



What is True Abstract Art?

Dr Daniel Shorkend

Shaanan College, Israel

***Corresponding Author:** Dr Daniel Shorkend, Shaanan College, Israel

Abstract: In this essay, I outline the project of some early pioneers of abstract painting in their search for an underlying structural pattern. This is then taken up by Abstract Expressionists and new languages and techniques were invented to explore this new domain or realm. I then argue that most artists who consider themselves abstract painters betray these initial spiritual intentions and go on to define in contradistinction, true abstract art. While I only deal with a few such examples, there are obviously many more, including perhaps the logical move to conceptualism, this still serves to put forward the basic tenant or argument, namely that the abstract is concerned with making visible the invisible.

Keywords: abstract painting; metaphysical; abstract flower painting; non-objective

1. INTRODUCTION

In this brief essay, I will give an outline of the provenance of abstract art. I will argue that at its birth and few a few decades thereafter, abstract painting was a highly metaphysical and spiritual enterprise. This, I will argue, is justified considering some of the chief proponents of abstract art. In this regard, I will analyze the works of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich in the early formative years and then the flourishing abstract expressionists with the likes of the artist' Rothko, Newman and Reinhardt. This will put me in a position of defining the true nature of abstract art and arguing for its deeply esoteric considerations. However, this project has been blighted by countless artists who call themselves abstract artists but really practice a sort of retinal, aesthetic game – a flower abstract painting as I dub it – and this is an anathema to true abstract art. I conclude with the hope of retrieving the spirituality latent in abstract art and as a basis for my own artistic practice.

2. KANDINSKY, MONDRIAN AND MALEVICH

Subsequent to the Impressionistic creative burst with regard to color, light and form, in addition to the post Impressionistic work of the likes of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh in the expressive, symbolic, and structurally new conception concerning pictorial space and technique, we find in Kandinsky a further paradigm shift. Although still somewhat dependent upon nature and some reference to empirical reality, Kandinsky discovered basic structural relationships, free use of color and line and intuitive motifs whose forms could barely be traced to a corresponding reality. What does this mean?

Firstly, it allowed a new emotive depth. The elements of art themselves could carry feelings rather than through the intermediary of a pictorial narrative. Secondly, this subtle use of the elements in themselves created a space where the *idea* of say clarity or speed or a vacuum was transmitted, again without a literal description of things and a faithful rendering thereof. The consequence of such technical changes opened up a new portal where the painting becomes a world unto itself, an entrance into a spiritual dimension if you will.

Although Mondrian and Malevich were more classical and geometric than Kandinsky, the logical extension of the latter's ideas – the move away from "reality" into what Malevich called "the non-objective", meaning no longer a servitude to the world of objects. One could call it almost scientific, like a symbolic notation that underlies individual and particularized phenomena under an abstract, universal code.

In the case of Mondrian, this was achieved by simply playing with the structural harmony of shapes, weight of colors and pictorial unity, with little or no reference to material objects. He played a certain kind of game, where harmony, spatial orientation and the simple limitations of horizontals and verticals described the idea. In other words, the vertical is life, and the horizontal is death, and it is their constant juggling and interface in the transient nature of things, that give way to a certain quantum of energy that is then read as the painting as it appears. He eschews emotion in favor of a sort of latent state of reflexivity where it is the coding and simplification that reduces the ten thousand things to a play of forms, primary colors and the definite black outline that defines spaces and creates a certain order. The fact that his artworks became sources of design thinking and mass culture does not undermine his metaphysical intentions and the fact that the artist made copious notes about the philosophical depth he was pursuing.

Malevich is possibly between the extremes of the apparent rigidity and geometries of Mondrian and the more emotive and sensory appeal of Kandinsky. His black square paintings are a sort of final nadir of all things, either as a vacuum that absorbs all light so that objects disappear or as a symbol of space, that “entity” that embraces all things. On another level such forms have been described as an icon, yet it may be so in negative terms – it is a “not” statement – an icon, an image and yet without reference to a political or religious leader or anything within the ambit of human social relations and the endless symbols that accompany the passing of various orders of control and power relations. In this sense, it is a statement of great importance: the prevalence of an image that negates the image!

In light of this, one may call such a motif - and he experimented with many basic shapes – a spiritual yearning for primitive, underlying forces, like a desire or feeling, without the crutches of traditional systems and orthodox religious ritual. In this sense the geometric figures are universal in scope, appealing to refined abstract thought. All the particularity of things are expunged, and we are left with a form that is rudimentary, a basic structure that has the potential to be anything – or nothing at all. It is the end of simply “picturing”, of using art as a mimetic tool, of endless copies of an ever-changing world. Rather Malevich alludes to the stasis within the change through a form that is at once everything and nothing. It is barely a thing, teetering on the abyss of possibility. In this sense, all history, all narrative disappears and all that remains is an entity whose existence is real only as art.

