

RADIANT ENERGY

February 2 – May 13, 2018

Visual Arts Center of New Jersey

RADIANT ENERGY

Matthew Deleget

How many distinct colors do you think the human eye can see? One hundred? A thousand? Or even ten thousand colors? Researchers today estimate that we can distinguish between seven to ten million different hues. Select women can detect even more than that. Human visual acuity is astonishing. Color is, of course, light and not a physical substance at all. It begins first as a sensation we see and then transforms into a phenomenon of our perception, which is consciously and unconsciously informed by our experiences. Light enters the eye and hits the retina, which is made up of millions of tiny photoreceptors, which are called rods and cones because of their shapes. The cones are sensitive to the wavelengths of red, blue, and green, and they send electrical signals via the optic nerve to the brain, helping us to identify and ultimately make sense of the things we are seeing. To say color is critical in enabling us to navigate our world would be an understatement. It is essential. For most people, everything is experienced in full vivid color.

Now, how many of those millions of colors can we identify specifically by name? That number is substantially less, perhaps

several dozen. We do have distinct names for the primary colors (red, yellow, and blue), the secondaries (orange, green, and violet), and neutrals (black, white, and gray). But aside from brown and, of course, pink—which is an odd exception since we don't have comparable words for light blue and light yellow—our ability to simply name colors is severely limited. And most significantly, how do colors make us feel? It's clear that color can elicit an entire spectrum of responses in us. Color can be pure emotion and can be infused with limitless external associations that reflect our psyche, our personal experiences, and our cultural context and heritage. Why, for instance, in American culture, is red associated with anger, blue with sadness, and black with mourning? In other cultures, these same colors may have completely different associations.

For the three acclaimed artists presented in *Radiant Energy*—Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld—color is the content of their paintings and the purpose of their life's work. Color is both a subject of bottomless inquiry and a pragmatic problem to be solved. Taken together these three artists represent the current

vanguard of color painting on the international stage. Born within five years of each other in three disparate locations—Robert Swain in Austin, Texas, in 1940; Sanford Wurmfeld in the Bronx, New York, in 1942; and Gabriele Evertz in Berlin, Germany, in 1945—all three artists arrived independently at color’s doorstep decades ago.

Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld first crossed paths many years ago in the renowned art department at Hunter College in New York City, where all three taught. Evertz also studied and continues to teach there. During the 1950s and 1960s, first under the guidance of artist Robert Motherwell and then curator and critic E.C. Goossen, Hunter’s art department pivoted from a vocational school to a true fine arts program that completely embraced the art of its time. By the 1970s and 1980s, Hunter had developed into the leading champion of abstraction and, more specifically, color painting, among art schools in the United States. A new Hunter Color School had emerged, and I firmly believe that in the not-so-distant future it will prove to be as innovative and influential as the now celebrated Bauhaus and Black Mountain College schools. The Hunter Color School is more than overdue for a survey exhibition of its own.

Along with their many fellow artists and educators, such as kindred spirits Doug Ohlson, Vincent Longo, Ray Parker, Ralph Humphrey, Mac Wells, and Valerie Jaudon, among others, Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld foregrounded an urgent concern for color painting and its transformative effect on the viewer. It should be noted that all three artists possess an exhaustive understanding of color and its extensive history, both as historians and as practitioners. Taken together, they share more than a century of color research and accrued wisdom, and their individual discoveries radiate in this exhibition.

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, both artists and non-artists alike have examined and attempted to systematize color and its attributes, looking at it through the lenses of philosophy, literature, physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, psychology, linguistics, and many other disciplines. When we talk about color today, it is clear

we’re speaking about something that is inherently interdisciplinary. The subject of color belongs to the study of the human experience. And our ability to learn new things about color and how it functions is limitless.

Similarly, our quest to analyze and, in turn, systematize color—conducted over the centuries by pioneers such as physicist Sir Isaac Newton, writer and poet Wolfgang von Goethe, chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, or painter and educator Josef Albers—is something that can never truly be completed. Color investigation usually begins as an objective pursuit, but it quickly proves to be less than an exact science, eventually moving into the subjective and reflecting the disposition of the researcher. To date, no one theory or approach has universally won out over all others to become the definitive model for understanding color and its effects. Questions about color have been asked for generations, and I can safely say they will persist far into the foreseeable future.

Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld have each committed the best of themselves to color. They’ve developed their own unique precepts and models for thinking about it, and have been conceiving and creating paintings to express those ideas for upwards of fifty years. Their recent paintings included in this exhibition are comprehensively considered and represent decades of inquiry and accumulated wisdom. Working at the intersection of experience and intuition, they have each made new discoveries by looking and working with color directly.

At its core, color is a three-dimensional problem. Each painting in this exhibition began as an investigation into color’s three distinct attributes: hue (a single, pure color), value (the lightness or darkness of a color), and saturation (the relative purity or intensity of a color). Every color imaginable can be mapped according to these three criteria. It is also well known by now that our perception of a specific color flexes depending on its quantity, its shape, and its proximity to other colors in a painting. Our perception is also affected by the particular physical attributes of the painting itself (its size and

shape), our distance from the artwork, and the amount of time we spend looking at it. And finally, color is impacted by the lighting we use to see it, whether natural or artificial.

Why is it important then to examine color painting right now? My short answer is that it has never been more innovative. Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld are each working at the very top of their abilities, making the most informed and compelling paintings of their lifetimes. My longer answer though is that our times have never been more urgent. We are currently living in the throes of a new digital age in which an endless stream of visual and verbal information assaults our senses on a daily basis and puts us into a persistent state of distraction, if not agitation. Every conceivable kind of information is flashed 24/7 across a petite, glowing screen that fits all too comfortably into the palm of our hand. Social media, streaming media, push notifications, apps, instant messaging, email, and more have left us with increasingly shorter attention spans. We are both less informed and ultimately less wise as a result.

These three artists provide us with an antidote to the malaise of our digital century. Their paintings function not as rejections of our wireless age but as returns to our core capacities as human beings. Although taking a selfie in front of these works might be too tough to resist—I've witnessed that phenomenon countless times—the artists invite us to put our devices away for a moment, to slow down, and to simply look at their paintings first hand and in real time. These works are produced neither through digital, analog, nor even mechanical means; rather they are made by eye and by hand, slowly and deliberately over time. And counter to our passive experience with digital media, the artists ask us to be alert, to look actively, and to focus our attention on the information in front of us. These paintings demand to be seen first hand through direct contact.

The importance of our role as observers in truly activating these works cannot be stressed strongly enough. It makes sense to remind ourselves that the first viewers of these works are the artists themselves. They've spent decades finely calibrating our viewing

experience. The paintings are keyed to our capacity for seeing and the physiology of our being. Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld are well aware that the ability to see color is not determined by age, gender, geographic location, or cultural context. And our role in their work is catalytic. We literally bring the paintings to life.

So what should we particularly pay attention to? To begin, throughout most of painting's history, the opportunities to experience color without the interference of an image have been rare. Color traditionally has been used to describe an object, individual, or environment. Even the superlative color painters of European art history, such as Johannes Vermeer, J.M.W. Turner, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, and Pierre Bonnard, were beholden to depicting images. However, with the emergence of abstraction about a century ago, color came to be considered a subject in itself. Abstraction, and color painting specifically, played a leading role in American modern art throughout the 20th century, from the works of Morgan Russell, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, and Stuart Davis, at its beginning, to those of Josef Albers, Hans Hofmann, Ad Reinhardt, and Helen Frankenthaler, by its middle, to Alma Thomas, Bridget Riley, and Marcia Hafif, by its end.

