

Weightless Color, Floating Free

Roberta Smith

Starting in the late 1950s the great American art critic Clement Greenberg only had eyes for Color Field painting. This was the lighter-than-air abstract style, with its emphasis on stain painting and visual gorgeousness introduced by Helen Frankenthaler followed by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski.

With the insistent support of Greenberg and his acolytes, Color Field soared as the next big, historically inevitable thing after Jackson Pollock. Then over the course of the 1970s it crashed and burned and dropped from sight. Pop and Minimal Art, which Greenberg disparaged, had more diverse critical support and greater influence on younger artists. Then Post-Minimalism came along, exploding any notion of art's neatly linear progression.

Now Color Field painting — or as Greenberg preferred to call it, Post-Painterly Abstraction — is being reconsidered in a big way in "Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975," a timely, provocative — if far from perfect — exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum here. It has been organized by the American Federation of Arts and selected by the independent curator and critic Karen Wilkin. She and Carl Belz, former director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, have written essays for the catalog.

It is wonderful to see some of this work float free of the Greenbergian claims for greatness and inevitability (loyally retraced by Ms. Wilkin in her essay), and float it does, at least the best of it. The exhibition begins with the vista of Mr. Olitski's buoyant, goofily sexy "Cleopatra Flesh" of 1962, looming at the end of a long hallway. The work sums up the fantastic soft power that these artists could elicit from brilliant color, scale and judicious amounts of pristine raw canvas. A huge blue motherly curve nearly encircles a large black planet while luring a smaller red planet into the fold, calling to mind an abstracted stuffed toy.

It is a perfect, exhilarating example of what Mr. Belz calls "one-shot painting" and likens to jazz improvisation. Basic to the thrill is our understanding that the stain painting technique involved a few rapid skilled but unrehearsed gestures, and that raw canvas offered no chance for revision. "Cleopatra's Flesh" is an act of joyful derring-do.

The "one-shot painting" stain technique of color field was the innovation of Helen Frankenthaler, first accomplished in "Mountains and Sea," made in 1952, when she was 24 and unknown. (It is not in this exhibition, but the method is conveyed by her 1957 "Seven Types of Ambiguity," with its great gray splashes punctuated by peninsulas of red, yellow and blue.) The technique negotiated a common ground between Pollock's heroic no-brush drip style and the expanses of saturated color favored especially by Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

In Greenberg's eyes the torch of Abstract Expressionism (the cornerstone of his power as a critic) was being carried forward by Ms. Frankenthaler's spirited reformulation, followed by Mr. Louis's languid pours; Mr. Noland's radiant targets; Mr. Olitski's carefully controlled stains and (later) diaphanous sprayed surfaces. And this continuity confirmed the central premise of Greenbergian formalism: that all modern art mediums would be meekly reduced to their essences; for painting that meant abstractness, flatness and weightless color. As you can imagine, that didn't leave anyone, not even the anointed few, with much to do.

Revisionist this show is not. Its 38 canvases represent 17 painters, including a selection of works by Abstract Expressionist precursors titled "Origins of Color Field." The elders tend to look as light and jazzy as their juniors; Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hoffman and Robert Motherwell, all present, were ultimately as much a part of Color Field as Abstract Expressionism. But even Newman's "Horizontal Light" of 1949 seems undeniably flashy; its field of dark red is split by a narrow aqua band, called a zip, that seems to speed across the canvas. Rothko's 1951 "Number 18," with its shifting borders and cloud-squares of white, red and pink, has a cheerful, scintillating forthrightness.

This forthrightness expands into dazzling instantaneousness in the works of Ms. Frankenthaler and Mr. Louis, where it sometimes seems that the paint is still wet and seeping into the canvas. Ms. Frankenthaler's high-wire act is especially evident in the jagged pools and terraces of color in the aptly titled "Flood" and in "Interior Landscape," which centers on a single, exuberant splash. Mr. Louis manages a similar tension while seeming completely relaxed. In "Floral V," where an inky black washes like a wave over a bouquet of brilliantly colored plumes, he achieves a silent grandeur, like a Frankenthaler with the sound off.

After the Frankenthaler and Louis works, this show dwindles into a subdued free-for-all, as most artists settle into more predetermined ways of working. Often big scale and simple composition add up to emptiness, especially when the signs of derring-do recede. Both Mr. Olitski and especially Mr. Noland are poorly represented. In Mr. Noland's square "Space Jog," Newman's zips run perpendicular to one another, forming a pastel plaid on a sprayed ground of sky blue, like a Mondrian bed sheet.

Jack Bush and Frank Stella make stronger impressions; they too subject the staining technique to geometric form. In his rambunctious "Moultonville II" Mr. Stella, to whose work Greenberg never really warmed, adds the further complication of a shaped canvas, creating a sculptural effect that clashed with the theory of flatness. Ms. Wilkin has rightly included Sam Gilliam, who eventually pushed stain painting into installation art, and the stripemeister Gene Davis.

The strongest presence in the remainder of the show is Larry Poons, whose three paintings (from 1963, '69 and '72) outline his progress from optical dots on monochrome fields to torrential pours of paint that tosses stain-painting delicacy to the winds and parodying both Pollock's and Ms. Frankenthaler's finesse. In the 1980s Mr. Poons's cottony paintings began to trash Greenbergian theories of flatness and weightless color with undisguised glee. It is time for someone, Ms. Wilkin perhaps, to organize a Poons retrospective.

One problem with Greenberg may have been a lack of humor. He didn't appreciate that if, as he said, Abstract Expressionism was Baroque, then Color Field might be Rococo: beautiful, frivolous and even comedic. Color Field shares its insouciance with Pop Art, its declarative use of materials with Minimalism and its high-key artificial palette with both. It even has links to Process Art in the work of early adapters like Alan Shields and has become a trope for so-called post-Modernists like Monique Prieto, Rudolf Stingel and Kelley Walker.

But given Color Field painting's long neglect, a time capsule is in itself a new look, and Ms. Wilkin's retelling has some new twists. Take for example her account of the legendary visit, orchestrated by Greenberg, that Mr. Louis and Mr. Noland made to Ms. Frankenthaler's studio to see "Mountains and Sea" during their 1953 visit to New York from Washington. Ms. Wilkin writes in passing that the visit occurred in Ms. Frankenthaler's absence, which completely reframes this pivotal event. Color Field was arguably the first major art movement initiated by a woman, and that woman was not present, in her own studio, to watch the wheels start turning in the heads of two male artists who, let's face it, were competitors?

Sometimes a critic's enthusiasm can do as much harm as good, especially when the critic has a blinkered take on the art of his time. The Icarus-like flight Greenberg took with Color Field was damaging to both parties and became a cautionary tale for art critics. New art is an unmanageable beast. If you think you have its reins in your grip, you will surely be unseated. Better to remain on your own two feet, ever alert to the inevitability of surprise and of betrayal, not the least by your own aesthetic responses.

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