

'The Geometric Unconscious' a conversation with Jorge Daniel Veneciano

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Courtesy Sheldon Museum of Art

Piet Mondrian's "No. 7" is part of "The Geometric Unconscious" at the Sheldon Museum of Art.

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This month, the Sheldon Museum of Art opened "The Geometric Unconscious," an exhibition of geometric abstraction drawn primarily from its collection that eschews standard museum chronological presentation for a three-pronged approach, looking at the core of the form, works approaching the core and works moving away from the core.

Underlying the show is a thesis developed by Sheldon director Jorge Daniel Veneciano and delineated in his essay in the exhibition catalog that turns the standard view of geometric abstraction upside down, arguing that the precise, almost scientific or mathematical style is rooted in spiritual concerns even as its American proponents deny this concern.

This week, Veneciano discussed his groundbreaking thesis and the exhibition. Here's part of that conversation:

LKW: The whole thesis that abstraction, particularly of the geometric kind, isn't just a science of the mind but has this spiritual root, completely changes the way you look at it.

JDV: "If we look at the history of abstraction, geometric or pure or gestural -- it comes out of European interest in esoteric philosophies like theosophy, and theosophy has its roots in ancient Greek mystical philosophy and ancient South Asian and Egyptian mystical beliefs. There's this whole world of mysticism undergirding the interest in symbolism and abstraction of the late 19th, early 20th century that turns into geometric abstraction.

"One thing that happens when abstraction comes to the United States is that it severs its ties to mystical philosophies. But its imperatives remain the same. Only the European spiritual dimension gets repressed.

"Those imperatives toward ideal forms and purism -- of shape and line and other formal concerns -- lose their anchor in European spiritualism, simply by denial. That's why I call this 'The Geometric Unconscious.'"

There's sort of that forced narrative of art history -- the original, the golden era, the return to that time -- that you write about. It gets forced to tell this nice story that may not be where the art comes from, but it's where the critics, historians want it to end up.

"What they do is adopt part of the esoteric narrative but not all of it. They adopt the formal part. So somebody like Alfred Barr (founding director of the Museum of Modern Art) looks at shapes and connects them to cubism and says, 'well, abstraction comes from European art movements.' That may be true in part on a very formal level. But the ideas for shapes aren't formed in a vacuum. Formal thinking has to be inspired by ideas, from cultural antecedents.

"If you take only the top layer of the story, which is the formal program for an artistic movement, you miss what motivates it. That's what's dropped from American narratives on geometric abstraction -- the

spiritual, esoteric, occult motivations or inspiration for imperatives like purism and cleansings. All religions have this practice or imperative toward cleansing and purification. The very idea of purism comes from outside of art. It's therefore impure. That's what I wanted to highlight about geometric abstraction.

"Historians do account for artists like Piet Mondrian, who was one of the chief proponents of geometric abstraction and who was himself a Theosophist. But when you get to somebody like Frank Stella, he'll buy the formal emphasis but reject the spiritual motivation for it."

By participating in the formal part, the inspiration comes with it, whether you want it to or not, don't you think?

"Right. What concerns me, though, is why American writers diminish or gloss over the underlying inspiration for this unusual fascination with form. Whether they do it consciously or not, they repress part of what's vibrant in abstraction. Yet it's still there. The unconscious holds something active that you don't pay attention to. It energizes what comes out as thoughts and art."

Why do you think glossing over happens? What is that that motivates that denial?

"There are different reasons. One is that Americans, certainly in the 20th century, wanted to distinguish themselves from Europeans. That's an external motivation. An internal one is that the logic of purism takes over. Purification is allowed to become the prime imperative of modernism. This means that abstraction aspires to become self-reflective — art that's only about art. That's when it purges the very source of its aspirations. It's kind of Oedipal, when you purge away your own parent. It wins independence by severing its ties to the romances that generated it in the first place. It undertakes its own self-cleansing."

I found it informative and amusing that Suprematism's black square and Ad Reinhardt's almost identical black square bookend the circle.

"In a way, the black square that (Kazimir) Malevich produced was like the first and the last painting of pure abstraction. So Reinhardt ended up calling his black square the ultimate painting. It's true if you take the directive of self-purification to the extreme, you end up with a black square."

If you look at the show upstairs, I went back and saw it after I read the catalog, and I read it differently. Do you find that you might even see the work differently?

"If you study certain shapes, you find that they have spiritual meaning in ancient societies -- the hexagon and circle for symbols of eternity and the cycles of life. So squares, rectangles, all these shapes have esoteric significance that artists aren't necessarily foregrounding -- they don't tell you what it all means. But the background includes the spiritualist history of the shape, the form. We didn't put up a code, you know, like the interpretation of dreams, an interpretation of symbols. ...