3. ROTHKO, NEWMAN, REINHARDT

With the foundation of abstract art already firmly established, the stage was set for more complex forms. We see in the work of Rothko, Newman and Reinhardt a refined version wherein each in their unique way added to the lexicon of abstract art. In so doing, the metaphysical possibilities that such new forms inspire solidified the abstract as a world in itself, rather than just a window into the existing empirical world or a narrative account simply pictorially depicted or represented.

Rothko’s rectangular color fields whose feathery edges absorb into the surrounding color are such that the tempo; loudness or softness; dense or airy; hum or hiss; deep or shallow and so on –was a new way to explore sensations and feelings. These works are essentially romantic in spirit, a reverie into the inner world within and on the cusp of form and formlessness. Carefully considered color coordination; compositional unity within his stylistic creation, and large formats in general create an overwhelming experience as the saturated colors do not just “represent” various modalities of the heart, but a profound meditative experience, luring the viewer into the depth, often somberness of these color fields.

Such a language was explored in various possible configurations. These patterns conjure a sense of timelessness, a window into eternity beyond transient and everyday life. Categorized as instances of Abstract Expressionism, Rothko was able to use color, form and scale without the dominant framework of line. This enabled him to explore color in itself with just enough form to create harmony – and mystery.

Newman would do the same in perhaps an even more direct manner with the invention of “Zip” paintings and the tiles of his works reveal an intense concern for the mystical and numinous. Although more classical than Rothko, the spirit is still one that marks the sublime over and above intellect and definition. At the same time, the artist refers to the kabbalistic concept of zimzum, the devolution of light and infinity to be contained and restricted so that finite existence may come to be.

Newman's flat color fields as opposed to Rothko's vibrating and shimmering, painterly effects, draws the eye into an experiential gestalt of color and a sense of the grandiose and sublime, an abstract, visual equivalent to a scientific formulae or principle. It is a sense of the objective tinged with a mystical and religious sentiment. As with Rothko, colors compliment and are in a relationship, yet whereas in the former case colors bend and inter-include, Newman's work – akin to Mondrian – is more “pure” or rather primary, lacking the complexity of mixture and confusion.

Reinhardt perhaps takes Newman's style to its extreme in his intense devotion to “art as art” as he called it. By this he wished to expunge all extraneous elements from art, all reference to externalities, one that is even more rigorous than sought by Mondrian's *de Stijl* or Malevich's suprematism. All that would remain were basic geometries of similar color fields, most notable in black, without visible mark-making. In this he sought a pure object – simply art, a category separate and unrelated to anything else, hence his technique and theoretical underpinnings were purist, absolute and emphatic.

In a sense, it appeared that he had made the “last paintings”, the final possibility that art allowed in order to usher in an abstract tradition without attachment to narrative content. One may surmise that this was like a Buddhist negation of the shifting sands of time, of the ebbing of life, of the tumult of things and their ever-moving sets of relationships. He sought stasis and indifference, a sort of intellectual coldness or aloofness. In this sense, one can experience these works as an offering of liberated consciousness, rather than references to history, myth and religion or traditional, secular subject matter such as the nude, landscape and still life – as Newman quipped that the Abstract Expressionists wished a refuge beyond the outmoded props of history. In this sense, the project of abstract art in such pioneering works is precisely a new frontier, one wholly metaphysical and which sought transcendence of the material universe or at least servitude to empirical reality and the play of the senses in simply describing that “reality”.

4. ABSTRACT FLOWER PAINTING

Notwithstanding such elevated concerns associated with the forerunners of abstract art, the vast majority of abstract painting rendered, including that of the contemporary, is not aligned with such noble goals. In fact, rather sadly, most such artists only consider the aesthetic and technical as ends in themselves, and such so-called artists are largely ignorant of the highly metaphysical meaning behind the elements of their craft: the point; the line; the mark; geometric or organic form; composition; scale; format; texture and so on – using such elements simply to make a pretty picture, yet one devoid of meaning, of content.

Abstract flower painting refers to a lack of consciousness, mere visual music. The aim is simply visual harmony without any regard for content. This is not to say the abstract artist needs to be aware of the reference each mark points to, but there ought to be some kind of consciousness of a symbolic structure, for a language is language precisely because symbols, squiggles or sounds actually say something. Mere marks without such a process is vacuous and simply denigrates the artistic pursuits of those who creatively engineered abstract painting.