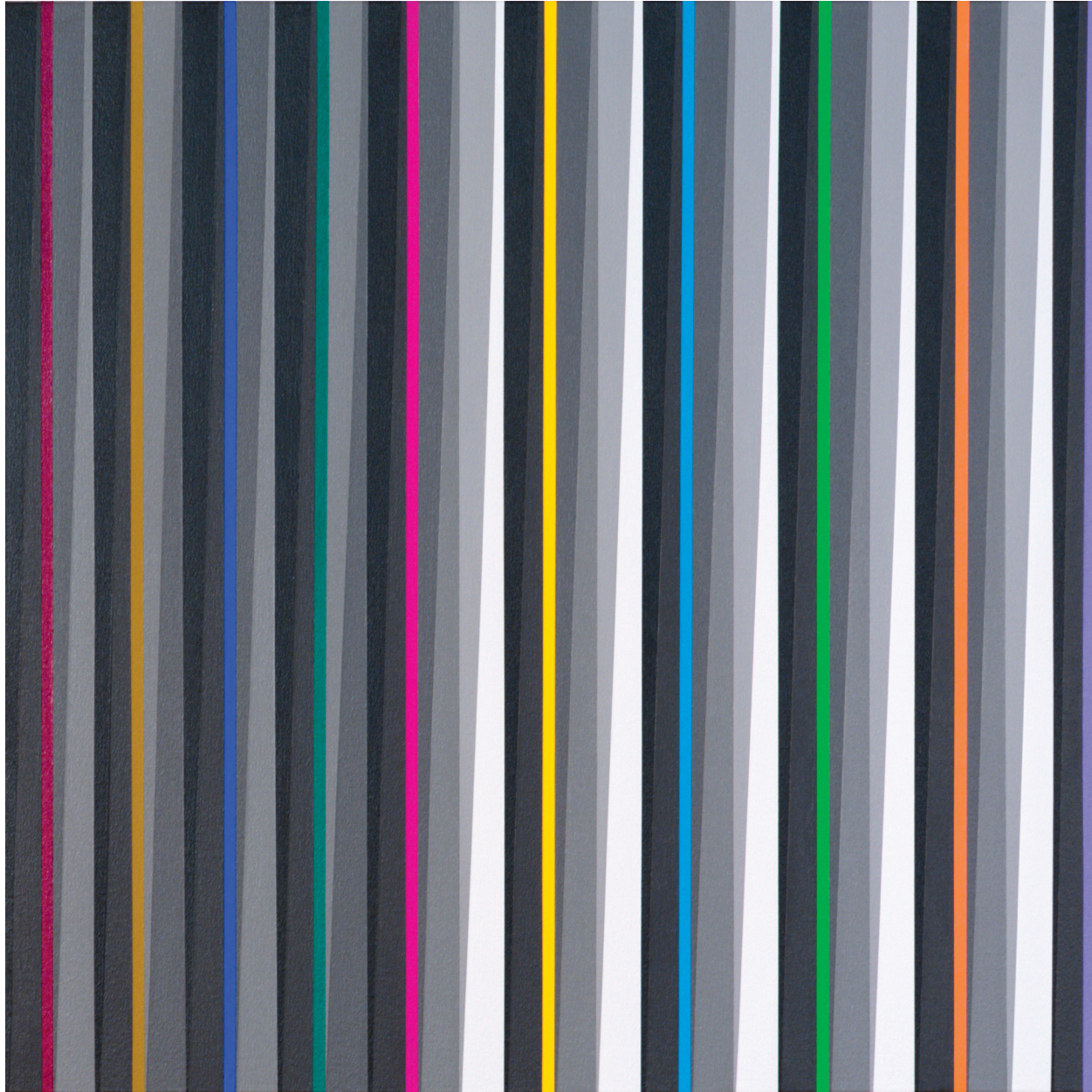
Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld realized long ago that pure color experiences, despite lacking a traditional image, still require a shape or structure to inhabit, and after much trial and error, each has arrived at a distinctive compositional arrangement. Yes, the paintings of all three consist of matte acrylic paint applied to a flat surface smoothly and evenly in layers with a brush, forming clearly defined geometric shapes or patterns with straight edges. But within those parameters, the differences are extensive. Evertz uses vertical stripes and tapered lines. For Swain, the structure is a grid of repeating squares. And Wurmfeld creates overlaid grids of varying units set against contrasting borders.

Their color choices are also wildly divergent. Although the paintings on view in this exhibition may appear to be more similar than not upon first impression, they present a broad array of color

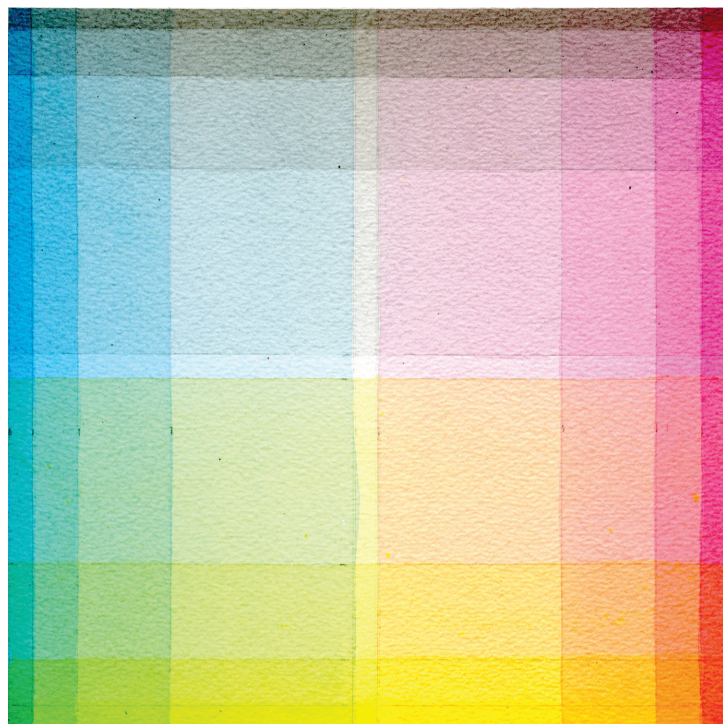
principles and decisions. I encourage you to spend time with these works and to examine them closely, to ask questions of them, and to unpack them. Ask which color or set of colors are present in a given painting and which colors are not. How much of a color is there? Is each color represented in equal amounts? What is a color's proximity to other colors, and what are those colors? How do adjacent colors impact each other? How are the colors arranged on the surface of the canvas? Are they symmetrical or asymmetrical? Do the colors change or modulate across the painting's surface? Do the colors seem to move in a specific direction, such as diagonally or, from left to right, or top to bottom? Do any colors recede into deep space or appear to leap off the surface of the paintings? Is the overall palette harmonious or jarring, luminous or subdued? Are the colors active or passive? What shapes do the colors assume? How do the individual shapes in a painting relate to each other? And how does the size of the painting relate to your field of vision, to your body?

