

HYPERALLERGIC

Color Field, Then and Now

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by David Carrier March 7, 2020



Paul Feeley, *Formal Haut*, 1965, oil-based enamel on canvas, 60 x 60 inches

The Fullness of Color: 1960s Painting at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, is a small catalogue-less exhibition that presents a large roomful of Color Field paintings.

The show includes Kenneth Noland’s “Trans Shift” (1964), in which a suspended blue and green chevron, set on the white canvas ground, reaches almost to the bottom edge of the frame; Jules Olitski’s “Lysander-I” (1970), where the reddish mist in the upper right quadrant slowly fades into yellow; Alma Thomas’s “Cherry Blossom Symphony” (1972), with a violet background on which small marks of dark blue are superimposed — they look a little like the lozenges in some of Larry Poon’s early paintings. (Thomas actually is the most interesting artist here. Her presence puzzles me, for I don’t usually associate her with these other Color Field painters.)

In Morris Louis’s “I-68” (1962), a field of thinly painted colors descends vertically. And Helen Frankenthaler’s “Canal” (1963) sets an irregularly shaped orange-yellow form of billowing color in front of a blue patch and, at the top, behind a dark grayish form. And there are two minor paintings, Gene Davis’s big “Wheelbarrow” (1971) and Paul Feeley’s decorative “Formal Haut” (1965).

A review should focus on the art displayed. Here, however, it’s almost impossible (at least for me) to look at these works with an eye innocent of a history of recent theorizing. In the 1960s, Clement Greenberg and his young disciple Michael Fried championed Morris Louis, presenting him as Jackson Pollock’s successor.

And so while visiting *The Fullness of Color* I composed in my mind’s eye a slide show. First Henri Matisse’s large areas of saturated color, then Pollock’s all-over line, followed by a Frankenthaler, painted on the floor with intense acrylic color.

And then in this imaginary lecture I would show her heirs, Louis and Noland. Greenberg’s laconic praise of Louis was supplemented by Fried’s elaborately, lovingly detailed essays, which explain the expressive significance of these pictures. My little slide lecture would present a popularized, simplified version of their claims.

A couple of years ago, when Joachim Pissarro and I interviewed Okwui Enwezor, I asked him what he thought of Fried’s claim, circa 1965, that Louis and a couple other of these figures were the greatest living artists. Things looked different, he replied, for a Nigerian.

In New York these big, gorgeous paintings were seen soon enough as the ultimate Salon paintings, our contemporary equivalent to the French Academic works that took up so much space during the Impressionist era. It’s revealing that Louis’s early political paintings — works from the 1950s depicting the Star of David — have attracted more attention recently than his Color Field works.

My sense is that Fried’s high-powered theorizing was always at some distance from the practice of these artists. An art historian present at the show Fried organized at Harvard in 1965, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, who talked with Olitski, told me that the artist said, “It’s Michael’s story.”

I fear that the visual culture in which these works were so greatly admired is now one of those very distant “you had to be there” moments, which are impossible to reconstruct. Color Field painting — what art movement rose higher and then fell further? In saying this, I don’t mean to criticize Greenberg and Fried, or the artists in this show. Their theorizing was bold, and the art striking and original. But I don’t believe that any of the works on display are great paintings. Maybe I am mistaken. But what rather interests me now as an art critic is the extreme difficulty of fairly judging Color Field painting. What happened in this paradigm shift?

There is a shared sense, hard for anyone to resist, that nowadays Greenberg’s and Fried’s formalism has ceased to be a productive way of talking. Sometimes the supporting theory departs but an artist remains interesting. The problem here, I suspect, is that without the support of theorizing, which now seems shaky, these works are mostly of modest interest.

Arthur Danto, who was a renowned philosopher as well as a famous art critic, developed a very well-known aesthetic around Andy Warhol’s “Brillo Box” (1964): “as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art, [...] if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought.” (*After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, 1996).

If you’ve studied his philosophy, when you see this work in a museum you cannot but think of that discussion. Ambitious claims are usually critiqued, and so it’s not impossible that in a generation this theory will no longer inspire conviction. Remove Danto’s theory and then “Brillo Box” is merely a replica of a 1960s Brillo box. What then will be the fate of Warhol’s sculpture?

Louis was an artist who had a mystique. His working process was mysterious, he died sadly prematurely, and very grand claims were made for his art: “What is nakedly and explicitly at stake in the work of the most ambitious painters today is nothing less than the continued existence of painting as a high art” (Michael Fried, “Morris Louis,” reprinted in his *Art and Objecthood*, University of Chicago, 1998).

Such a man could not be just a very good artist — he had to be a great artist, or, otherwise, his paintings are just very pricey decorations. Long ago, when I took my mother to a Morris Louis exhibition, we ended up having an argument. When she said, “These are just beautiful decorative paintings,” I in turn called her a philistine. Mom, how I wish that I could apologize, for you were right, I was wrong.

Look across to the other small Guggenheim exhibition, *Marking Time: Process in Minimal Abstraction*, where the very early David Reed painting “#90” (1975) defines what now seems to be the wave of the future. With a roughness and immediacy lacking in most of the Color Field works, Reed’s painting about the process of art-making in a way that today seems immensely sympathetic.

Is it time now for a revival of Color Field abstraction? To answer that question would require a larger show than this exhibition, which maybe marks a useful starting point for that discussion.