

ART • WEEKEND

The Colors of the Sixties

Spilling Over: Painting in the 1960s at the Whitney Museum expands the common understanding of a pivot point in American art, while basking unapologetically in the pure pleasure of looking.

Thomas Micchelli 4 days ago



Frank Bowling, "Dan Johnson's Surprise" (1969), acrylic on canvas, 115 15/16 × 104 1/8 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art (© 2019 Frank Bowling/Licensing by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, all images courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, unless otherwise noted)

The eighth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, as David Breslin, the Director of the Collection, sees it, is “a place for surprises.”

The elegant spaces of the museum’s top floor, catching the light off the river through its skylights and glass walls, have felt enchanted ever since it opened in 2015 with the Early Modernist “Forms Abstracted” section of the new building’s inaugural exhibition, [*America Is Hard to See*](#).

Breslin and Curatorial Assistant Margaret Kross have continued that magical sensation with the small but impactful [*Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s*](#). With just 18 works, one per artist, it expands the common

understanding of a pivot point in American art, while basking unapologetically in

the pure pleasure of looking.

In a brief conversation during the press preview, Breslin told me that it was his intention to anchor the show with the works of a few household names, most notably Helen Frankenthaler, whose majestic “Orange Mood” (1966) imposes itself on the room, a cauldron of yellow, orange, and gold bordered by ice-cold slices of ultramarine, while surrounding them with paintings that might be less familiar but no less dazzling. Every one of the works in this show is worth contemplating for a good long time.



Morris Louis, “Gamma Delta” (1959–60), magna on canvas, 103 1/8 x 152 1/2 inches (© 2018 Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

For the purposes of the exhibition, the 1960s begin in 1959 and wrap in 1972. Its focus on the use of color during a decade marked by Clement Greenberg’s advocacy of the reflexive flatness of Color Field painting, which ultimately led to the dematerialization of the object, would seem to invite every manner of curatorial crisis, from academicism to superficiality to solipsism, and Breslin did state in his opening remarks from the podium that the show could have easily tumbled into disaster.

As a formal property, color is simultaneously specific, amorphous, and generic — a chameleon that changes its form and objectives from work to work. To choose it as a theme for an exhibition demands that the selection walk a fine line between logic and intuition, while seeking a quantum of forgiveness that it can never approach telling the whole story.

The title of the exhibition, *Spilling Over*, comes from a statement by Bob Thompson, whose entrancing “Triumph of Bacchus” (1964) hangs to the left of Frankenthaler’s “Orange Mood”:

I paint many paintings that tell me slowly that I have something inside of me that is just bursting, twisting, sticking, spilling over to get out. Out into souls and mouths and eyes that have never seen before. The Monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams. (Gylbert Coker, *The World of Bob Thompson*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979.)

This is hardly an expression of a cool '60s aesthetic. In fact, the majority of the works in the show run hot — if not in color temperature, then in commitment.



Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), *New Day*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 89 3/8 × 184 1/4 in. (227 × 468 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art (© 2018 The Kenneth Noland Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

The exhibition launches with Kenneth Noland's large stripe painting, "New Day" (1967), which streaks past you as soon as the elevator doors open. With its glowing oranges, yellows, reds, and blues, it is the appropriate messenger for what is to come.

But, in keeping with the eighth floor's penchant for surprises, the other two works in the entrance lobby are among the coolest in the show. One of them is Carmen Herrera's virtually blank painting in white and green, as its matter-of-fact title, "*Blanco y Verde*" (1959), affirms. Composed of two canvases, one atop the other, the only shape that appears in the painting is a green triangle rising a couple of inches above the seam.

(The triangle's location at the juncture between the two canvases uncannily mirrors the squeezed space created by the two balls in Jasper Johns's similarly structured "Painting with Two Balls," which he made in 1960, the following year. Herrera's green triangle looks like a before-the-fact feminine riposte to Johns's sardonic sendup of painterly machismo.)



Robert Reed, "*Plum Nellie, Sea Stone*" (1972), acrylic and graphite pencil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Hament Corporation (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The Herrera faces "Plum Nellie, Sea Stone" (1972), a purple-and-white painting by Robert Reed, an African-American artist who taught at Yale from 1969 to 2014, the year of his death. The near-monochrome keeps in check the near-anarchy of the painting's style, which darts from expressivity to geometry, stratagem to accident.

