

*A Difference in Tone: Two Investigations of Color*

Over the course of the 1950s numerous artists working in different parts of the world arrived, both independently and collectively, at ways of activating perception. This global aesthetic orientation paralleled a period of unprecedented research into optics and the physiognomy of vision, accompanied by popular interest fed by the media. Carlos Cruz-Diez and Julian Stanczak are two such artists, Cruz-Diez based in Caracas and Paris, and Stanczak in the United States. Both artists sought, in their particular and individual ways, to materialize and actualize color.

Cruz-Diez was inspired by his personal research, which led him to understand color along almost scientific lines. As he put it, “I...made contact with the world of physics, chemistry, the physiology of vision and optics. I searched for what philosophers and humanists had thought about the phenomenon of color perception.”<sup>1</sup> This provoked him to develop novel formats that dynamized the picture plane so as to present hue disassociated from form. Coming from a South American context tied to the history of European modernism, which was reinforced by his move to Paris in 1960, Cruz-Diez’s experiential environmental address extended from the optical effects inherent in that tradition of geometric abstraction. Stanczak was also drawn to the legacies of European modernism, but held on to the time-tested possibilities of paint on canvas. He found inspiration in his observation of nature, and in episodes of art history, like Impressionism (which also inspired Cruz-Diez), where artists developed new ways of understanding how we see the world around us. Stanczak wants to ground us in the world by making us revisit how we see and examine it anew.

In reviewing the epochal *Responsive Eye* exhibition at MoMA, which included works by both Cruz-Diez and Stanczak, the critic Sidney Tillim identified a distinction between European and American modes of Op Art. The European mode deployed geometric patterns inherited from the post-Cubist tradition as an armature for intense optical experiences. Tillim isolates these experiences as largely consisting of, “afterimages of reticulated surfaces, often exploiting the ‘popping’ effects of juxtaposed, intensely contrasting hues [typically black and white], and *moiré* patterns.”<sup>2</sup> We can see aspects of this in Cruz-Diez’s use of high contrast, as in a work like *Induction Chromatique* (1973), such that forms oscillate and dance as we move around the surface of one of his works. Meanwhile, American-Type Op, according to Tillim, “is conscious of a field which expands rather than contracts...traditional dark-and-light contrasts have been exchanged for the contrast of hues which are usually of equal value and intensity. Thus the entire planimetric field becomes a chiaroscuro-less ‘positive’ form, ‘bulked space’ as it were, rather than space that has been carved into traditional, structured figure-ground relationships as it is in European-type optical paintings.”<sup>3</sup> This accords with Stanczak’s more naturalistic understanding of color, evident in a work like *Shimmer* (1978), though in some works he has elements of the contrast favored in so-called European-Type Op, as in the electric *Assemble* (1973-74).

Significantly, both Cruz-Diez and Stanczak understood themselves not in relation to Op art, which was a journalistic turn of phrase, but rather as being part of the broader tradition of

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1. Carlos Cruz-Diez, “My Reflections on Color,” 2006. Unpublished text.

2. Sidney Tillim, “Optical Art: Pending or Ending?,” *Arts Magazine* 39:4 (January 1965): 19.

3. Tillim, “Optical Art: Pending or Ending?,” 19, 21.

perceptual art, which was shared by other artists, such as Josef Albers, who was Stanczak's teacher and mentor at Yale, and who had pioneered modalities of hard edge geometry that activate perception. As Stanczak characterized the distinction: "I never indulge in visual tricks! If I want illusions and visual tricks, they are readily available in everything I look at."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to identify what he is after as "peace and repose, not visual action," which he achieves through "the music and poetry of colors." Rather than shouting at the viewer or strong-arming them into having an experience, Stanczak articulates this as "a secret whisper." Stanczak shapes and modulates such "whispers" through the measures and divisions of his canvas, which Stanczak describes as operating as "containers—particular sizes, beats, and amounts that facilitate the visual activity." In this way, what can seem at first to be cold or programmatic we discover is in fact the result of Stanczak's intuitive tuning of form and color, which he analogizes to how a composer works with sound or a poet with language.

Stanczak extends this to understanding his painting as operating in time, like music and poetry, a durational conception of pictorial experience that Cruz-Diez shares. The Venezuelan artist similarly arrived at a conception of the artwork's surface as partitioned. He discovered that he had to fragment the picture plane by introducing vertical strips, across which color and form could change. These were U-shaped aluminum sections printed with colored lines or three to five strips of cardboard, extruded PVC, or polystyrene, stuck together and arranged between two filters. Cruz-Diez called this format the "Chromatic Event Module," which evokes Stanczak's discussion of "containers" in his paintings.

Cruz-Diez stated of his innovation that it "allowed me to create a material demonstration [that] color is constantly creating itself, it is happening in time."<sup>5</sup> This happens, for example, in Cruz-Diez's *Psychromie* 1004, where the color palette shifts between yellow and green as one passes in front of the work. Both colors are always present to one degree, but the emphasis shifts from one to the other being dominant. The blending and merging of these hues is done intuitively, such that the change of color occurs, as is true of perception, imperfectly and is more like a floating haze of pigment that oscillates and flows, than a snapping back and forth from one extreme to another, like with a lenticular print. Meanwhile, in Stanczak's work we can understand the "containers" he references to be, at the most elemental level, the grids of circle, square, and stripe forms he builds the majority of his works out of, as Cruz-Diez also does with vertical lines.

Stanczak uses these building blocks to establish larger geometric forms, such as the stacked diamonds of *Procession in Pale Light* (1987), the inset squares of *Interaction* (1964), or the glowing bands of *Intercession* (1984). While, unlike Cruz-Diez's extrusions, these units sit flat on the picture plane, they nonetheless change as one spends time looking at them, pulsing, shimmering, and sliding in our vision like the swaying of grass in a field or the misting of rain on a warm summer day. Individual paintings thus serve to calibrate the viewer's vision in a way that transfers the artist's experience of phenomena in nature into the abstraction of paint on canvas. This necessitates that Stanczak be involved in every aspect of the work, from the mixing of the paint, to the stretching of the canvas, to the application of the paint. The temporal aspect of the experience of color is what links Cruz-Diez and Stanczak. The duration that occurs with movement in space around the surface of a Cruz-Diez work is paralleled in the

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<sup>4</sup>. All quotations by Stanczak from "Julian Stanczak in the Moment: An Interview with Dave Hickey," *Julian Stanczak* (New York: Danese, 2008), not paginated.

<sup>5</sup>. Cruz-Diez, *Psychromie Process*, MFAH catalog.

time necessary to sit in front of a Stanczak and have it reveal itself to us, as nature does the longer we spend time with it.

- Alex Bacon