Clearly the paintings in this exhibition first engage our eyes, but they quickly engulf our minds. These works are not simply optical exercises. They conjure up in each of us an endless array of personal associations and emotional content. It's definitely not wrong to ask how the colors presented in these paintings make you feel. What emotions, experiences, or memories come to mind? The range is immeasurable. I stand truly in awe of these artworks for the profound depth and dedication of the research that each artist invested in them, the deliberateness and precision with which they're executed, and the awesome range of associations and emotions they evoke. These works are sublime, very much like the chemical process in which a physical material is transformed directly from a solid to a gas. Like ice evaporating into steam, these three artists present works that transform the raw stuff of pigment and canvas into experiences that are ethereal and ineffable. Color truly is a mysterious thing.

Matthew Deleget is an artist, gallerist, curator, writer, and educator based in Brooklyn, New York.



Gabriele Evertz, *Messenger*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas over wood, 24 x 24 in.



COLOR LEXICON

Matthew Deleget

Words elude many of us when speaking about color painting. Here's a basic primer of color terms to help us refine our discussion about color and its effects. Related terms are grouped together for ease of use. Note that many of the terms below can be used in combination with each other, for example "secondary hue" or "subtractive primary colors."

Sanford Wurmfeld, *Series F, 1*, 2010–11. Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper, Sheet: 12 × 9 in.

COLOR THEORY A system for understanding the organization of all colors, how they are mixed, how they interact, and their resulting visual effects and experiences.

COLOR WHEEL A tool containing individual colors arranged around the perimeter of a circle to help us understand color relationships. Although the precise placement and organization of colors on the wheel has been widely debated, a color wheel generally features the primary, secondary, and tertiary colors as they appear in the visible spectrum. Colors are placed equidistant from each other, and complementary colors are located directly opposite from one another on the wheel.

PRIMARY COLORS Red, yellow, and blue. These three colors cannot be produced by mixing other colors together nor can they be reduced any further into other colors.

SECONDARY COLORS Orange, green, and violet. Mixing pairs of primary colors produces these colors. Red and yellow make orange, yellow and blue make green, and blue and red make violet.

TERTIARY COLORS Colors that result from the mixture of primary and secondary colors. For example, yellow and green make yellow-green, blue and violet make blue-violet, etc.

ACHROMATIC COLORS Black, white, and all grays. Colors that lack a hue are often referred to as neutrals, but they are anything but neutral when used in a painting.

HUE A single, pure color.

VALUE The lightness or darkness of a color.

SATURATION The relative purity or intensity of a color. A color becomes less saturated when mixed with another color, any color. For example, a primary red mixed with white becomes an unsaturated pink. The red is now both less pure and also a lighter value. Most colors we see in the world are unsaturated.

WARM COLORS Colors often associated with sunlight, such as red, orange, and yellow.

COOL COLORS Colors often associated with an overcast day or nighttime, such as blue, green, and violet.

MONOCHROMATIC Using only one color.

POLYCHROMATIC Using two or more colors; in other words, multicolored.

ANALOGOUS COLORS Colors that are adjacent to one another on a color wheel.

COMPLEMENTARY COLORS Colors that appear opposite each other on a color wheel. The basic complementary color pairs are red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and violet. When used in a painting, complementary color pairs heighten each other's intensity the most.

SURFACE COLOR* The color of a shape in a painting that helps us identify the object being depicted. We see surface color as a sensation. From sensation, our minds transform surface color into film color and/or volume color (described below) through our perception. Perception involves our experiences and memory.

FILM COLOR* The effect of a color's luminosity where the color appears to separate from the surface of the painting and float out in front of it.

VOLUME COLOR* The appearance of shallowness or depth of a color in a painting. Generally speaking, light colors advance forward while dark colors recede into space.

* *Surface color, film color, and volume color are the three modes of appearance originally articulated by the psychologist David Katz in the 1930s.*

ADDITIVE COLOR The behavior of light mixtures (an immaterial substance). For example, red and green light mix to make yellow. All colors of light projected onto each other would ultimately produce the color white.

SUBTRACTIVE COLOR The behavior of paint mixtures (a material substance). For example, red and blue paint mix to make violet. If all colors of paint were mixed together, they would produce a dark brown.

SIMULTANEOUS CONTRAST An optical effect first noted by Leonardo da Vinci and later analyzed in great depth by the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, director of the Gobelins Manufactory's dye works in Paris during the early 19th century. When two colors are placed next to each other, they impact each other's appearance and our perception of them. This effect is most pronounced when complementary colors, such as blue and orange, are placed adjacent to each other. The colors appear to vibrate optically. However, when only one color is present, say blue, and its complementary, orange, is not, our mind's eye will call for it. This effect is called *afterimage* and can be observed, for example, when we stare for a while at an area painted blue and then shift our eyes over to a white wall. An orange sensation will linger before our eyes.

SUCCESSIVE CONTRAST An optical effect that occurs when viewing one color and then another. A shift occurs in our perception of the second color. For example, if we look at a green area and then look at a yellow area in that same painting, the character of the yellow will be tempered by the afterimage of green. The yellow will appear more reddish, which is the complementary color to green. It is always the complementary color that will appear successively. Most colors are seen in the successive mode so we rarely see a color as it truly is.

REVERSE CONTRAST The optical effect where a color assimilates and appears to spread. It begins to take on the appearance of a color adjacent to it.

PARALLEL PURSUITS

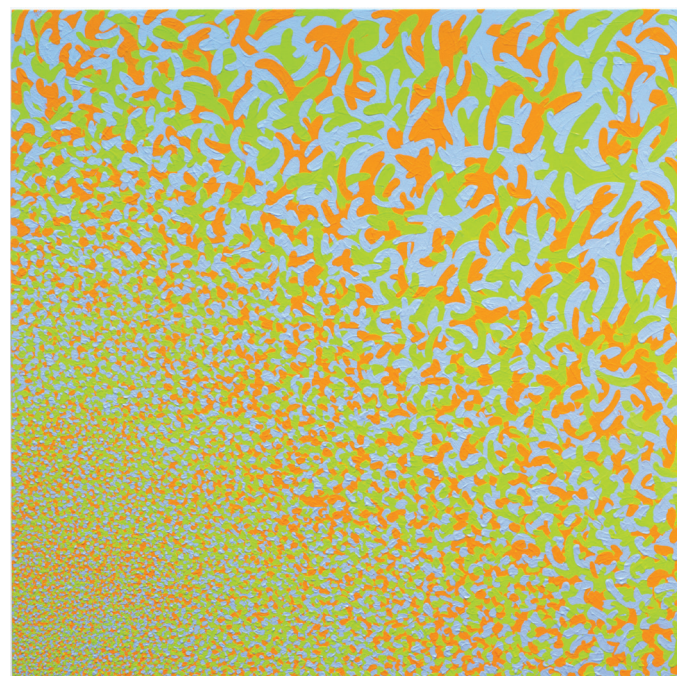
Mary Birmingham

Color is a subjective experience. This is as true for the person who sees color everywhere in the world as it is for the three artists showcased in *Radiant Energy*. Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld have devoted their careers to exploring color sensation in abstract painting, earning respect and admiration from many institutions, scholars, and critics. For this publication, Matthew Deleget, who is an artist, curator, and co-founder of Minus Space, contributes an eloquent and insightful essay.

