

POWER GEOMETRY

painting & digital art from the
Thoma Foundation collection

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This thematic exhibition begins with the fact that geometric shapes have visual power, but it does not end there. The phrase Power Geometry, adapted from globalism studies, is based on the premise that artists have the power to maneuver cultural narratives into visual form. Geometric abstraction, as a picture-making strategy, is often imbued with histories of social rescue and resistance, under the cover of symbolic shapes and colors. This exhibition serves to illuminate the embedded social, political, cultural and historical narratives that drive abstract picture structures.

Power Geometry draws from the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation's collection of mid-century abstract painting and contemporary digital art. The foundation's holdings, diverse and international in scope, provide an opportunity to rethink traditional themes in art.

Some of the social histories ingrained in the abstract artworks include Frank Stella's conceptual appropriation of a destroyed Polish synagogue into his monumental shaped canvas for the *Polish Village* series; John McLaughlin's inspiration from Zen Buddhism to create minimalist visual statements; and Judy Chicago's feminist borrowing of a historically male-dominated craft, autobody spraypaint, in order to shift gender dynamics in the art world. These and other examples highlight the ways that artists advocate for social awareness through their chosen media.

-Jason Foumberg, Thoma Foundation curator

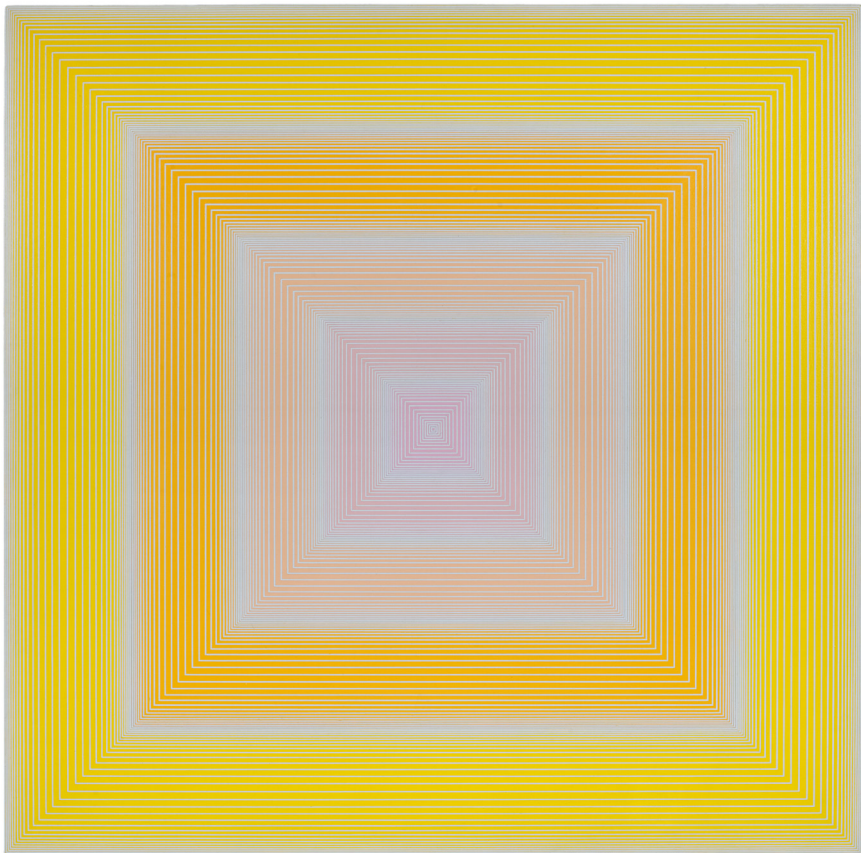
Exhibition runs Fall 2015 through Summer 2016.



© Sabrina Gschwandtner, Photo: Tom Powel

Sabrina Gschwandtner (American, born 1977)
Expanding/Receding Squares, 2014
16mm polyester film and polyester thread on lightbox
32 x 31 7/8 inches

This “film quilt” on a lightbox is comprised of 16mm filmstrips sewn into a pattern evoking a quilt motif. The artist received the films from an archive that was disposing of its holdings, so she preserved the outdated technology in a similar way that quilters rescue scraps of fabric. The film scenes are from craft documentaries from the 1950s through the 1980s, including *Arts and Crafts in America*, *Hearts and Hands: 19th Century Women and their Quilts*, and *Hopi: Songs of the Fourth World*. Gschwandtner’s *Expanding/Receding Squares* was created in response to the Thoma collection’s vast holdings of geometric, hard-edge painting, especially the work of Richard Anuszkiewicz.



