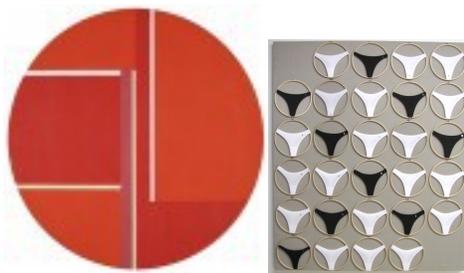


L. Kent Wolgamott: 'The Geometric Unconscious'

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Courtesy photo

"Red Sea" (1985) by Felrath Hines is part of "The Geometric Unconscious" at Sheldon Museum of Art.

"The Geometric Unconscious" is the title of the striking fall exhibition at the Sheldon Museum of Art, a visually captivating show that brings together a host of Sheldon's top abstract holdings with a few borrowed pieces to cast new light on the old, but still vital subject -- geometric abstraction.

The exhibition, which includes sculpture placed throughout the building and works in the sculpture garden as well as paintings on the gallery walls, contains an artistic who's who -- from geometric abstraction's "founder" Piet Mondrian through the New York School's Ad Reinhardt and minimalists Agnes Martin and Frank Stella to contemporary artists such as Peter Halley, whose 1999 "Colortron" turns the lines and rectangles DayGlo and textured.

The third study of geometric abstraction at Sheldon in the past 40 years, "The Geometric Unconscious" finds its thesis not in shape, form or history but in origin. In his introduction to the exhibition's valuable University of Nebraska Press-produced catalog, Sheldon director Jorge Daniel Veneciano defines the idea of the geometric unconscious:

"... we can use ('geometric unconscious') to name the unknowns feeding the development of geometric abstraction in modern art. We know geometric figuration when we see it, and we know its history as charted by artists and historians, but we don't always know how we got here, or why this particular course of history."

To explore those origins, "The Geometric Unconscious" eschews traditional categorization of art and artist and dispenses with chronology, grouping works by their looks and intents, splitting them according to their relationships with the "Core" of geometric abstraction.

So, pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's "Imperfect Print for R.A.M.," a 1987 print that incorporates his trademark Benday dots with hard black lines that create triangles, fits into "Linear Geometry," while pop artist Bridget Riley's wavering colored lines of "Eclipse" are part of "Beyond the Core."

Similarly, cubist still lifes by Patrick Henry Bruce and Henry Fitch Taylor from the 1910s become part of "Approaching the Core," the exhibition's introductory section that finds artists throughout the decades moving toward using pure geometry.

There hangs side-by-side Steve Joy's "No Quarter (Maroc)" from 2010 and Sean Scully's "Barcelona White Bar" -- a pair of rectangle-based works that reflect the influence Scully has had on Joy's work and

the personal emotion that the artists invest in the pieces that, fitting the thesis, have geometric content but aren't pure geometric abstraction.

"The Core Tradition" is appropriately introduced by Mondrian's "No 7," a 1937-42 piece of hard thin lines and angles by the Dutch painter that is in the doorway to the exhibition's second gallery. On the wall next to it is Burgoyne Diller's "Third Theme Abstraction," his 1940-45 homage to Mondrian.

The "core" section includes work by Albert Swinden, a founder of American Abstract Artists, Ilya Bolotowsky's "Red Tondo" (1967-68), a circle filled with red and red-orange blocks that proves that geometric abstraction doesn't have to be rectilinear, and John McLaughlin's "#1, 1965," a white rectangle surrounded by black that is as hard-edged as it gets.

"Core" geometric abstraction doesn't have to be two-dimensional. Charles Biederman's "#35 Orans" (1971-73) finds small brightly colored aluminum planes extending from the base, and Sol LeWitt's "Incomplete Open Cube," a 1974 minimalist sculpture that is part of the outline of a cube sits on the floor.

The exhibition's third gallery contains a section called "Afro Geo," which, in keeping with Sheldon's mission, finds transnational roots in geometric abstraction in the Africa-based black-and-brown pattern of Tiago Carneiro da Cunha's "Prancha Africana," a 2002 polyurethane sculpture that resembles a shield or a surfboard, and in Nigerian-born Odili Donald Odita's large brilliantly colored "Passage," a 2010 painting that is a recent addition to the museum's collection.

That gallery also houses a section titled "Beyond the Core." It contains two works by Lincoln artists, a 1979 painting by the late James Eisentrager and Marjorie Mikasen's anthropomorphic 2005 acrylic "Action Potential." Lincoln sculptor Mo Neal's "Duomo Reamer," a 1995 piece in wood, rubber and plaster, sits on the landing outside the gallery doors.

One of the final pieces in the show is one of its most informative. Ana de la Cueva's "billings b&w" from 2009-11 is an assemblage work that stretches black-and-white thong underwear over wooden embroidery hoops arranged in a grid.

De la Cueva's piece is clearly beyond the core ala Mondrian, but just as obviously highly geometric -- evidence that "The Geometric Unconscious" continues to reverberate through contemporary art