As a curator, I am interested in creating opportunities for museum visitors to have meaningful encounters with works of art that enlighten, move, or even transform them, so I am especially excited to bring the works of Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld to the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. With color as the content, these compelling and often mesmerizing works made between 2010 and 2017 immediately draw us in, and with sustained looking, trigger a range of physical sensations and emotions that may surprise us. The gallery provides a perfect environment for this profoundly personal experience of color to unfold in real time.

As an art historian, I am interested in looking at contemporary art through the lens of art history. I find it fascinating when artists like Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld use the same lens, because as *makers*, they have special insight into how an artwork is made. Their interests often enlighten their individual practices. What art from the past resonates with them, and how do they relate to it in their own work? Which artists do they revere and which ones challenge them?

In this essay, I have included three comparisons to begin to answer these questions. Because all of the work in the exhibition is nonrepresentational, connections to representational paintings are not always immediately apparent. However, careful examination of an old-master work alongside an abstract work can open new perspectives on both. By identifying some of these parallels, I hope to catalyze a larger discussion about abstraction, representation, and the role of color in painting.



ROBERT SWAIN

Since the mid-1960s Robert Swain has composed paintings by arranging gridded squares of various sizes in adjacent rows and columns, carefully controlling the hue, value, and saturation of each square to establish color relationships. This structure allows him to modulate the color in a nearly orchestral way, producing multiple visual sensations for the viewer. Although he has continued to use and refine the gridded format, around 2006, he began what he considers to be a less passive approach, seeking more active surfaces and greater color sensations.

Swain calls the newer works “brushstroke paintings,” since the all-over pattern of irregular shapes mimics brushstrokes. While his

large gridded works showcase numerous hues in the same painting, he generally limits his palette in each brushstroke painting to two or three colors. For instance, *Untitled, 8 x 12 – Green*—a painting he made for this exhibition—contains ninety-six unique colors, each contained within a twelve-inch square. By contrast, *Untitled,*

Left: Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926), *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade*, 1894. Oil on canvas, overall: 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{15}{16}$ in. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.49

Right: Robert Swain, *Untitled, 3-15-8/17-15-5/29-15-7*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 5 x 5 ft.

3-15-8/17-15-5/29-15-7 comprises only three hues—orange, blue, and green—all with the same medium value and each one highly saturated. Swain keeps the colors consistent throughout the painting but alters the sizes of the individual shapes. He distributes the colors in equal proportions so that none dominates and the figure-to-field relationship is in constant flux. The color feels weightier and less airy than in the gridded works.

The brushstroke paintings reveal Swain's interest in exploiting the physicality of paint. The thickly layered shapes overlap and abut one another, producing a textured surface that is almost like a relief map. The raised edges of the individual shapes cast shadows and highlights along the borders between colors. The first time I confronted one of these brushstroke paintings in Swain's studio, I was struck by the heavy impasto of the interlocking colored shapes. The visceral surface quality radiates a dynamic energy comparable to Stuart Davis's works from the 1940s.

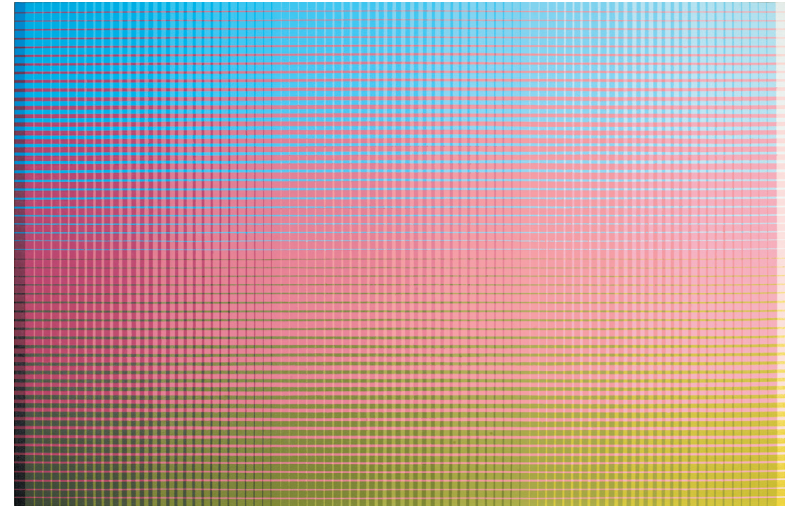
In the brushstroke paintings, Swain constructs his space with repeated dabs of color, which he fans out from the lower left to the upper right in graduating sizes, thus suggesting a sense of movement. This variation in size also causes different reactions in the viewer's eye. The smallest dot-like strokes in the lower left corner create an optical mix reminiscent of Georges Seurat and other Post-Impressionist artists. As the shapes expand toward the upper right corner, the borders between them become more pronounced, their adjacent edges creating optical contrasts for the viewer. With longer exposure to the work, the eye begins to experience afterimages, which may cause the appearance of vibrations or flickering on the surface of the painting. Swain's ultimate goal is to achieve a sense of dynamic equilibrium while increasing the color sensations.

As a longtime admirer of Claude Monet, Swain sees a connection between his efforts in these brushstroke paintings and some of Monet's works, especially the numerous paintings of the Rouen Cathedral or grain stacks. For Swain, Monet's practice of painting the same scene at different times and under different light or

weather conditions is "an artist's attempt to understand the different qualities of color." He admires this approach that treats a grain stack or a building façade as an "armature" for color.¹ Swain addresses similar physical and emotional aspects of color without depending on the motifs used by predecessors like Monet or Seurat: "I just skip the landscape part and go right to the color."²

Despite painting more than thirty views of the Rouen Cathedral, Monet considered his actual subject to be the atmosphere surrounding the building rather than the building itself. He called this the *enveloppe*. "To me the motif itself is an insignificant factor," he has been quoted as saying. "What I want to reproduce is what exists between the motif and me."

In Monet's *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade*, of 1894, reflected light moves across the building from the deeply shadowed lower right to the glowing tower on the upper left. In the brushstroke paintings in *Radiant Energy*, Swain also orchestrates light in an upward diagonal sweep. Building on the foundational work of Monet and other artists, Swain has freed himself from the underlying armature and allows color to speak for itself.



SANFORD WURMFELD

In addition to his lifelong investigation of color, Sanford Wurmfeld has a special interest in panoramic paintings. Over the past few decades, he has executed several cycloramas, which are panoramic images on the inside of cylindrical platforms that provide a 360-degree view. Creating an environment that immerses the viewer in color is a worthy challenge for an artist whose work has always treated color as a perceptual experience. And while most of his work is not on this monumental scale, it often conveys a panoramic sensibility.

Wurmfeld, a well-known scholar who has chronicled and advanced the study of color theory in the 20th and 21st centuries, is highly attuned to the art of the past. The chronology compiled for his 2013 retrospective at the Hunter College Art Galleries is filled with entries on the various exhibitions and artworks he saw and responded to across the years, revealing the importance of other artists to his

own development. In discussing Wurmfeld's career, scholars and critics have often noted affinities with artists he admires, including Johannes Vermeer, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Piet Mondrian, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock. While some of these parallels may seem obvious, others are less expected.