Watery, Frankenthaler-esque pools of variegated green provide a base coat, which the artist loads up with waves of blackish violets. These elemental forces churn, spin, spatter,

and crash around an inexplicably blank rectangle floating diagonally across the composition's center — we are looking into a literal void.

Around the outside edges of the roiling purple, coolly executed graphite lines divide the surface between raw canvas and coats of clear acrylic medium. It's a wholly absorbing work, indicative of both the compositional clarity and formal complexity of Reed's art.

Reed is one of seven artists of color in the show, and from a historical standpoint, their works are the most revelatory due to decades of institutional biases and blind spots (though, for the record, there are no artists of Asian heritage, and the gender ratio is six women to 12 men).



Sam Gilliam, "Bow Form Construction" (1968), acrylic and enamel on draped canvas, 119 7/16 × 332 5/16 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Around the corner from the entrance, Sam Gilliam's "Bow Form Construction" (1968) signals the most formerly diverse room of the exhibition, with abstraction, figuration, pictograms, and hybridization bouncing off one another in imaginative curatorial adjacencies.

Hybridization is embodied in two works that couldn't be more different: Gilliam's hulking draped canvas and Alex Katz's "Edwin, Blue Series" (1965). "Bow Form Construction" is stained in blue, green, blush, and maroon, like

a gigantic Veronica's veil, and hung from two mounts on the wall. A fusion of painting and sculpture, it thrusts itself into real space in a gesture that, in the year of Martin Luther King's assassination, bespeaks both grief and power.

Katz's portrait of the poet and critic Edwin Denby is a cutout on composition board attached to a second board painted monochrome blue. Executed with a delightful fluidity that's lost in the artist's trademark style, the portrait's layered dimensions flip back and forth between illusionistic and abstract space. Katz's cutouts — a form he explored widely the '60s — are rarely mounted on a separate panel; here, the bas-relief created by combining a painted cutout with a monochrome field delivers a jolt of teasing ambiguity.

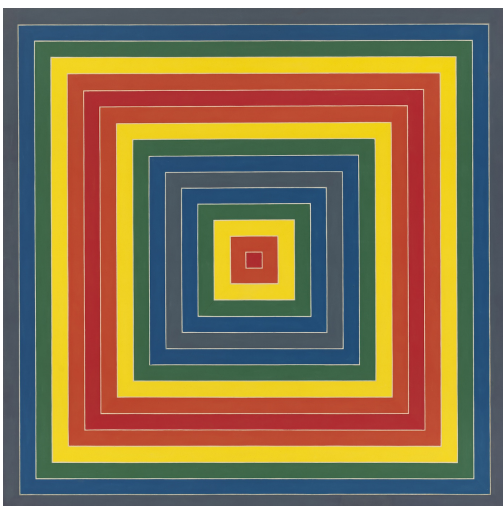
Kay WalkingStick's "April Contemplating May" (1972) hangs adjacent to the Katz; with its solid-green negative shapes, self-referential painting-within-a-painting (the artist's "Pieces of Sky" from 1970), and orange, abstracted nude, the work



Alex Katz, "Edwin, Blue Series" (1965), oil and acrylic on composition board, 18 x 20 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the artist (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

than that.

According to the wall text, Bowling, who was born in Guyana, "made a series of paintings between 1967 and 1971 that combine abstraction with continental shapes in order to explore histories of colonization and the African diaspora" — the formal and political are irreducibly linked. (The title, however, does not refer to a William Walker-style colonizer of Latin America, as you might think, but to a friend and fellow artist whose work was chosen for the Whitney Annual — the precursor to the Biennial — the year the painting was made.)



Frank Stella, "Gran Cairo" (1962), alkyd on canvas, 85 9/16 x 85 9/16 inches (© 2019 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

revels in an invigorating in-between-ness that roams a flickering plane between Pop and Color Field painting — the same territory occupied by Frank Bowling's "Dan Johnson's Surprise" (1969) on the opposite wall.

Bowling's huge painting (115 15/16 x 104 1/8 inches) is covered in mists of sprayed and poured acrylic, through which a map of South America emerges in three iterations across the composition's horizontal midline. You would be tempted to think that the imagery is a response to Jasper Johns's enigmatic map paintings, but the work's purpose goes deeper

Marcia Hafif's "72., March 1965" (1965) hangs on a narrow wall beside the passage between this room and the skylit main gallery. The painting's absolute symmetry comprises a central blank, four-pronged shape reminiscent of a gyroscope or jack, its vertical spine reaching the top and bottom of the canvas, while its horizontal arms fall short of the two sides.