Simply playing with the elements of art for their own sake without forming a language – a correspondence to something – is akin to putting letters together to form a garbled message. It lacks intellect, awareness, and concept. Granted, play and aesthetics are key components to all art, it still behooves the artist to use such elements in meaningful structures and I would maintain the true artist is able to articulate – even if not immediately – the intellectual content of such a process. Yet such flower painters cannot do so in which case they undermine art as a language and simply are involved in surfaces and superficiality. Such so-called artists are not conscious of the history and theory of art. Consider the scientific quest for knowledge where scientists build on previous knowledge and since in my estimation art too is a kind of knowledge, a lack of cognizance of such theory, history and practice and a mere toying with different techniques to make pretty pictures would be tantamount to a chemist putting together elements just because he or she liked the combination of colors and thus without understanding the actual chemistry and without any goal or prediction as to the outcome and even long-term possible consequences.

Art is research and aesthetic play does not entail a disregard for content. Those artists who consider themselves abstract artists and yet have no idea that a point or a line are charged with ideas, fail to do proper research. A point is infinity both an infinitely large and an infinitely small; it is the potential of

possibility, whereas a line, a minimum of two points, is the development of this point into the realm of the two dimensional – this may be associated with “understanding” conceptually, the drawing out of the infinite potential of the point within the realm of the knowable, conscious grasp or comprehension. Colors carry symbolic meaning and the way such points, lines and colors are applied with certain speed, in certain relationships, perhaps textured or watery and other such elements of art likewise refer to primitive concepts concerning creation itself. They are not simply devices to make a nice composition of a painting that matches the furniture. It is simply abhorrent that the vast majority of so-called abstract painters are metaphysically and spiritually illiterate, childishly entering the hallowed domain of abstraction simply as an exercise in technique.

5. TRUE ABSTRACT PAINTING

The critical point is that true abstract painting, that is, one with metaphysical or spiritual import, is such that technique develops out of necessity, as a consequence of speculative thought or intuition and not as an end in itself. In this sense, such art is true because it divines a new language, a new technique as a process that begins with deep pondering. In the case of abstract flower painting the content is the technique and usually one already discovered as it were, and not borne out of necessity or as a result of speculation and insight.

In the case of the aforementioned artists, they are regarded as masters precisely because their metaphysical leanings necessitated a new language, technique or method. Technique as a consequence of a journey, rather than a goal in itself. Once established, it may be copied and used by other artists but then it has lost its luster and meaning. Hence, we elevate originality in art, while the copy, however well executed does not carry such value.

One can draw from say poetry where a great poem expresses profound ideas through language, a language that flows from the meaning itself and is not simply excellence in technique and style for its own sake. This is what clearly separates the master from the hobbyist, however adept at correct grammar and syntax such a hobbyist may be. Craft bends to art and where there is only craft, it is not art.

In my own practice, my style and technique are an outcome of emotions, intuitions, and ideas and not simply a skill, a performance act. It is not about performance, but intimacy and I take the examples of these forerunners of abstract art and the Abstract Expressionists in particular as mentors for my approach, both in terms of content and method. At the same time, I think I have also developed my own unique abstract language and an attentiveness to line, color, and form as elements in themselves that may do the impossible: represent the unrepresentable, that is to say, allude to notions of infinity. At the same time, I do sometimes use imagery that are symbolic and even overtly pictorial such as faces, figures and references to landscape, so I may not be purely abstract which has already been exhausted over the last century.

6. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I briefly argue for the metaphysical and spiritual basis of abstract art. I do this through an analysis of key artists both in the inception and later developments of abstract art. It was found that indeed such artists evoke a new language born of esoteric concepts that necessitated and pioneered such originality. This is in contradistinction to the abstract flower painting whose work has little depth however refined the technique is – and in most cases it is simply a copy of a previous method or style. In that case, it lacks artistic excellence.

My hope is that if abstract art is to continue it does so on the basis of a tradition which is fundamentally metaphysical and spiritual. In this sense, abstract – often considered so named as a reference to that which is simply incomprehensible – once more becomes a language of the realm of the esoteric, yet grasped and comprehended via the elements of art and associated meanings, like Plato’s geometries; sacred geometries; symbology; a sensitivity to the elements of art as vehicles for emotive meaning through the way such elements are expressed; and most importantly as an

What is True Abstract Art?

intellectual terrain much as the abstract is the ability to categorize and refine sensual reality in discrete units, to mathematically symbolize through logical operations. Visually, the abstract is difficult to decode and hence Pop Art castigated it, and it has lost currency subsequent to that. In my own practice I try to retrieve such “lost meaning” and it may be that the abstract will have to work in symbiosis with the more representational in order to get at meaning-making in a more robust and palatable or quantifiable manner.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY



Dr Daniel Shorkend, is a practicing artist, academic and researcher. He has several books published, both fiction and non-fiction, continues to publish in academic journals and considers himself a teacher, regardless of the level. He resides in Haifa, Israel and hopes to expose many to the beauty and depth of art.

Citation: *Dr Daniel Shorkend. "What is True Abstract Art?" International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE), vol 10, no. 8, 2023, pp. 7-11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1008002>.*

Copyright: © 2023 Authors. *This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.*