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Seeing Noland's Feeling

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Kenneth Noland American, b. 1924

Kenneth Noland's paintings—whether his target-like compositions and their elliptical variations of the late 1950s and early 1960s; his midcareer chevrons, diamonds, and elongated horizontal bands; or his irregular polygon-shaped canvases of the 1970s—exhibit the artist's formal solutions to some notoriously difficult pictorial problems, specifically those generated by the complex interrelationships between shape and color.¹

In the 1960s Noland advanced a mode of painting that appeared to demonstrate an indivisibility of shape and color utilized for expressive ends. Such unity of form and sensuous content satisfied two demands often perceived to be at odds with one another: a formalist insistence that technical innovation be constrained by the properties of the medium, and viewers' expectations that works express artistic feeling. Noland's work, that is, complied with certain Modernist aesthetic criteria of purity, or truth-to-medium, while providing an aesthetic experience that stimulated a physical—and by extension emotional—response from the viewer.

The art critic Clement Greenberg, Noland's friend and admirer, was noted for articulating a rhetoric of purity in his account of the development of abstract painting. Greenberg's argument is well known: Modernist painting, under the historical pressure of disciplinary self-criticism, had been forced to isolate and develop only those attributes of the medium which could be provided by no other art—namely flatness, shape, and color. In so doing, painting was “rendered ‘pure,’ and in its ‘purity’ [found] the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.”² Concentrating his means on unifying color with the flatness of the support or the shape of the canvas, Noland succeeded in making a completely optical art, free of the “interference of tactile associations.”³ Among those who wrote about painting in the 1960s, Greenberg was uniquely sensitive to the interdependence of medium specificity (conceived abstractly and formally) and feeling (experienced physically and/or emotionally).⁴ He recognized that these poles were not opposed or contradictory but were instead mutually reinforcing—indeed constitutive—of each other. So, it appears, did Noland.

Prime Course displays a banded triangle within a rectangular expanse of ungressoed canvas nearly nine feet wide and more than seven feet high. A corner of the triangle reaches toward the painting's bottom edge; the other two points of the triangle are located at each of the two upper corners of the canvas. The triangle thus seems to have entered the pictorial field from above, forcing its way into view. The colored interior of the triangle consists of four rough-edged bands of nearly equal width nested one within the other. This chevron pattern emphasizes directional force (of gravity or perhaps acceleration). Noland's chevron seems to move down toward the bottom edge of the canvas, nearing an anomalous green dot of paint not usually visible in reproductions. Since more than two-thirds of the triangle's area lies in the left half of the canvas, the shape appears to be slowly shifting to the left.

Noland said of the chevron that he thought of it as having a “radical kind of symmetry”: “I came to the fact that unbalancing has its own order. In a peculiar way, it can still end up *feeling* symmetrical.”⁵ What the artist meant, perhaps, was that the viewer's adjustment to the off-center composition created a dynamic equilibrium. As compensation for the unequal distribution of visual weight in the painting, viewers move to the right, to center both the picture and themselves. Processes of adjustment such as this one are activated by *Prime Course*; they are the key to understanding Noland's reference to “feeling.” Even the least-emphasized physical properties of the painting (such



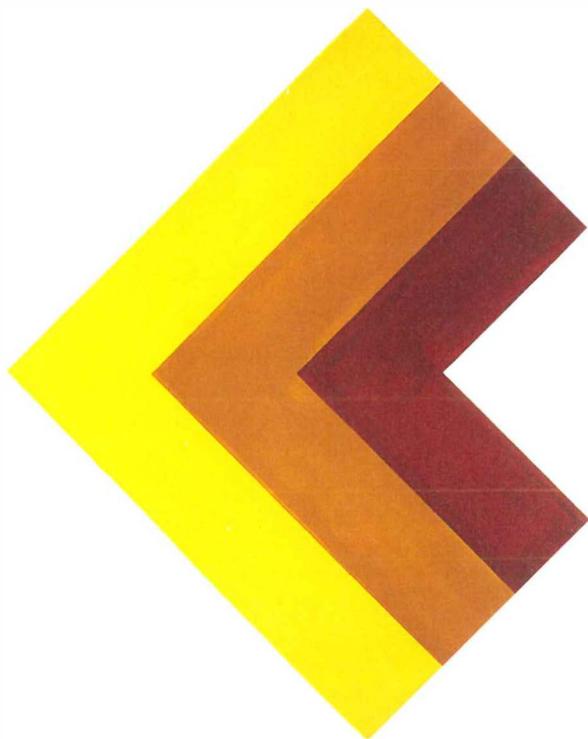
Prime Course, 1964
acrylic resin on canvas
93 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 105 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

as the green spot or the ragged edges of the bands) affect the viewer: visual perception and physical sensation are intertwined, despite how imperceptible the connection might at first seem.

An experience of Noland's work reaffirms that feeling is not just optical stimulation resulting from the technical virtuosity of the artist; it is the whole circuit of stimulus, response, and adjustment that perpetuates the continual modification and development of our perceptual, cognitive, and motor skills. Physiologically, seeing always entails felt responses, no matter how remote they are from our immediate conscious awareness and regardless of how much our descriptive language fails to describe them adequately. Noland condenses these relatively complex (and resolutely human) interactions in his art. In *Prime Course*, seeing *is* feeling.—*M.S.*

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In *Autumn Spirit*, Noland created a harmonious interaction of form, color, and shape. While this nonillusionistic painting completely adheres to the aesthetic of purity, Noland adds a "literary" title, which encourages a poetic reading of the forms. The colors might call to mind the leaves of the season, and the movement of the angular bands from right to left might suggest wind. Through his suggestive title, Noland brings back into the formalist canvas the "impure" realm of nature.—*R.B.*



Autumn Spirit, 1965
acrylic on canvas
60 x 60 in.