In 2015, Wurmfeld participated in *Past Present: Conversations Across Time*, an exhibition at the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania. Pairing works by contemporary artists with masterpieces from the Museum's Samuel H. Kress Memorial

Left: Canaletto (Italian, 1697–1768), *View of Piazza San Marco, Venice*, ca. 1740/46. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Allentown Art Museum; Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961. (1961.44)

Right: Sanford Wurmfeld, *Canaletto Variations, #6, II - 15 + B/2*, 2014. Acrylic on gesso primed cotton, 42 x 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Collection, the curators invited Wurmfeld to create a new work in dialogue with Canaletto's *View of Piazza San Marco, Venice* (1740–46), a painting that depicts the afternoon sunlight illuminating the pink façade of the doge's palace. In response, Wurmfeld painted *Canaletto Variations, #6, II - 15 + B/2*, illustrated opposite and included in *Radiant Energy*.

Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal) was a Venetian artist famous for his *vedute*, precisely rendered topographical views of cities or tourist attractions sold as souvenirs before the advent of picture postcards and color photography. Wurmfeld has called Canaletto “a proto-panoramic painter” and recognizes a correspondence to his own goals in painting. As he wrote in his statement for the Allentown exhibition, “By establishing a constant focus throughout his painting with no single vanishing point, Canaletto asks the viewer to approach his work as they would a primary experience, focusing sequentially from one part of the scene to the other, scanning and fixating over a durational period of viewing... to create many centers of attention throughout the painting.”³ Notably, Wurmfeld likened the artist's topographical views in a 1989 Canaletto retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to a contemporaneous map in the same exhibition, remarking “maps are meant to be scanned and viewed in all their parts with no particular spot of the map intended as a focal point.”⁴ Just as in a topographical map, everything in this view of Venice is rendered with the same clear focus.

Wurmfeld correlates the experience of looking at Canaletto's painted scenes with “gliding down the Grand Canal in a gondola or promenading in the Piazza San Marco.”⁵ The absence of an established focal point challenges the viewer to actively look, which is also crucial to viewing Wurmfeld's work—even though it is fully abstract. Color is the content, but it is enough to captivate viewers and carry them away.

Inspired by the primary color palette (red, yellow, and blue) of the Canaletto, Wurmfeld arranges the hues chromatically on overlapping grids, a compositional structure he has employed since

the mid-1980s. There is a gradation of color as the lines expand and contract horizontally and vertically, causing one hue to transition into another across an expansive field—almost like a moiré pattern. The effect is that of a luminous chromatic veil floating just above the surface of the painting, shimmering like Venetian light.

Here, as with all of the works in *Radiant Energy*, time plays a critical role in our perception of Wurmfeld's hue, value, and saturation choices. With durational viewing, the sensations multiply, creating an energized visual field for the receptive viewer. By altering our distance from the work, we ultimately change the color experience. Surfaces become mutable and ambiguous, as the figure-to-ground relationships shift and reverse. Time spent interacting with these works demonstrates a profound idea: color is a physical phenomenon that happens in real time. I particularly like the fact that Wurmfeld has responded to a *veduta*, or “view painting,” since the English translation can also be read as an imperative statement, “View painting.” This is exactly what Wurmfeld's work insists we do.



GABRIELE EVERTZ

Paul Cézanne famously stated, “light does not exist for the painter,” reminding us that an artist relies solely on pigments to evoke the sensation of light. This idea is central to the work of Gabriele Evertz. Possessing a deep knowledge of art history, she pays special attention to the ways other artists have tackled this issue—often in works that differ greatly from her own. Evertz’s sketchbooks are filled with reproductions of paintings, detailed notes analyzing their compositions and color structures, and her ideas about possible responses to similar problems. These visual and philosophical inquiries into the art of the past sometimes reveal affinities with her own work. Recently, her observations about a specific painting, *The*

Virgin as Intercessor, a 17th-century work by Flemish artist Anthony van Dyck that is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., directly inspired two new works, *WhiteLight* and *Clearing / Lichtung* (both 2017), which are in *Radiant Energy*.

Evertz recognized a kindred spirit in Van Dyck, whom she considers a chromatic painter with an intuitive understanding of

Left: Sir Anthony van Dyck (Flemish, 1599–1641), *The Virgin as Intercessor*, 1628/1629. Oil on canvas, overall: 46 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.88

Right: Gabriele Evertz, *WhiteLight*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.

color interaction. During a studio visit she told me, “I could not get the painting out of my head.”⁶ Her new works do not reinterpret the Van Dyck but offer parallel solutions to the challenge of conveying light with pigment.

The Van Dyck work, painted in 1628–29, depicts the Virgin Mary floating heavenward amid swirling clouds and putti. The brushwork and handling of color suggest the influence of Titian, whose work Van Dyck greatly admired, copied, and even collected. Evertz, who was initially attracted by the luminous light of this painting, analyzed Van Dyck’s use of hue, value, and saturation contrasts, as well as complementary color pairs, recording her observations in a sketchbook.

Brightness emanates from Mary, who is bathed in a shower of golden light from above. The glowing yellow-orange color surrounding the figure and seeping out between her sleeves and bodice seems to detach itself from the canvas and hover in the space between the viewer and the painting. This mode of color appearance, identified in the twentieth century as “film color,”⁷ is a crucial component of Evertz’s work. She also noted Van Dyck’s brilliant use of simultaneous contrast, which occurs most dramatically between the adjacent complementary colors yellow-orange and blue-violet.

Evertz was fascinated by Van Dyck’s orchestration of lights and darks in the painting—tints of blue and orange in the upper half and violet-gray in the lower half—and the way this tonal division effectively frames the figure of the Virgin. She adopts a similar strategy in *WhiteLight*, applying her signature structure of a one-inch grid of vertical stripes and tapering lines. The seventy-two vertical bands in this work feature twelve hues, six metallics, and nine admixtures of achromatic colors (grays and whites) repeated in intervals across the field. Responding to Van Dyck, she places the darks at either end of the painting, surrounding the lights arrayed across the center in a 2:1 ratio of lights to darks. This creates a kind of aperture that makes the gray fall away and allows the light to come forward, appearing even brighter, more expansive, and

more luminous. Evertz describes the intended effect: “In film-color mode, achromatic colors appear to group into luminous white light that seems to expand and come forward into the viewer’s space. Flickering metallic stripes are bundled to convey a further sense of beaming bright rays that are entering from above. The atmosphere is one of intense illumination.”⁸

Van Dyck’s subject matter, while representational, is completely invented. Since no one actually witnessed the depicted event, the real drama occurs in the interaction between the viewer and the work of art. Perhaps this is a conceptual link between Van Dyck and Evertz—the primacy of imagination at the inception of an artwork and the need for a viewer to complete it. Evertz’s written notes on her own work conclude, “Neither symbolic nor mystical, the painting invokes in the perceptive viewer a heightened state of aliveness, perhaps even rapture.”⁹ While Van Dyck’s intended viewer would have understood the power of his symbolic manifestation of the Virgin Mary, Evertz was moved by the work despite its iconography. She probably recognized something rapturous in Van Dyck’s intuitive mastery of color and the sensations it caused in her, knowing instinctively that this was the best part of the story.