© Richard Anuszkiewicz, Photo: Michael Tropea

Richard Anuszkiewicz (American, born 1930)

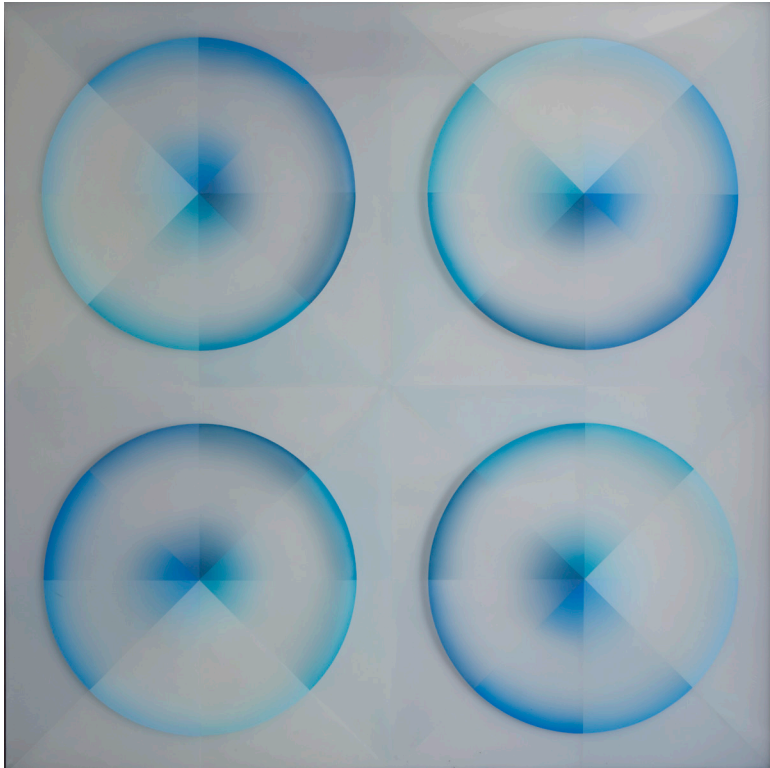
Soft Yellow, 1972

Acrylic on canvas

48 1/2 x 48 inches

Richard Anuszkiewicz is the father of the Op art movement of the 1960s and 70s in the United States. The term Op, short for Optical, was coined by *Time* magazine in response to William C. Seitz's 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art, which first contextualized the hard-edge painting movement. After studying under Josef Albers at Yale, Anuszkiewicz was named "The New Wizard of Op" by *Life* magazine.

Anuszkiewicz protested the Op label, despite his prominent place in the movement, preferring instead to view his style more simply as one preoccupied with line, space and most importantly, color. "I'm interested in making something romantic out of a very, very mechanistic geometry," he said. "Geometry and color represent to me an idealized, classical place that's very clear and very pure."



© Judy Chicago, Photo: Michael Tropea

Judy Chicago (American, born 1939)
Pasadena Lifesavers, Blue Series #1, 1969–1970
Sprayed acrylic lacquer on acrylic
60 x 60 x 2 inches

In the decade prior to her iconic Feminist installation *The Dinner Party* (1974) for which she is best known, Judy Chicago made minimalist, geometric objects. She adapted an unusual technique for the *Pasadena Lifesavers* series—autobody airbrushing. Chicago enrolled in autobody school to learn that historically masculine skill in order to create her paintings that explore color for its sensuous qualities, thereby pursuing a new language of feminine abstraction. The circles “turn, dissolve, open, close, vibrate, gesture, wiggle,” she describes, and they suggest abstracted aspects of women’s anatomy.