"You can look at the works differently. So many of the artists represented in the exhibition do have some connection to spiritualist or esoteric thinking, whether it comes from a religious sensibility or from a universal, humanist perspective. They often aspire to tap into this universal spiritual feeling through the visuals they produce.

Then you have somebody like Peter Halley."

Halley, a geometric abstractionist who first came to notice in the 1980s and has been one of the leading artists in the form for three decades, is represented in the exhibition by his painting "Colortron" and in the catalog by a 1984 essay titled "The Crisis in Geometry" in which he uses the thinking of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard to challenge the conventional view of geometric abstraction and, now, the esoteric-based view.

"You can look for spiritualist resonance in geometric shapes, but you can also find these forms in the most infernal of places like prisons and subterranean electronic conduits and circuitry, where you are the farthest you can get from any humanist concern. Halley makes these allusions.

"The other thing that many of these Theosophical artists were interested in was color theory from (18th-century German writer Johann) Goethe, whereby colors exerted force, a kind of cosmic push and pull. For Halley to call his painting 'Colortron,' to draw on artistic interest in color and Goethe and to add the cyberword 'tron' to it, is to transform or completely undermine that interest. It unhinges the doors of perception that other artists have been trying to open. ... That's part of the critical brilliance of his work."

It seems to me that if people know where geometric abstraction comes from, as you put forth in your essay, it might not be so off-putting. They may not know who Mondrian is, but they might recognize where it's from.

"One of the things that's interesting to me is the perception that people have of abstraction and modern art as elitist. How did it get to be elite? Again, the origin of all this lies with esotericism. In mysticism there is an elite, there is a priesthood, you have to be initiated to understand it. This structure gets transferred into modern abstract art, which is why some people are turned off by it. You have to be initiated. You have to be in the circle to understand the circle."

The catalog, which includes four written essays, also presents eight "image essays" in which works from the Sheldon collection are grouped by formal themes, such as Euclidean Geometry.

Before looking at the catalog I never would have thought of the Sol LeWitt and Anne Truitt together. But they really fit.

"Pairing artworks in the book is important because it creates connections. A contemporary way of thinking about art is to place it in context, not in isolation. One of the things we wanted to do with the catalog is to

stage dialogues across the page. ... Even the Barbara Hepworth and the Brancusi, we've never paired them together before, but they make new sense together."

I never would have thought of the Brancusi as geometric before I read that case study. That also shows, maybe, the line between geometry and naturalism isn't as sharp as people want to make it seem.

"With Brancusi, we see the whole process performed with 'Princess X.' It began as a representational bust of a woman, Marie Bonaparte, a society woman in Paris, and he later pared away all identifying features. In that paring away, he was aiming at what he called the Eternal Woman. There it is, a reference to mystical Goethe. Part of his concern was with getting past the phenomenal world and to a form of essence. Brancusi was trying to evoke the essence of woman, not an individual. That sensibility toward essence is part of the esoteric concern with the spirit in contrast to the mortal human, an underlying reality rather than the visible world. I see Brancusi as performing the very process of abstraction through geometry with the 'Princess X.'"

It (Veneciano's essay) is kind of a game changer to think about it (geometric abstraction) that way. It takes the narrative that we've been given for so many years and says 'maybe not.'

"One thing that impressed me as I was reading and preparing for this exhibition is how the narrative always comes back to Alfred Barr. You can read it in Greenberg and Kramer and many others. But it comes from Barr, who early on made this shift -- forget references to spiritualism, it's all about the art itself. That's where art's purism turns on itself."

It chases its own tail.

"That's a good way to put it. It's astonishing to me how everybody will defer to -- what do they call it in Freud? -- the primal scene. The primal scene of Alfred Barr, where he sees only the superficial formal connections and not the occult connections, their procreative union. But everybody repeats that repression in his own way."

Not anymore. Veneciano's essay will, if nothing else, create a new dialogue on geometric abstraction that challenges eight decades of thought.

"To tell you where my thinking comes from, it's really American pragmatism, where you want to question the habits of mind, I start with Emerson, that's what he wrote about. This is the perspective I want to bring to art. Frankly, I see this as part of the overall program at Sheldon, some of the innovative things we're doing. This fits into the way we think about 21st century museum practice and shifting from the historical culture of 20th-century museums to a more critical culture for 21st-century practice.

It's a different way of thinking, and here it is coming out of this little museum in the middle of nowhere.

"Not so little, I'd say, but you're right that it's not coming out anywhere else. It's because we've been organizing Sheldon through innovative ways of thinking overall that we are leading in the field, for example, in our transnational perspectives to American art. Because we are relatively small, we're more versatile, more nimble than juggernaut museums."