Identifying affinities, influences, and parallels drawn from art history can enrich our knowledge and understanding of any artist. And while placing Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld in the context of other artists is an interesting exploration, it is by no means a necessary factor in approaching or appreciating their work. The physical experience of viewing their paintings requires only time, patience, and a receptive eye. Ultimately, they reassure viewers that color is sufficient as content and can be enjoyed intuitively and emotionally.

Perhaps for these three artists the history of art should be seen as a parallel universe in which each moves comfortably among their predecessors yet stakes out a unique position. While many past masters have painted with color, these three masters paint color as itself. It's almost as if they are emancipating color from some of its former constraints, moving it beyond such representational associations as landscape or religion, and allowing it to form its own logic and language. For Evertz, Swain, and Wurmfeld, color and its perception by the human eye is miraculous enough on its own.

Mary Birmingham is Curator at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey.

¹ Conversation with the author, Oct. 5, 2017.

² *Visual Sensations: The Paintings of Robert Swain: 1967–2010*, (New York: Hunter College/Times Square Gallery, 2010), 92. Exhibition catalogue.

³ *Past Present: Conversations Across Time* (Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley, 2015), unpaginated. Exhibition catalogue.

⁴ Sanford Wurmfeld, "Canaletto: Maps and Panoramas." Unpublished lecture, distributed privately.

⁵ *Past Present*, unpaginated.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, artist quotes from conversations with the author, held between July and November 2017.

⁷ See Matthew Deleget, "Color Lexicon," elsewhere in this publication.

⁸ Email correspondence with author, Nov. 1, 2017.

