the written word is generally more easily accessible than the abstract symbol. By giving the viewer something they can immediately empathize with, language, I allow them to bring their personal recollections and/or attachments to the work. By doing this, I hope to bypass some of the guarded feelings people may have towards non-literal picture making. For example, one of my drawings is titled *fast kink*. Because these words evoke a feeling or action (possibly a jerk-type motion) rather than an image, *fast kink* can be applied to any number of specific encounters the viewer might have experienced that also involved some kind of jerk-like qualities.

An intimate relationship with my work such as the one described above is, however, balanced with a more detached perspective. When experiencing sensations that are suggested by my work, I am aware of the fact that even though I am able to process them internally, they are occurring independently of me. I use the psychological effect of scale as a way to reinforce similar feelings of estrangement between the viewer and the artwork. I believe the size of both the large and small pieces create a psychological distance between the art and the viewer because, as Robert Morris writes,

The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. Space between the subject and the object is implied in such a comparison.³

The large paintings create a physical distance by forcing the viewer to move away in order to view. The paintings loom over the viewer, causing their presence to become more monumental than intimate. The small drawings also evoke a feeling

of distance despite the fact that they exist within the physical realm of the body. The drawings pull the viewer closer in yet maintain a feeling of distance similar to looking at something through a microscope. That is, as if the viewer is witnessing an expansive spatial relationship on a small scale. The conflicting sensations of *intimacy and detachment reveal the presence of a barrier*. Though the viewer has gained a sense of what it might be like to be intimate, they are prevented from attaining complete intimacy due to a distanced perspective caused by scale.

This polemic relationship between the two seemingly oppositional forces of intimacy and detachment mirrors itself in my process as the struggle to gain freedom with the material and my desire to have control. Ideally my paintings and drawings should flow freely, each mark existing in the moment, and not forced by my will into becoming an aesthetic reproduction. Though I am more interested in a mark that contains evidence of authenticity than one with a beautifully executed gesture, an innate desire for beauty may cause me to fall into moments where I strive only for what is aesthetically pleasing. This conflict is analogous to the one faced when I witness a sensory event. I question whether I am truly in the moment or if I am altering what I experience to satisfy the need of the will. If the latter is so, then everything I experience will be predetermined by who I am. I often wonder if it is possible to experience life openly and freely if who I am is shaped by forces I may not have control over. By bringing the validity of my perceptions into question, I am considering this possibility.

An unknown finds its way into the work through a visual unrest or flaw. In my artwork, an overt visual flaw or imperfection can cause an unsettling composition,

³ *Ibid.* Page 817

a muddy color or a seemingly unfinished section. This so called flaw acts as a symbolic bridge between a perfection have understood and accepted through harmonious composition and the failure to attain perfection despite the harmony. I equate the flaws in my work to the “tragic flaw” often found in literature. A tragic flaw is by definition a minor imperfection that causes the downfall of an otherwise good character. While witnessing a character whose minor flaw causes them to fall into extreme misfortune, we flux between two modes of thinking: one lamenting the injustice of being subject to fate (understanding the character’s smallness) and the other asserting the power of the individual by speculating about how things might have been different if the hero or heroine had overcome his or her flaw (imagining completeness, perfection). If the flaw did not exist, we would have no reason to imagine a greater perfection, we would see ourselves as simply subject to fate.⁴

Methods and Materials

In order to get the most active relationships, I try and keep the singular shapes from being too dominant or heavy. I avoid shapes that appear three-dimensional. My intent is to playing down volume and instead making the zones of color appear flat and transparent. You can see it is often possible to look through the shape and see what is inside or behind. For example, in the painting *tandem* (fig. 4) a pink colored glow from another shape is apparent behind the massive blue shape.

⁴ Gelven, Michael, *Why Me? A Philosophical Inquiry into Fate*. Northern Illinois University Press: DeKalb, 1991. Pages



Fig. 4

Shapes also dissolve into each other as in *double brink* (fig 1), where the green appears to be transforming into red. In both *tandem* and *double brink* I am playing down the role of the particular shape, which will often take precedence, and to highlight the relationships between the shapes. I achieve this by using thinned acrylic paint, often wet on wet so different colored washes diffuse into each other, giving an immaterial quality to the shapes.

