

## The Realization of Perception: White Paintings by Mary Corse

The realization of our perceptions of the world in the forms of space and time is the only aim of our pictorial and plastic art.

—Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, *The Realistic Manifesto*<sup>1</sup>

Since periodizations cannot all be arbitrary, we can notice how events of the early chronology of Mary Corse's life could have projected themselves into the future. Her birth in 1945 coincides with the year of Pollock's first drip paintings made in the same year, and her precocious early work of the mid and late sixties saw the twilight of Abstract Expressionism and the publication of Donald Judd's *Specific Objects*<sup>2</sup> in 1965, an essay that was to signal the evolution of Minimalism as a force in American painting, "even though," as Corse has remarked, "we discovered there really are no specific objects."<sup>3</sup>

This discovery has to do with the most distinctive feature of Corse's work as a dynamic embodiment of perception. The work is such an embodiment in two senses of the term, both as a visible expression of perception, and as a process by which perception becomes tangible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a poster in Moscow in 1920. Reprinted in a translation by Gabo in Read, Herbert *Gabo* London, 1957, and also in the anthology, Harrison and Wood *Art in Theory 1900-1990* Oxford, 1992 p.297.

<sup>2</sup> Judd, Donald "Specific Objects" in Thomas Kellein, ed. *Donald Judd: Early Work 1955-1968* New York, 2002. Originally published in *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965

<sup>3</sup> Mary Corse in conversation with the author, August, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> This dual aspect of perception, the simultaneous experience of what we see on the one hand (the *noetic*) and, on the other, the meaning and other associations we ascribe to what we see (the *noematic*), is the province of Phenomenology, and finds its most famous enunciation in Husserl's account of his experience of seeing a tree in a town square. See Husserl, E., 1963, *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Collier Books. From the German original of 1913, originally titled *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book. Newly translated with the full title by Fred Kersten. Dordrecht and Boston, 1983.

In the presence of Corse's paintings—often to our astonishment—we find that they transform before our eyes as we draw closer or farther away, and especially if we should move across the field of view. Should there be a natural light source, then the paintings also change as the light striking them moves due to a passing cloud, or by the trajectory of the sun. At first, the works might appear to be fixed, undifferentiated, flat, hard-edged, monochromatic—in this case matte white—geometric fields with neither a sign of the artist's hand nor an accidental pattern of surface variation. Then, even with a subtle change in the spectator's viewing position, the paintings suddenly reveal alternating bands that might be reflective, gray, differentiated by brushstrokes, textured, and with what Hans Hofmann called "push-pull" varying depth effects. With any further movement of the spectator or the light source, the paintings continue to reveal innumerable oscillating variations between these two poles of unity and multiplicity.

The technique for making such variation possible—one the artist evolved during years of experimentation with combinations of paint, reflective microspheres, and other materials—is of less concern here than its implications. It is a fact that, from her youth, Corse took an interest in two southern Germans, each of them in his own way interested in space and perception: the physicist, Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976), and Josef Albers (1888-1976), the artist and educator. Heisenberg's name transcended the physics community for his Uncertainty Principle that stated that one cannot know with certainty both the velocity and the position of a particle at any given instant because the act of measuring the one changes the other—the reader may indulge me the simplified paraphrase of a layman. The reason this idea seized the imagination of so many outside the insular world of theoretical physics is that it was natural to consider that the principle might apply equally to the visible world. This view gave rise to a radical idealism that suggested there was no such thing as an objective vision of anything independent of a variable subjective perception.

Albers, who also was no stranger to mathematics, began his *Homage to the Square* series in 1949, and would extend it to hundreds of works also concerned with the matter of how our perception could revise our sense of the object. Although the appearance of each painting remained static, and the concentric squares in all of them had either the same dimensions of their constituent element—or at least the same rigorously consistent proportional relations—even the sizes of the squares appeared to vary from one work to the other because the studied way the artist juxtaposed the colors would change one's perception of the works' internal formal relations.<sup>5</sup>

But it is a fact that in order adequately to see this effect, one must see at least two Albers works of the same size—one reason he made so many.

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<sup>5</sup> Albers, Josef *Interaction of Color* New Haven, 1963.

Despite its revelatory emphasis on perception, this condition is very different from the effect of a Mary Corse painting that typically yields multiple systems of internal tensions that remain independent of the presence of other works.

Corse's manner of compelling a variable perception with the viewing experience also renders her work conceptually distinct from older Minimalist contemporaries such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella (early work), Larry Bell, Brice Marden (early work), John McCracken, Carl Andre, and others. Despite its diversity, "orthodox" Minimalism remained at heart a more radical assertion of the Modernist idea that a work of art could aspire to dispense with any external referent in order to represent only itself. Corse's work rejects such a view not for traditional reasons of art as a representation of an external referent, but because the Modernist autoreferential idea presupposes a fixed *self* to which the artwork exclusively refers.

Instead, Corse's own work posits an experience that entails the interaction of three elements: (1) an artwork contrived by the artist as a field that elicits acts of varying perceptions; (2) the subjective and varying perceptions that the work compels thereby; and (3) external conditions independent of the spectator that further vary the perceptions. In this sense, the work is not autoreferential, but the nexus of a system of conditions in shifting and continually dynamic equilibrium. As such, the work enacts rather than represents our experience of reality.