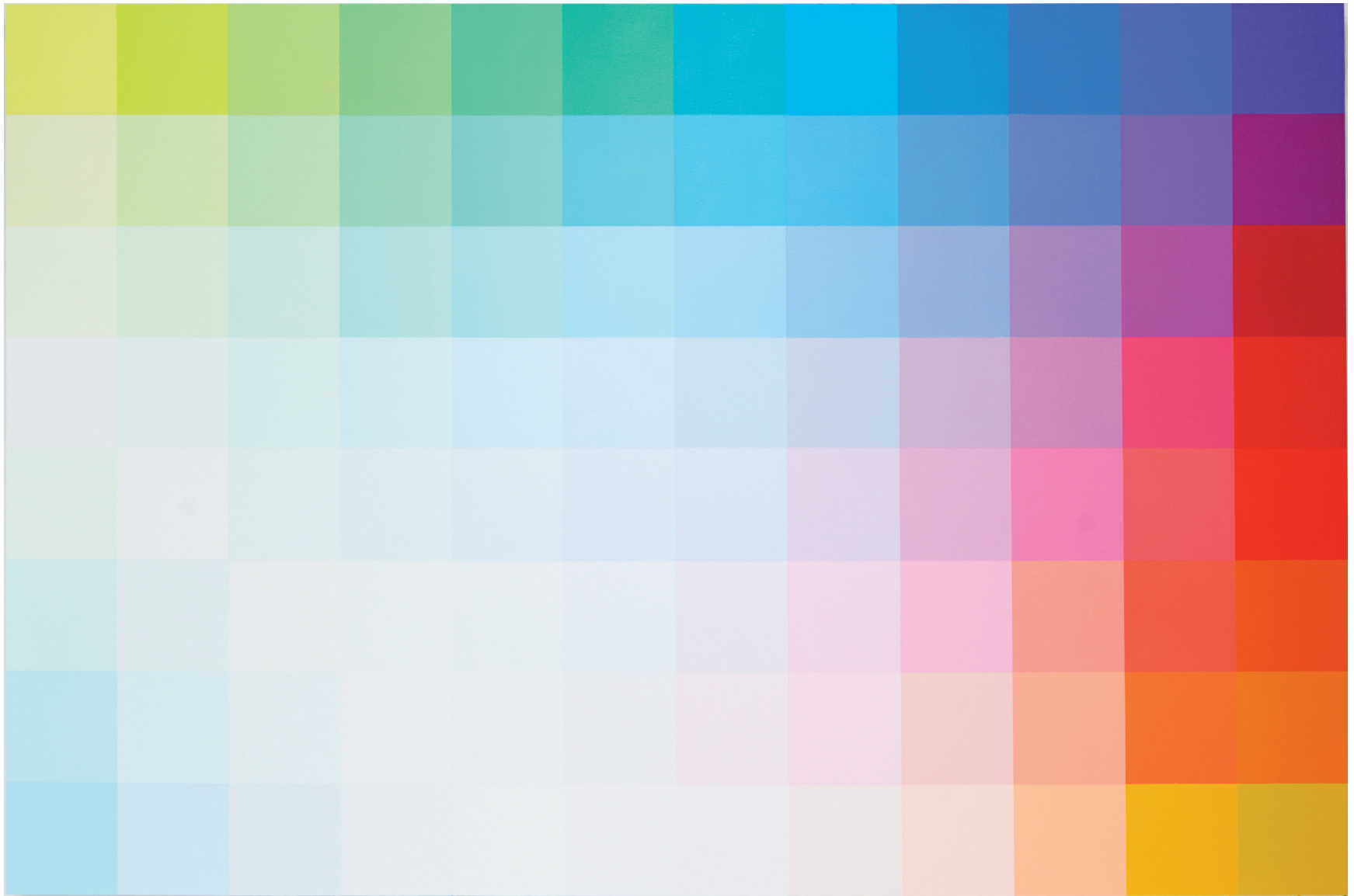
⁹ *Ibid.*



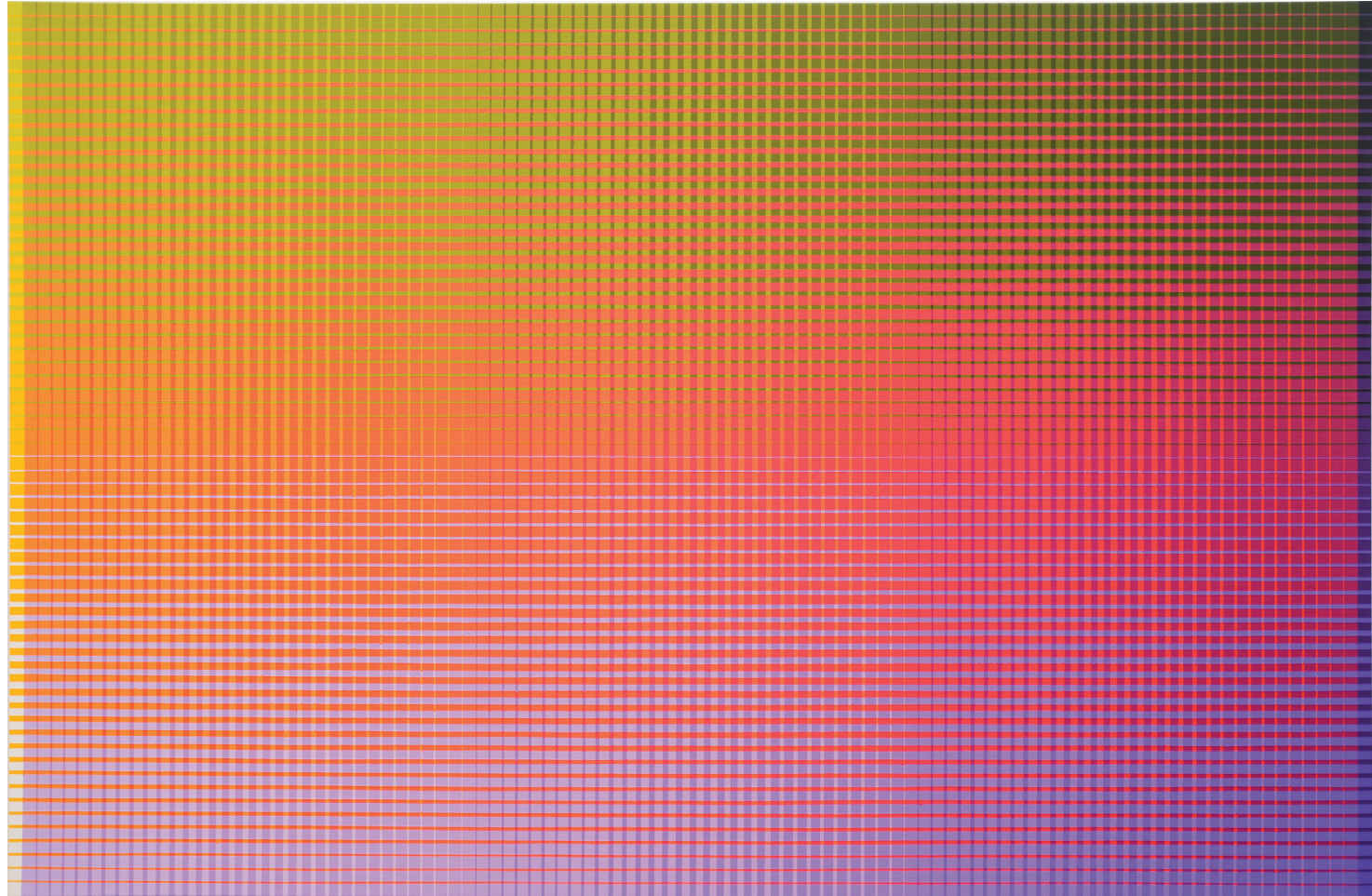
Gabriele Evertz, *WhiteLight*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.



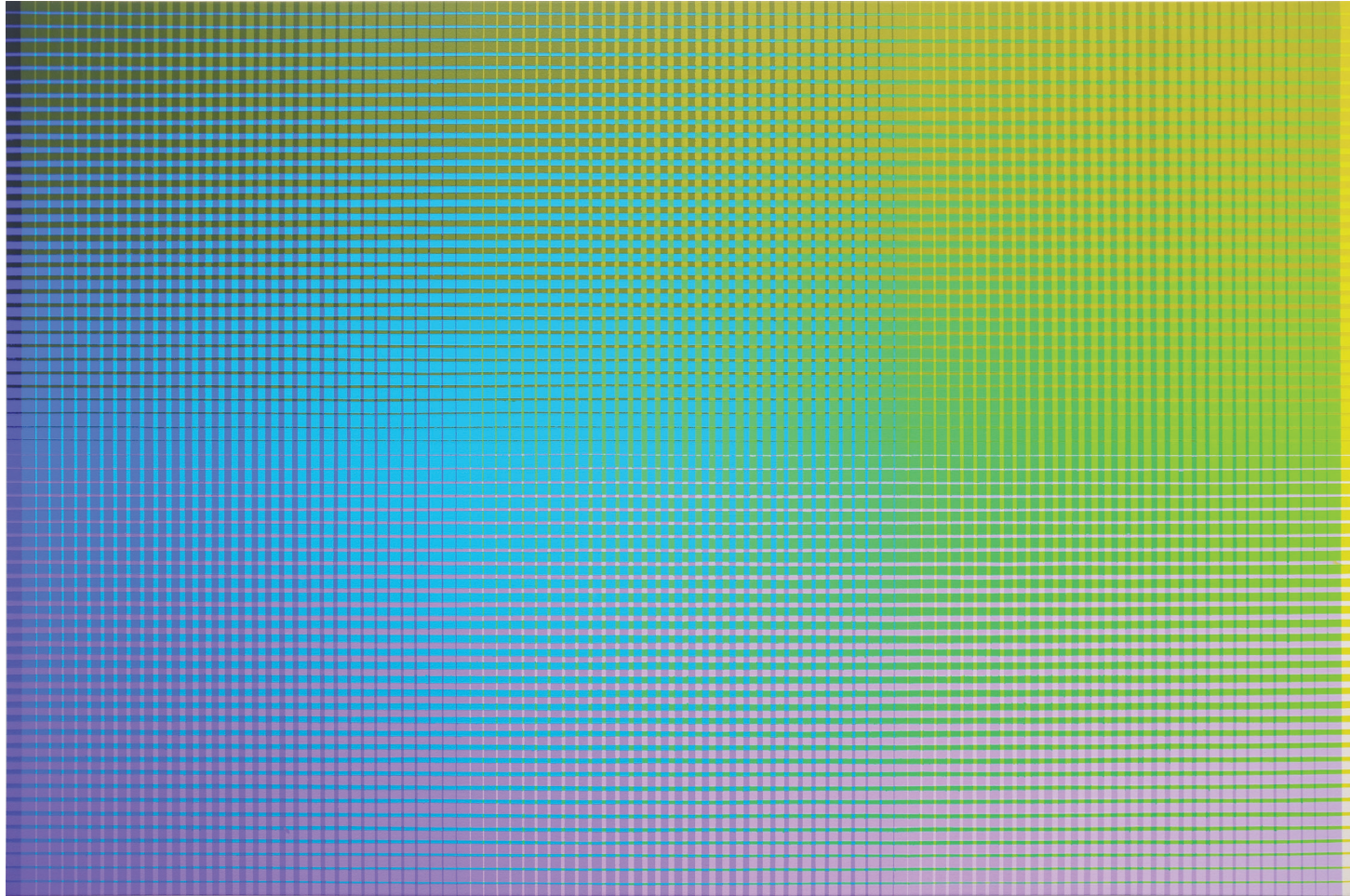
Gabriele Evertz, *Clearing / Lichtung*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.



Robert Swain, *Untitled, 8 x 12 - Green*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 12 ft.



Sanford Wurmfeld, *II - 18 + B:2 (YOY-VRV:Ys + Vt)*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 90 in.



Sanford Wurmfeld, *II - 18 + B:2 (YGY-VBV:Ys + Vt)*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 90 in.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works courtesy of the artist

GABRIELE EVERTZ

Clearing / Lichtung, 2017

Acrylic on canvas

72 x 72 in.

WhiteLight, 2017

Acrylic on canvas

72 x 72 in.

Messenger, 2012

Acrylic on canvas over wood

24 x 24 in.

WG NJ - 1, 2017

Acrylic on paper

21 x 21 in.

WG NJ - 2, 2017

Acrylic on paper

21 x 21 in.

WG NJ - 3, 2017

Acrylic on paper

21 x 21 in.

WG NJ - 4, 2017

Acrylic on paper

21 x 21 in.

WG NJ - 5, 2017

Acrylic on paper

21 x 21 in.

ROBERT SWAIN

Untitled, 8 x 12 – *Green*, 2017

Acrylic on canvas

8 x 12 ft.

Untitled, 3-15-8/17-15-5/29-15-7, 2011

Acrylic on canvas

5 x 5 ft.