My work, whether on paper or canvas, is based in drawing. I believe the conventions of drawing are more suitable for my ideas because I want to build

images that are suggested and not completely resolved. Traditionally, a drawing is an exploration. When what is being looked for is found, the artist might stop working on the drawing even if it is unfinished per se. A painting, on the other hand, seems to be less acceptable when it is unresolved. It is more likely to be dismissed. I want the viewer to feel though the work is complete, something is still not being seen. In the piece *no title* (fig. 5) the upper portion is composed



Fig. 5

almost completely with line. I stopped working on this painting while there were still many untouched areas on the canvas. Though sparse, I believe the painting

has enough variation in the mark-making and unexpected directional movements to evoke simultaneity and a strong sensory experience.

The materials I use reflect the desire to stay as close to the realm of drawing as possible. Acrylic paint, normally a full-bodied, painterly material, is thinned down to the consistency of watercolor. Other materials, such as dry pastel, oil pastel, gesso, charcoal and graphite, are traditionally more common in drawings.

I choose raw canvas as a surface for painting because it shares qualities with paper. Like paper, the exposed fibers allow it to hold materials such as pastel and charcoal and absorb liquid media more readily. I am also excited by the vulnerable quality of raw canvas as opposed to the sized surface. Unprimed canvas is vulnerable because of its tendency to hold on to every mark, leaving little room for editing. This pushes me to create without fear or hesitation. I can ruin the artwork as easily with a timid mark as I can with a bold one. Since neither can be erased very well, I don't have much to lose by being bold.

In my work, the large variety of wet and dry materials are important in order to give the feeling of several events occurring at once. Paint is applied to wet grounds, dry surfaces, and surfaces previously marked with pastel or charcoal, which are literally grounds covered in fine powdered pigment. I attempt to assure every mark maintains its individuality so all the marks can independently relate to one another. For example, I want the viewer to be able to access a dry charcoal line in an area that has been washed in thinned acrylic. I do not want a series of similar the marks to simply unite into a larger form.

II. Historical

The interest in interpreting sensations goes back as far as Pythagoras. He believed the “harmonies of celestial orbit parallel the seeming irregularities of life-forms on earth.”⁵ These irregular life-forms were sensual stimuli such as light, sound, and fragrance. Distilling these sensations down to their essences allowed one sensation to stand in for another. Pythagoras claimed by doing so, a person could tap into the universal truth present in mundane, daily sensations. This concept is called synaesthesia. A more recent scholar of similar theories was Wassily Kandinsky (b. 1866), who said in 1914,

The sound of colors is so definite that it would be hard to find anyone who would try to express bright yellow in bass notes, or dark blue lake in treble.⁶



⁵ Carcopino, Jerome, *quoted in "Abstract Film and Color Music,"* by Moritz, William, in The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985. Abbeville Press: New York, 1986. Page

Kandinsky used what he called “dematerialization” to try to capture the shared vibrations of different sensations. This process involved painting only the sensual qualities of color and disregarding the local color in the landscapes, which were his point of departure. At first he drew from the natural world to discover these harmonies, but later looked into his inner nature or soul to create his first completely non-objective paintings. Much thought about man’s inner nature lead him to realize that the vibrations set off by certain sensations directly resonated with the soul. He wrote,

A Dresden doctor tells how one of his patients, whom he describes as ‘spiritually, unusually highly developed,’ invariably found that a certain sauce had a ‘blue’ taste, i.e., it affected him like the color blue. One might perhaps assume another similar, and yet different, explanation; that in the case of such highly developed people the paths leading to the soul are so direct, and the impressions it receives are so quickly produced, that an effect immediately communicated to the soul via the medium of taste sets up vibrations along the corresponding paths leading away from the soul to other sensory organs (in this case, the eye).⁷

An important precursor to the nonobjective painting of Kandinsky is called “color music”. Color music uses light projections to form colored shapes moving in a way that attempts to replicate the effect of sound. Its practitioners believed this was a way they could achieve synaesthesia. Though dozens of color musicians have made art in this way for the past four centuries, most of the records for artists who worked before World War I have been lost. The best known of the more recent practitioners of color music is Aleksandr Scriabin.

⁶ Kandinsky, Wassily, *from* “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” *in* Art in Theory 1900-1990: an Anthology of Changing Ideas. Edited by Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul. Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993. Page 93.