This enactment that simultaneously expresses and renders tangible the perceptive faculty also evokes several themes having to do with accident. One such theme is an art historical tension between the two tendencies, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. When it comes to the former, it has struck many museum visitors that works as diverse as those by de Kooning and Barnett Newman, for example, exhibit a formal disparity so extreme that it causes doubt as to whether it is useful or legitimate to ascribe such artists to the same group.

In fact, however few formal congruencies Abstract Expressionist painters may have had, their overt formal disparity is incidental in comparison with one unifying conceptual attribute: accident and intention in the application of pigment as a central tension of the work. Pollock *intentionally* would drip thinned paint without touching the tip of the brush to the canvas, enabling the conditions for accident to occur, and thereby relinquishing ultimate control of the result. De Kooning applied paint directly from the tube and scraped with a putty knife so that the result of the stroke was only visible to the artist after the fact. Rothko would soak his canvasses, what Clement

Greenberg called “the dyer’s effect.”<sup>6</sup> Newman applied successive coats of paint without waiting for the undercoat to dry, so that there was no way to predict the final look of the color combination; the outcome of his “zips” depended on an vertical tear of the masking tape and the degree of adhesion of paint to the torn edge of the tape once he removed it. Helen Frankenthaler would “bleed” extremely thinned paint onto unprimed canvas. And Hofmann’s “push-pull” dynamic depth variation presupposes a degree of accident because the results remain in flux and their mutual relations are impossible to fix with precision in advance.

This accidental element “built-in” to Abstract Expressionism was anathema to the Minimalists who demanded absolute control of their works. This desire for control was not only because of the theoretical imperative that a work was fully-constituted to the degree it was contrived by the artist, but also because the accidental component of a drip, a splash, a rip, or a soak, referred to that which was external to the work itself—even if such referents merely were the hand of the artist, or gravity, or humidity, or any other physical condition. This is one reason why Minimalism traditionally demands flatness and geometric rigor, and it is also why, to all intents and purposes, it also excludes the brush stroke or other mark making.

In this sense, it was natural to assume the veracity of the truism that Abstract Expressionist paintings and any works with Minimalist formal features not only were mutually exclusive, but necessarily so.

Mary Corse’s paintings disprove this supposed irreconcilability. Among the various shifting elements that appear in degrees and disappear in accordance with the external lighting and the spectator’s progress, some vertical bands reveal explicit brush strokes that are deliberate, consistent, and unmistakable; other bands exclude them in favor of a undifferentiated Minimalist flatness no matter what the viewing angle.

In this way, the artist’s play of perception also enables the works to subsume and transcend both of the hitherto mutually exclusive categories, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, by using each in opposition. As such, they generate an aesthetic tension by means of an internal dynamic opposition within each work that simultaneously is formal and conceptual. In addition, because there is also a measure of accident intrinsic to the spectator’s changing vision of the work, and to the external conditions that augment such changes, it fair to say that Corse’s paintings also project the Abstract Expressionist tension between accident and intention, from the artist’s execution of a work (a tension it also retains) to the spectator’s experience of

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<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, Clement “Introduction” in *Post-Post Painterly Abstraction*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964.

it. The works also project this same tension from the canvas where traditionally it remained, to the surrounding space.

“Where there is space, there is time,” the artist is fond of saying. As we traverse the field of view (or as the light shifts), the fact that we see the works transformed before our eyes presupposes that such changes occur during a time period we also perceive. On the one hand, this time may correspond with the time it takes for the spectator to cross the field of view. Or this time could correspond with the time elapsed during a gradual shift in an external light source. Or the changes one perceives revealing themselves in the work may be a function of both times, that of the speed of the change in viewing angle and the speed of the change in the light source.

Historically, it has been natural to take for granted that still images, once created, are also temporally “frozen.” There is even a tradition that tends to value the sense in which they capture and reveal the time of their creation no matter how alien to the artist’s intention such an evaluation might be. In Corse’s work, however, the dynamic environment in which the painting occurs is a directly integral component of the viewing experience. The exhibition space thereby becomes a partial aesthetic constitutor of the work, and the placement of multiple works that one may see simultaneously in traversing the space, compounds the dynamic of the changes in the works, and posits further tensions between them.

Since, invariably, the space in which we find the work is dynamic with respect to time, to invest a “still” painting with a temporal dynamic is to address the problem of realism in a more fundamental way than a representational image could aspire to do—a fact that has led Corse to describe herself with more than a trace of irony as “a realist painter.”

As transformations in individual works reveal themselves, there are likewise simultaneous changes in other works in the exhibition space. These give rise to the implicit potential not only of a simultaneity of visual transformations in tension with each other, but also of multiple and simultaneous temporal dynamics in the same field of view.

Such an arrangement posits a more ambitious spatial complex than that of the old Constructivist ideal of space without mass,<sup>7</sup> not only because intrinsically it is more dynamic without resorting to kinetic devices, but because the perceptive faculty and its external variants allow for infinitely more possibilities in fluid relation.

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. Gabo and Pevsner

The result is that Corse's work is neither materially specific like Judd's, nor spatially specific like Andre's or Flavin's, nor temporally specific like Michael Asher's. But since it enlists the complicity of perception for its proper realization, it compels an active specificity in each person who perceives it.

—DREW HAMMOND, 2011