Untitled, 3-23-6/13-23-7/27-23-7, 2012

Acrylic on canvas

4 x 4 ft.

Untitled, 3-23-6/13-23-7/27-23-7, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

Untitled, 3-13-9/13-13-5/29-13-8, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

Untitled, 5-19-7/19-19-5, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

Untitled, 7-15-5/15-15-5/29-15-7, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

Untitled, 7-25-6/21-25-6/25-25-6, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

Untitled, 11-25-7/13-25-7/23-25-6, 2011

Archival pigment print

22 x 17 in.

SANFORD WURMFELD

II - 18 + B:2 (YOY-VRV:Ys + Vt), 2016

Acrylic on canvas

59 x 90 in.

II - 18 + B:2 (YGY-VBV:Ys + Vt), 2016

Acrylic on canvas

59 x 90 in.

Canaletto Variations, #6, II - 15 + B/2, 2014

Acrylic on gesso primed cotton

42 x 64 ¼ in.

II - 15 #1 (Dk) (RO-BG), 2010

Acrylic on canvas

42 x 24 in.

II - 15 #1 (Lt) (RO-BG), 2011

Acrylic on canvas

42 x 24 in.

Series F, 1, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 2, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 3, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 4, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 5, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 6, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 7, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 8, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 9, 2010–11

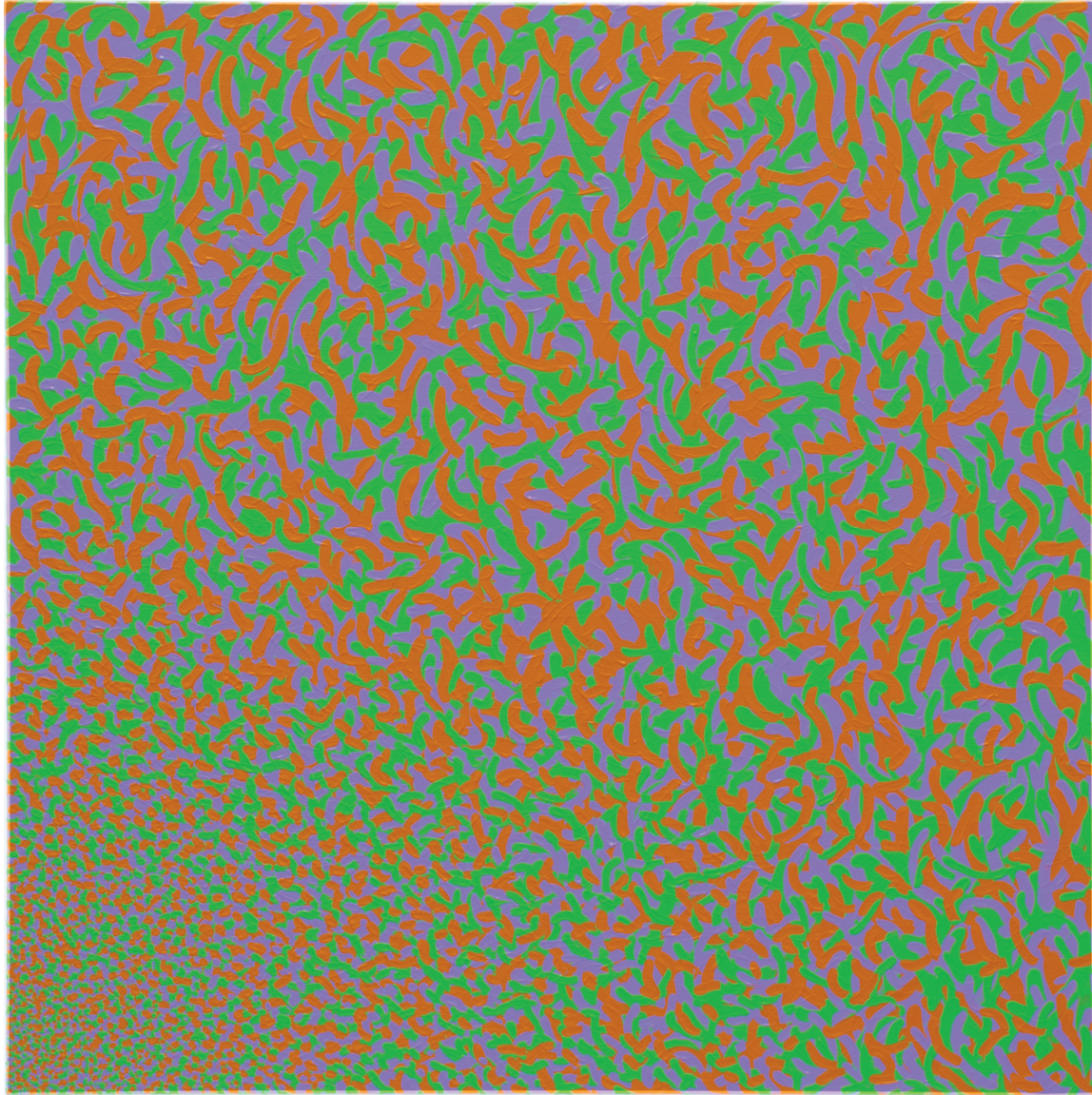
Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.

Series F, 10, 2010–11

Transparent acrylic on watercolor paper

12 x 9 in.



Robert Swain, *Untitled*, 3-23-6/13-23-7/27-23-7, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 4 x 4 ft.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of my favorite stories involves Isaac Newton. Newton fled London in 1665 to escape the Great Plague. He moved to the countryside where a deep interest in light and color led him to undertake a series of experiments on himself. Many of his experiments took him to extremes, like staring at the sun and pressing a needle into his eye. It always seemed to me that Newton was trying to create experiments that measured up to his curiosity, and this compulsion led to breakthroughs that changed the way we understand the world.

There are affinities for me between this story and the exhibition *Radiant Energy*. Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld are creating paintings that reflect deeply personal investigations into color. The experience of looking at these paintings is so powerful that it draws us in on both a sensory level and an intellectual level. The works in *Radiant Energy* give us opportunities to delve into both the beauty and the conceptual side of color, raising questions for us as viewers and making us look at art and the world in new ways.

There are many people who have made this exhibition and catalogue possible. Foremost thanks goes to the artists: Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld. Each of these artists has spent years thinking about and exploring color systems, and their individual pathways open up new perspectives for us.

Thanks to Matthew Deleget, director of Minus Space in Brooklyn, NY, who represents the artists and contributed an essay to this catalogue. The exhibitions at Minus Space create a focused atmosphere where one can see and learn about contemporary reductive abstract art. We are fortunate as a community to have gallerists like Matthew who organize high-quality programs and passionately share a strong aesthetic approach with the public.

Creating an exhibition catalogue is a team endeavor, so we give our thanks to those who worked on this book: our editor, Cathy Lebowitz; our designer, Kristin Troia; and the printer, GHP Media.

And finally, thanks to our staff at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, and especially Kimberly Siino, Exhibitions Manager, and Mary Birmingham, Curator. Kimberly always amazes us with her ability to pull the disparate parts of our exhibition program together with an unflappable demeanor. And, with *Radiant Energy*, Mary once again delights us with a thought-provoking and visually stunning exhibition accompanied by a compelling essay.

Melanie Cohn
Executive Director