Kandinsky, around the time he made his leap into abstraction, often mentioned Scriabin's work in his writing. *Prometheus: the Poem of Fire* (1910) is thought to be Scriabin's greatest achievement. It combines an orchestral score with light projections. Unfortunately, there have been only about a half-dozen performances of the piece that included lights. Performances of Scriabin's work will usually have only a written description of his color music theories in the program notes as a curiosity. His biographer, Fabion Bowers, wrote the following about

Prometheus:

Some of the passages emit sparks and flames, many of which are of dark, opalescent hue and others wound the eye with their sharp colors... The symphony begins with chaos – blue and green inertia of matter. The opening chord sounds the 'active beginning' ... That mythical Prometheus which serves to open the symbol on the first state of consciousness.⁸

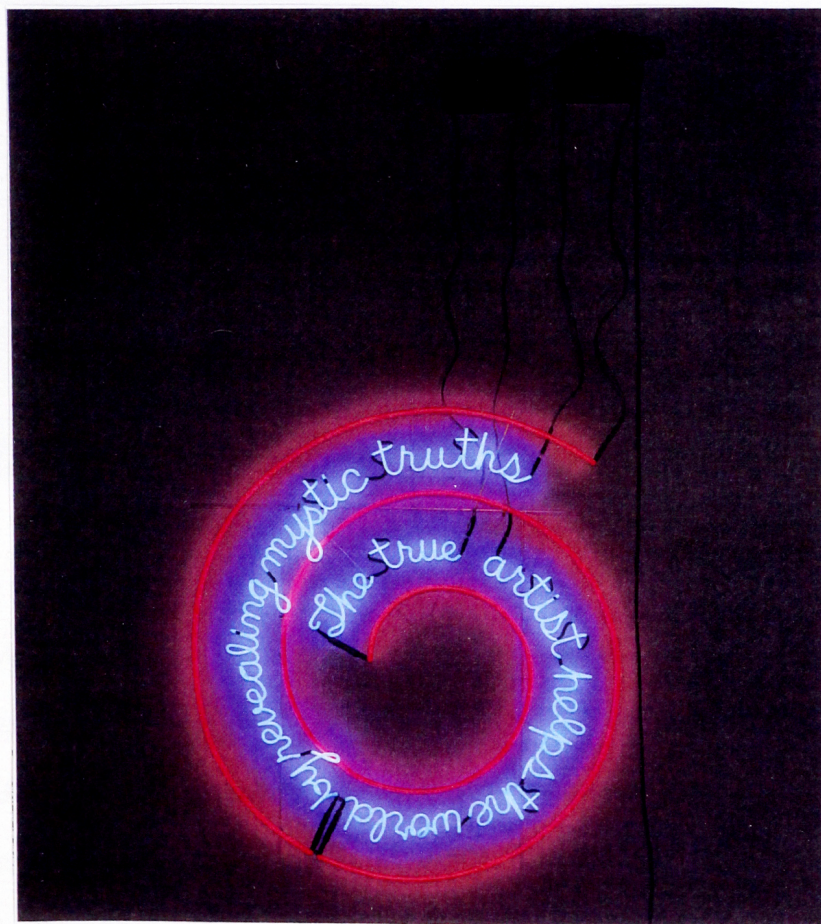
Scriabin's artistic production, like several other artists in his day, was enriched by theosophical ideas. Bowers describes how *Prometheus* "reeks of theosophical symbolism."⁹ Like Kandinsky, he believed that he could reveal spiritual truth though the synaesthesia of sensations.

A more recent example of an artist working with a similar set of principles, only in reverse, is Bruce Nauman. His piece *Window or Wall Sign* (1967) uses peach and blue neon to spell out the phrase, "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths." Here we find the sensual medium of light being used to state its intent in common language. This piece can easily be read as a critique of the idealistic theories of early modernists like Kandinsky and Scriabin.