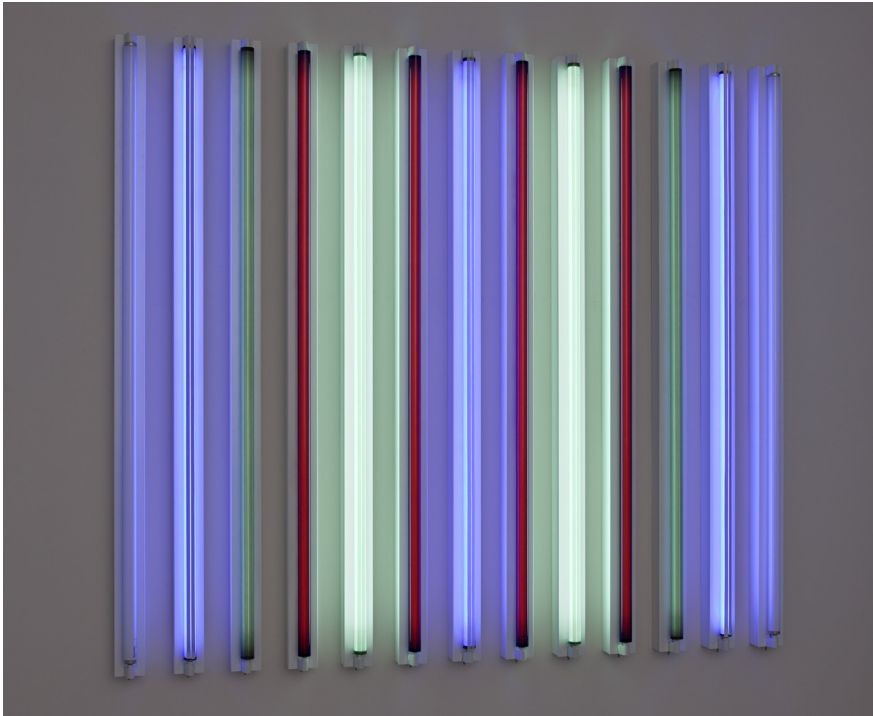
Frank Stella (American, born 1936)

Jabłonów I, 1971

Acrylic and felt on shaped canvas

95 1/2 x 114 inches

With creative woodworking skills, Stella constructed *Jabłonów* for his *Polish Village* series. Shaped-canvas introduced an extra dimension into his hard-edged work, and he collaged fabric as readymade color, leaving its edges rough to emulate the brushy lines of previous stripe paintings. The series includes 130 canvases, each referencing a centuries-old wood synagogue in Poland destroyed by the Nazis. For this reason the *Polish Village* series has been interpreted as a memorial artwork. "There's a sense of romance and strength in those structures," said the artist, who seems to have been equally inspired by the synagogue's carpentry technique, as detailed in the book *Wooden Synagogues*.



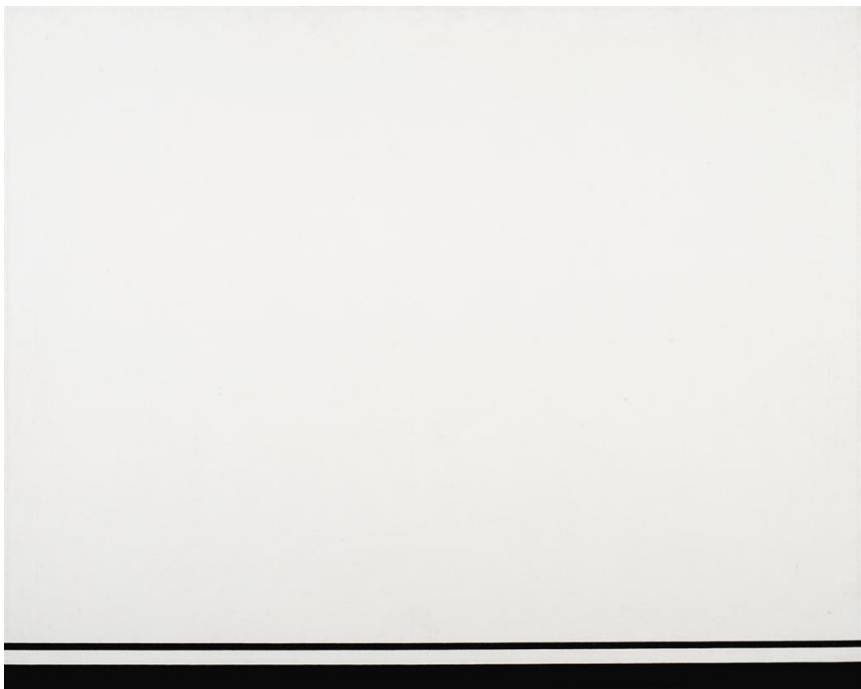
Robert Irwin (American, born 1928)

Lucky You, 2011

Light, shadow and reflection

72 x 81 1/2 x 5 inches

Light and Space artist Robert Irwin is more interested in creating atmospheres than images. A former Abstract Expressionist painter, he began incorporating fluorescent tubes into his installations in 1970. Here, the 13 evenly spaced tubes emit six different colors, with four on/off, user-controlled configurations. The colored filters are named after flora, including jade, violet, orange and avocado, abstracting the artist's native San Diego terrain into a light experience. Irwin's color combinations encourage viewers to see a visual phenomenon rather than an object, evidenced by the artist's preferred medium description: light, shadow and reflection. For Irwin, each viewer's unique perception of *Lucky You* is a truth fundamental to the artwork's meaning.