The shapes forming the composition's left and right sides are painted solid orange and green, respectively. The pigment of these two planes, especially the orange, quaver with increasing frequency the longer you look at them. The

rigidity of the symmetrical design is subverted by color alone.

The potency of pigment encountered in Marcia Hafif is carried into the main gallery with Josef Albers's red-and-orange "Homage to the Square: 'Wait'" (1967); Richard Anuszkiewicz's "The Fourth of the Three" (1963), a red, blue and green grid; and Ellsworth Kelly's blue and green lozenges on a red field, "Blue Green Red" (1964). The Kelly is the simplest in layout, but the most optically activated, with the three colors throbbing as rapidly as a racing heart.



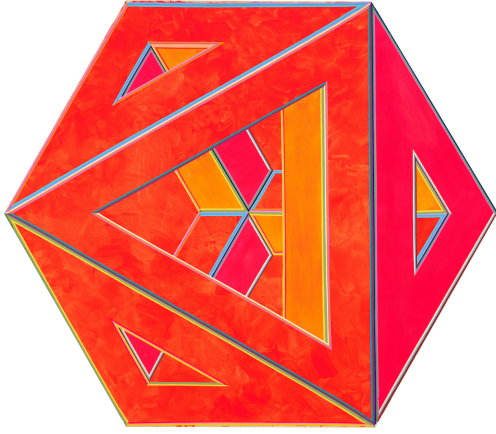
Emma Amos, "Baby" (1966), oil on canvas, 46 1/2 x 51 inches (© Emma Amos, courtesy the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York)

"Gamma Delta" (1959-1960) by Morris Louis and "Gran Cairo" (1962) by Frank Stella, hung side by side, complement each other, with the yawning space between Louis's gullies of poured paint playing off Stella's densely formatted concentric squares. Of all the artists in the exhibition, Stella strikes me as the single odd choice. I think of his work in terms of form and structure, while color feels, if not quite like an afterthought, then more external than intrinsic.

The Frankenthaler, mentioned earlier, faces these works from the other side of the room, with Thompson's "Triumph of Bacchus" on the left and, on the right, Emma Amos's simmering "Baby" (1966), in which a flatly painted young woman in round sunglasses is depicted against an abstracted, hotly colored backdrop. There is also a pair of legs, each painted a different shade of brown, on the upper right. These mysterious forms, together with the yellow, orange, blue, and green shapes surrounding them, could easily be read, as in the WalkingStick, as a painting-within-a-painting.

This wall pulls off the trickiest conceit of the show, which is that, in the right context, color can rule as the sole baseline. With their similar palettes, the three paintings work as a team despite their divergent styles and imagery, and even enlist the Albers on an adjacent wall, whose colors blend enticingly with the Amos, as a fellow traveler.

The remaining two works in the show, Miriam Schapiro's "Jigsaw" (1969) and Alvin Loving's "Septehedron 34" (1970), point to a postmodern future in their break from Clement Greenberg's orthodoxy of reflexive flatness. While geometric on its face, Shapiro's sharply angled planes cannot help but protrude and recede,



Alvin Loving, "Septehedron 34" (1970), acrylic on shaped canvas, 88 5/8 x 102 1/2 inches (image courtesy the Estate of Al Loving and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York)

creating shelves and recesses, while Loving's shaped canvas takes up the challenge of making all seven sides of a heptahedron visible at once.

Radiating in brushy oranges (the evidence of the hand itself a compelling departure in the geometric realm) and fluorescent pink, with crisp edges of electric yellow, green, and blue defining the heptahedron's facets, Loving solves the problem by painting imaginary apertures that create the illusion of space — a *verboden* move in the critical climes of 1970 — revealing the form's interior and the backs of the hidden sides.

Spilling Over runs through the end of August. It's a perfect summer show that you will want to visit again and again. Its abounding freshness clears your eyes and lifts your spirits, so that everything around you, in and out of the museum, looks clear, bright, alive, and new.

Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through August 31. The exhibition is organized by David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection, with Margaret Kross, curatorial assistant.