Jim Dine

1. Jim Dine, "Walking Memory: Interview, Catalogue, and Artist's Writings," in Germano Celant and Clare Bell, *Jim Dine: Walking Memory, 1959–1969* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1999), 20.
2. *Ibid.*, 47.
3. *Ibid.*, 50.
4. *Ibid.*, 114.
5. *Ibid.*, 28.
6. Dine, quoted in Graham Beal, *Jim Dine: Five Themes* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 11.
7. Dine, "Walking Memory," 192.
8. *Ibid.*, 56.
9. *Ibid.*, 192.
10. *Ibid.*, 114.

Jean Dubuffet

1. Dubuffet stated, "The name Hourloupe was invented just for the sound of it. In French it calls to mind some object or personage of fairytale-like and grotesque state and at the same time also something tragically growling and menacing. Both together." Dubuffet, quoted in Margit Rowell, *Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1973), 35.
2. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
3. Lawrence Alloway, introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Dubuffet, 1962–1966* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 17.
4. Dubuffet, quoted by Sophie Weibel, Director, Fondation Dubuffet, in e-mail communication with the author, Sept. 2, 2005.
5. Daniel Wheeler, *Art since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Vendome Press, 1991), 83.
6. Andreas Franzke, *Dubuffet*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 133.
7. Wheeler, *Art since Mid-Century*, 84.

Kenneth Noland

1. See Diane Waldman, *Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1977).
2. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), vol. 4, 86.
3. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland" (1960), in Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, 97. Greenberg notes that Noland and Louis utilized the stain-soak technique to identify color with ground, a process they noted in Jackson Pollock's work, as well as in Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* of 1952.
4. See especially Greenberg's "Feeling Is All" (1952), in Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, 99–106.
5. Diane Waldman, "Color, Format, and Abstract Art: An Interview with Kenneth Noland," *Art in America* 65, vol. 3 (May 1977): 99–105.

Robert Rauschenberg

1. Daniel Wheeler, *Art since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Vendome Press, 1991), 127.
2. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Collection, 1991), 66.
3. *Ibid.*, 109.

4. Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 58.
5. Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed," *October*, no. 63 (winter 1993): 80.
6. Wheeler, *Art since Mid-Century*, 127.
7. Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 59.

Larry Rivers

1. For a reproduction of this photograph, see John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 356.
2. Rivers based at least seven foamcore constructions on images of Matisse with his models or in front of his paintings. In addition to *Matisse Opera and the Continuous Line*, there are the following: *1924 and Matisse* (1985), *Matisse in Nice: Two Red Flowers* (1990), *Matisse in Nice: Blue Dress* (1991), *Matisse in Nice: Large Leaves* (1991), *Matisse in Nice: Roumanian Blouse II* (1991), and *Matisse in Nice: Sienna Shutters* (1991). The works of 1990–91 are part of Rivers's series *Art and the Artist*, which was featured at Marlborough Gallery, New York, in March 1993 (for exhibition catalogue, see n. 1).

Niki de Saint Phalle

1. David Bourdon, "Niki de Saint Phalle: Targets, Nanas, and Tarot," in David Bourdon et al., *Niki at Nassau: Fantastic Vision, Works by Niki de Saint Phalle* (Roslyn, N.Y.: Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, 1988), 23.
2. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 315.
3. Daniel Wheeler, *Art since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Vendome Press, 1991), 161.
4. Pierre Restany, "An Infinite Hope in the Poetry of Destiny," in Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Tarot Garden* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 10.
5. Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 311.
6. Phyllis Braff, "Nanas, Guns, and Gardens," *Art in America*, Dec. 1992, 102.
7. See Pontus Hulten, *Niki de Saint Phalle* (Berlin: Berlin Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993), and Braff, "Nanas, Guns, and Gardens," for Saint Phalle's "iconoclasm" and approach to other religious themes.
8. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 850.
9. See Saint Phalle, *The Tarot Garden*, for a full explanation of the Garden's iconography.
10. Harry Matthews, "Lessons of a Master," in Bourdon et al., *Niki at Nassau*, 9.
11. Hulten, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 150, 175.

Lucas Samaras

1. In her essay "On Peering into Lucas Samaras' Boxes," critic Joan C. Siegfried referred to the glass fragments as crystals and noted their similarity to the crystals or precious stones that adorn reliquaries; see Siegfried, *Lucas Samaras: Boxes* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971), unpaginated.
2. His father had gone to America nine years earlier. Both parents returned to Greece in 1964.
3. Samaras, *Samaras Album: Autointerview, Autobiography, Autopolaroid* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Pace Editions, 1971), 11–12.
4. Thomas McEvilly, "Intimate but Lethal Things: The Art of Lucas Samaras," in McEvilly, Donald Kuspit, and Roberta Smith, *Lucas Samaras: Objects and Subjects, 1969–1986* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 20.

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