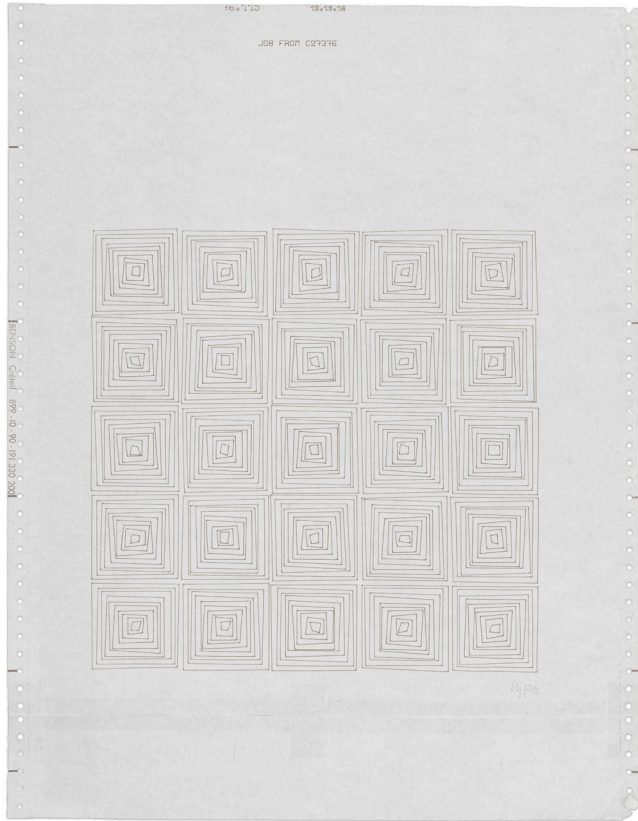
John McLaughlin (American, 1898-1976)

#8, 1966

Oil on canvas

48 x 60 inches

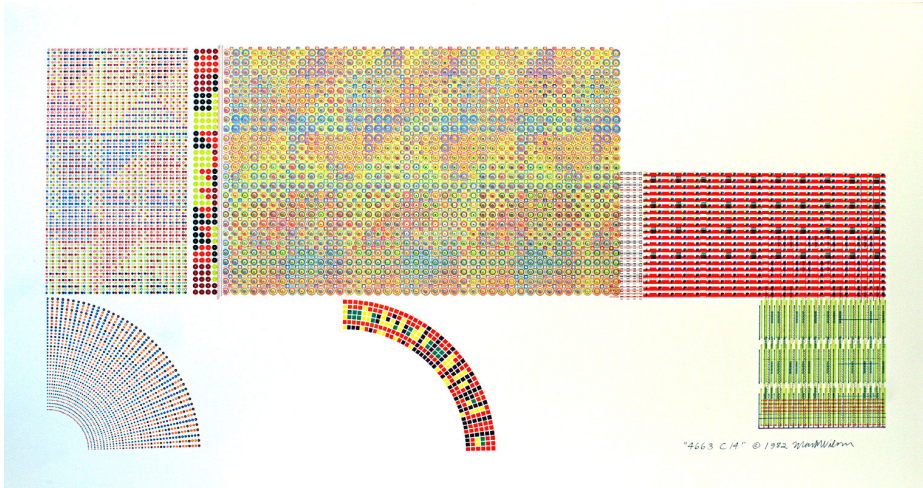
California hard-edge painter John McLaughlin's approach was developed in tandem with his career as a dealer of Japanese prints and paintings. He did not attend art school but instead cultivated his minimalist abstract paintings through connoisseurship of Japanese aesthetics and philosophies such as Zen Buddhism. The faith emphasizes clarity, discipline and mind-games called *koans* meant to shake loose the trappings of rational thinking. McLaughlin's work emerged in response, and as an antidote, to the frenzied canvases of the Abstract Expressionists, offering a cool reprieve from their painted scenes of chaos. "My greatest emphasis is on simplicity," said the artist. "This quality does not necessarily indicate a lack of content."



Vera Molnar (French, born 1924)
Selections from *Transformations*, 1976
Ink on paper

In 1968 Vera Molnar began using a computer to create artwork, but she did not employ algorithms or randomized data like the other innovators of her time, nor did she rely solely on punch cards and invisible code. Instead, she was one of the first artists to modify her artwork onscreen, in real time, similar to contemporary digital practices. For the 21 drawings in the *Transformations* series, Molar modified shapes within the program and tested them onscreen, before sending the final drawings to the plotter to be recorded. In this way Molnar acted like a painter and often referred to herself as such.