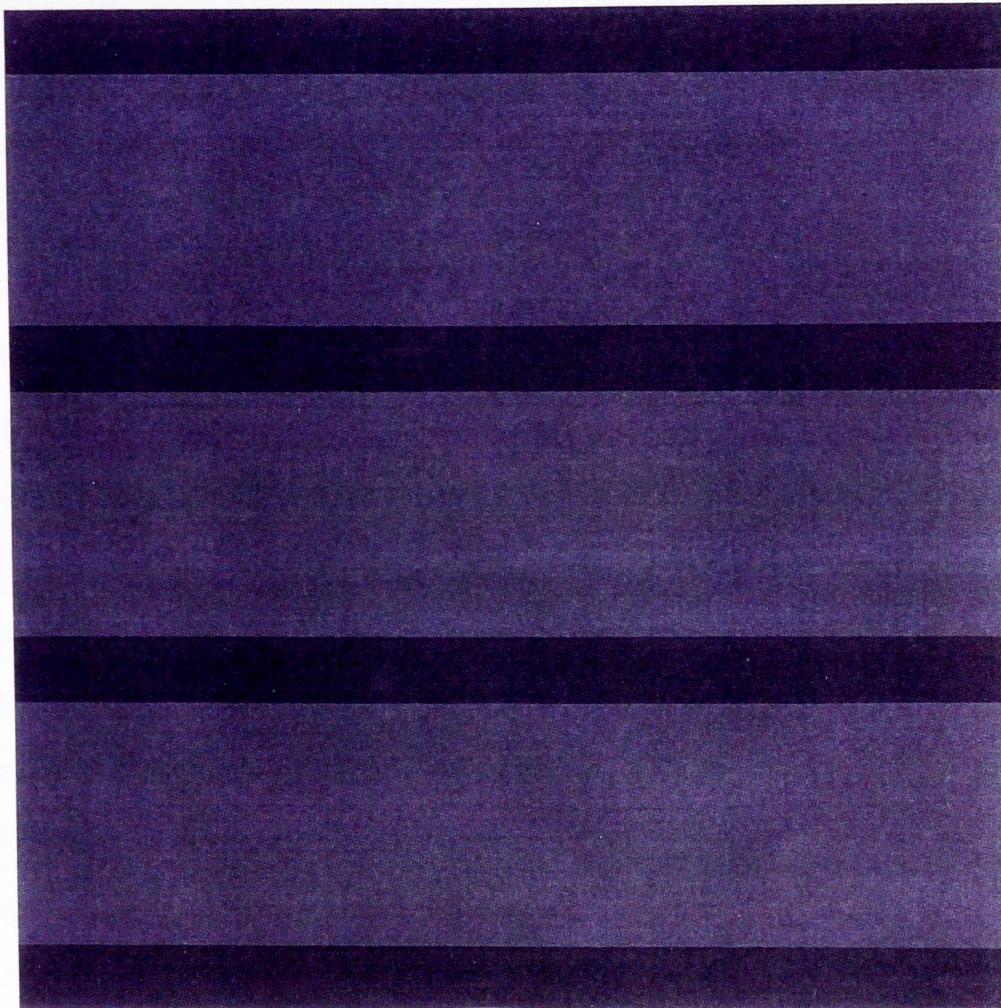
⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Moritz, William. Page 298.

My work relates to what these artists were doing for two reasons. The first is that I also attempt to interpret sensations by changing their form. Second is that the elements in the composition, and the sensations that inspire them, mutually activate each other, overlapping in the process. Although similar to synaesthesia, the meaning I draw from the effect is different in that while Kandinsky and Scriabin believed sensations *contained* a truth that prompted relative experience. I attempt to use the relationships between sensations to point to a truth that is *not overtly present*.



⁹ *Ibid.*

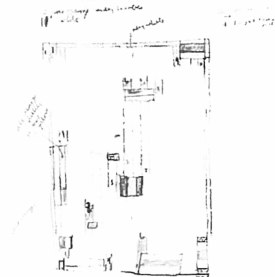


Agnes Martin's (b. 1912) paintings are about perfection and yet this perfection exists not in the work, but in our minds. Her regular, mathematically formulated grids set the stage for perceptive eyes to discover flaws. There are graphite lines that waver ever so slightly, areas where acrylic washes are built up a tad more than other areas, and one may even detect a slight flaw in the weave of the canvas.

But then again, your eyes might be playing tricks on you. Either the visuals are off-perfect, the viewer is off-perfect, or most likely, both are off-perfect.

Witnessing something that marginally reaches perfection causes perfection to appear in our minds. It is possible that if we saw perfection in actuality we might not accept it, thinking we have been beguiled or we are not seeing the whole picture.

