POST-OP: The Responsive Eye—Fifty Years After

David Richard Gallery
544 South Guadalupe Street, Santa Fe

AS A FIFTY-YEAR-ANNIVERSARY TRIBUTE TO THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART'S

February 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye,* David Richard Gallery presents *POST-OP*, curated by David Eichholtz and Peter Frank. *The Responsive Eye* introduced the Op Art movement through the work of ninety-nine international artists. *POST-OP* investigates how a subset of these artists continues to work with visual perception and perceptual ambiguity. This is the first in a series of four linked exhibitions by Eichholtz and Frank in this anniversary year.

MoMA's original press release for the exhibition characterized the more than one hundred twenty paintings and constructions as works that exist "less as objects to be examined than as generators of perceptual responses in the eye and mind of the viewer." In David Richard Gallery's large, bright space, the works undulate, vibrate, and dart; it's like being surrounded by color-drenched, dancing shapes. The artists use lines, bands, circles, and patterns in white, gray, black, or vivid colors to create movement, illusions, and hidden images—all of which are real to the eye and the brain, but do not exist physically in the actual paintings. In the original exhibition catalogue for *The Responsive Eye*, William C. Seitz, MoMA's Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions, writes, "The eye needs only the slightest clue to link an abstract shape to some past association with actual objects and space."

In *POST-OP*, Karl Benjamin's two works from 1964 and 1990 both present dense, bold colors, the first in large blocks, the second in multicolored geometric patterns that shift into ever-changing prisms. It's a mistake to try to figure out where one prism stops and the next one starts. Just when you think you know where one plane recedes, it jumps forward on you. Richard Anuszkiewicz's *Exact Quantity*, from 1963, is anything but. It would be terrifying to try to ascertain the exact quantity of these lines as they cross different colors and create different sensations. Some push us backward, others tip the painting's two large squares sideways, but they really don't. Up close, they aren't squares at all, merely illusions. Looking more intently, or squinting to try to understand what is really there, is a recipe for motion sickness. And yet we're fascinated to try. After all, didn't the artist have to focus on these bouncing lines for extended periods to create this effect in the first place?

Untitled (June 30) by Ernst Benkert, from 1967, along with Francis Celentano's *Elliptical Kinetic Painting*, from the same year, toss us around in black and white—literally in Celentano's case, as there is a motor involved. Benkert presents squares that might not be, and even though our brains know that this ink-on-paper creation is perfectly flat, and hanging on a perfectly flat wall, the upper left and lower right corners still curl away from us. They just do. Then Celentano loops us around and around with black and white ellipses in order to pull us into a black hole. Surely the ellipses must be a connected spiral, but they turn out to be nine separate white bands alternating with nine black ones. Correction—they don't just pull us into the black hole, they pull us right through the wall. Because the piece is motorized to spin continuously, it also creates the sensation of pushing us out while it sucks us in. A more recent Celentano acrylic in nearly neon colors is equally unnerving, yet gorgeous. *Le Cirque 10*, from 2004, blends graded wiggles of greens, reds, oranges, and probably several other colors, except that you can't look at it long enough to really pick them out because the floor is starting to move. The effect is something like a multicolored, pounding, shimmering waterfall. Eichholtz, who designed the exhibition layout, chose to enhance this effect when he hung *Le Cirque 10* on a wall that receives powerful, natural New Mexico light. Access to the painting is from either side, which causes the ripples to undulate from top to bottom. No, wait, that can't be, it's a flat surface.

John Goodyear illuminates his 1965 work *The Light Source* from behind. Doesn't matter, we still reach out to steady ourselves. There is a yellow-and-black pattern on the surface of a light box. A panel of horizontal acrylic bars hangs in front of it. When the panel is pushed sideways into a pendulum motion, the yellow lines jump to life behind it and even our own movement changes the patterns. Goodyear's *Presence*, from 2013, incorporates wooden dowels and monofilament in a way that is entirely unsteadying. Two of the four vertical bars are painted on the canvas. The other two alternate with them but are suspended in front of the canvas. Our eye is ready to believe that all four are painted flat until we notice the dowels' gentle shadows. The powerful red, white, and blue bands in Francis Hewitt's 1991 *Franklin County* actually feel calming. There is so much going on within each band that our eyes don't fight to dissect it all. Instead, we see an explosion of colors. On a flat surface, it stays that way. And nothing dances. But not to worry, Hewitt's *Grey Illuminated Discs* and *Op Ended*, both from 1964, prance on the wall with fantastic vibrations. Another Hewitt wall-bender is *Illuminated Discs*, also from 1964. Here are circles that look like Japanese lanterns meet Bubble Wrap, as the lower left corner of the painting appears to flap off the wall toward us.

Thomas Downing's ca. 1970 *Fizi* looks simple: three circles—each of a different blue hue—that make the square painting seem narrower on the bottom. And then the circles begin to lose the definition along their curves, their sizes shift, and there go our eyes and minds again, running away from us with their own ideas. In a later acrylic from 1983 called *First Sky*, Downing continues to mess with us. Are the red, feathery shapes the same size? Are the pinks alike? Are the parallel lines truly parallel?

Happily, each artist's contribution from the 1960s and his contrasting later work are *not* presented side by side. Instead, Eichholtz has placed the older works in the gallery's inner core, with the newer pieces around the perimeter, like moving back in time. We can now look forward to parts two through four of the series, with the possibility of a four-series catalogue coming, like a prize, at the conclusion.

—Susan Wider

Francis Hewitt, *Op Ended*, acrylic on canvas on Masonite, 24" x 24", 1964

Julian Stanczak, *Trespass in the Dark*, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 84", 2004