She developed a customized computer program she called "Molnart" with her husband François Molnar, an artist and scientist, from 1974 to 1976, for the purpose of generating computer drawings. Each drawing is stamped with the number of hours, minutes and seconds of its creation. "In spite of their advantages," said Molnar, "computers, no more than other simpler tools, do not guarantee that a work of art of good quality will result, for it is an artist's skill that is the decisive factor."



Mark Wilson, 4633 C.214, 19 3/4 x 37 3/4 inches. Ink on paper. © Mark Wilson, Photo: Michael Tropea.

The Algorists

Computer Art Pioneers

A group of artists who code their own software to produce computer-assisted artwork have termed themselves The Algorists. When new computer technology became available in the 1960s, these artists instantly took notice, and they began writing custom code to compose computerized drawings. Finally, in 1995, they produced an Algorist manifesto to identify their artistic community.

An algorithm is a set of mathematical instructions—multiplication and division, for instance—that can be carried out by a computer, especially when they are complex beyond human capability. Verostko calls this a “recipe” for creating art. Although algorithmic procedures have been used creatively for centuries, from basket and textile weaving to Islamic mosaics and music notation, computer hardware provided tools and techniques more precise than traditional art methods.

The plotter pen, attached to a computer’s drawing arm, is a favored Algorist tool. (Originally, engineers, astronomers and architects used plotter pens for drafting.) The plotter pen can make an intricate drawing, although errors or glitches sometimes occur. The plotter tool was often used to create geometric abstractions more precise than would be possible by the human hand alone.



© Jason Salavon

Jason Salavon (American, born 1970)

Everything All at Once (Part III), 2005

Live television broadcast, real-time computer program, audio, projector and monitor

Everything All at Once uses custom software to convert a live television feed into an animated geometric abstraction. The computer code averages the entire content of the TV screen into a single color in what the artist calls a “relentless sample rate” of 30 frames per second. The radiating concentric circle pattern develops in real time, and the TV is programmed to change its channels every few seconds. Salavon likens the circular abstraction to the hypnotizing effects of TV and channel surfing. In 2014, he was the first artist-in-residence at Microsoft Corporation.



© Marina Zurkow, Courtesy of bitforms gallery

Marina Zurkow (American, born 1962)
Mesocosm (Wink, TX), 2012
Real-time computer program and audio on monitor

This digital animation imagines a dystopian ecosystem emerging around a real sinkhole on an oilfield in Wink, Texas. The land collapsed in 2002 into a 900-foot—and growing—hole, likely caused by the nearby excavation of natural resources. The scene develops in real time, determined by the seasons and corresponding animal migrations, as well as from randomized software inputs. The artist satirically envisions the landscape as picturesque parkland, with a picnic table and an array of birds, insects, scavenging dogs, antelope and people in Hazmat suits. Oil refineries churn smoke in the background. As a generative artwork, the scene never repeats.



© John Gerrard, Courtesy of Simon Preston Gallery

John Gerrard (Irish, born 1974)

Dust Storm (Manter, Kansas), 2008

Real-time 3D computer program on wall-mounted plasma screen
40 3/4 x 34 x 9 1/4 inches

Dust Storm (Manter, Kansas) depicts a virtual scene built on a 3D video gaming platform with a gigantic dust storm looming on the landscape's horizon, developing in real-time. A custom algorithm advances the threatening dust cloud pixel-by-pixel, in tandem with the real time of day from Manter, Kansas, a tiny Midwestern farming town affected by the 1930s Dust Bowl. The ensuing environmental and economic devastation was due, in part, to the advent of fossil-fuel powered farm equipment and overly aggressive industrial farming practices. Gerrard's dust cloud was rendered from composite photographs of explosions in the Middle East during modern wars, thus connecting the historic Dust Bowl and the Great Depression with the current problems of over-dependence on fossil fuels.



© Siebren Versteeg, Courtesy of bitforms gallery

Siebren Versteeg (American, born 1971)

Daily Times (Performer), 2012

Real-time computer program and internet on monitor
63 1/2 x 37 1/4 x 4 inches

Each morning, the artwork automatically downloads the front page of the *New York Times* which becomes the canvas for a digital painting. Custom software is programmed to randomly generate digital brushstrokes atop the day's headlines. At the day's end, the abstract painting is discarded, much like a daily newspaper. The sequence is the artist's response to the 24-hour news cycle.

About the Thoma Foundation:

The Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation recognizes the power of the arts to challenge and shift perceptions, spark creativity and connect people across cultures. We lend and exhibit artworks from our collection and support innovative individuals and pivotal initiatives in the arts.

For more information:
www.thomafoundation.org