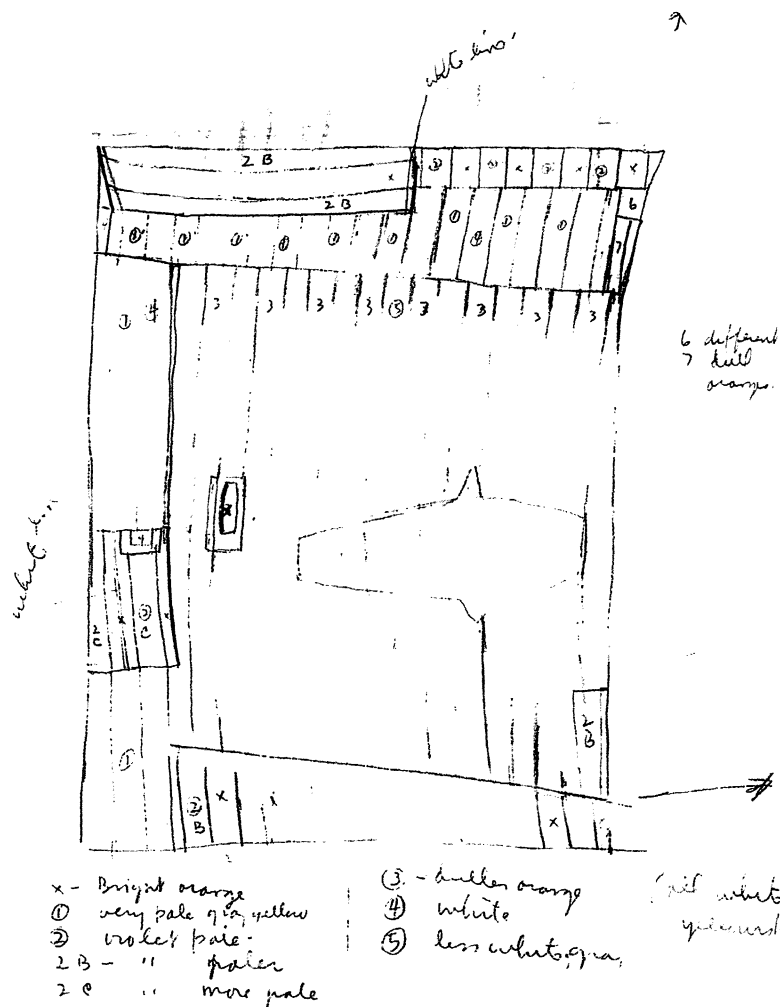
Another artist that challenges us to look for what is important in imperfection rather than perfection is Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923). This seems hard to believe, considering the flawless surfaces and the pure, clean colors in his paintings. Yet one has only to look at the objects that inspired much of his work for a different perspective. A broken window, red wine stains on a tablecloth, a shelled bunker, or a mended skylight was the subject of many a series of drawings, paintings and studies. One less than pristine subject that captured his attention was the mended beach cabana, a common sight along the beaches of a post- World War II France where fabric was in short supply. The small rectangular shelters made from striped fabric were repaired with striped fabric, though the patches often didn't match the original fabric. The repairs interested Kelly so much that he made



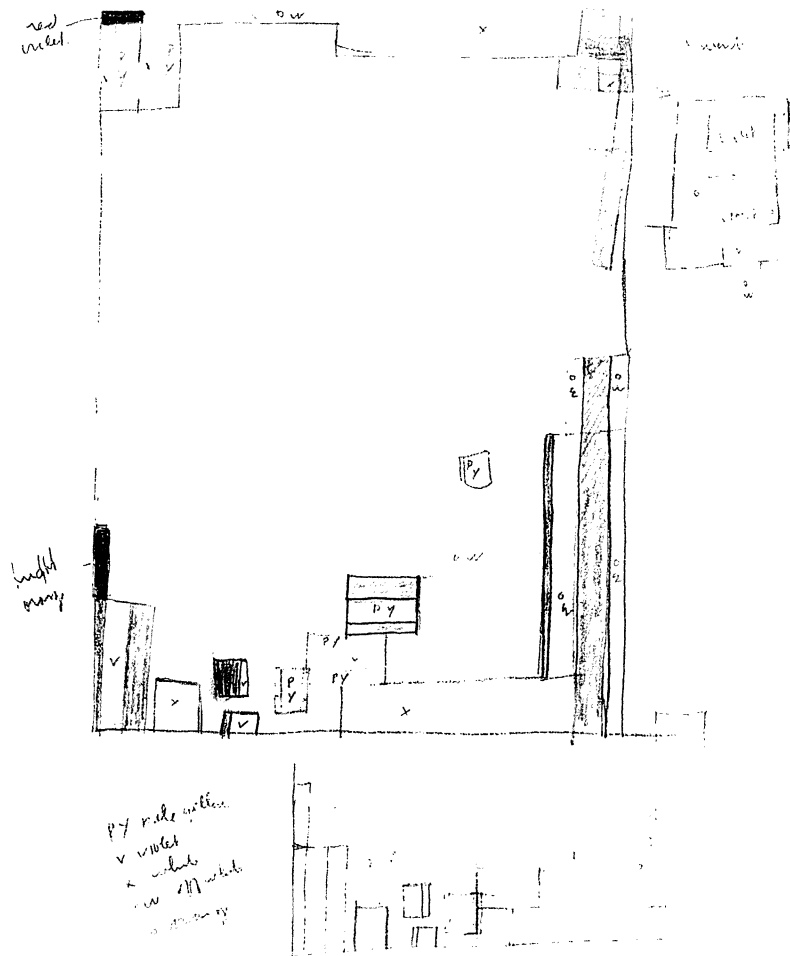
several pieces of art that left out the rest of the cabana.

Yve-Alain Bois writes ;

In his sketches, Kelly recorded the minutest disturbances with the obsessive precision of an entomologist, carefully noting the colors and tracing the exact shapes of the patches- most of which were made, strangely enough, from pieces of striped fabric that did not at all match the rest of the fabric.¹⁰



The fact that Kelly took so much care in rendering the imperfections while neglecting the intact areas of his subject tells us that he felt the most fertile ground existed in these imperfect areas.



¹⁰ Bois, Yve-Alain, "Kelly's Trouvailles: Findings in France," in *Ellsworth Kelly – The Early Drawings*. Harvard University Art Museums: Cambridge, Massachusetts and Kunstmuseum

Improvisation is an important aspect of my work because it allows me to exist in the moment. I believe the way I handle improvisation is similar to the way it is done in certain performance pieces. An example is in a work titled *Bug Dance* (1976) by Gus Solomon, which was based on the improvisational score *Bug Piece* by composer Yehuda Yannay. In *Bug Dance*, dancers and musicians respond to the movement of insects across a Plexiglas grid. The insects are made visible to the audience and performers by being projected onto a screen. The performers make unpremeditated sounds or movements when one or more insects land on a particular portion of the grid.

I believe this piece in particular has many similarities to the way I work. The first is that the improvisational aspects of the piece do not resolve themselves in the end. One movement provokes another, instead of being drawn toward a known conclusion, a single focus point or idea. Another similarity is that, though the movements are spontaneous, they all have a specific origin; the movement of the insects. Since there is no set corresponding between the movements of the insects and the reaction of the dancers and musicians the piece remains improvisational. My work is similar in that the *composition of improvisational marks* is derived from a sort of unobservable model or configuration of sensation that originates in life. Unlike *Bug Dance*, my process is also based upon slow deliberation. For example, in the painting *the whitest feet* (fig. 6) I made the dark

triangle at the bottom with quick, unpremeditated brush strokes. Because of the rough and energetic way that I applied the paint, a few drips spattered onto a wet surface above the shape. The wetness of the surface caused the paint to dissipate in an unexpected way. Though completely accidental, I felt that these drips were little gems. I wanted them to play more of a part in the composition, so I put white over a large portion of the triangular shape I had just made. I decided that the brown splatters needed something of comparable compositional weight to react against so I drew a line that stretched from one side of the canvas to the other. I ended up lightening one-half of the line to ensure the eye of the viewer would not be pulled away from the drips. Before each and every step in the process described above was taken, there was a period of deliberation. The planned and unplanned work together in determining how the painting will look.



Fig. 6

Conclusion:

My work represents an attempt to form a bridge between what I experience through my senses and what might exist beyond them. I do this by using moments from life when I felt an awareness of sensations at their highest point, their apex. I bring these moments back to the studio in an attempt to recreate their structure in an abstract composition. In the process of doing this, I must confront seemingly unanswerable questions involving my ability or inability to experience freely and to act freely. This unknown factors itself into the art as a subtle polemic aspect that will hopefully cause the viewer to, in turn, engage and examine the workings of their own perceptions.

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