Impure and Open

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Neil Anderson's abstract paintings of the past thirty-five years are further proof that Modernism's path has never been as logical or pure as some would like to think. Nor did Modernism culminate with the death of painting or the author, as some observers have been claiming for many years. Just when authorities conclude that a medium, subject, form, or process has been exhausted, an artist comes along and proves them wrong. Anderson is such an artist. Working in oil paint, a notoriously slow medium, he made his first breakthroughs after he jettisoned representational painting in favor of abstractions arrived at through an open-ended process. Whether or not critics acknowledge the challenge his recent work presents to their narratives is a different story.

I am thinking of the history of all-over painting and the diverse group of artists who have contributed to it. Even a highly abbreviated history would have to include Janet Sobel, a Brooklyn mother of four who began painting in 1937 at the age of 43. In the mid-1940s, she devised a way of dripping paint through a punctured can onto small canvases. Sobel's modestly scaled abstract paintings were shown at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, *Art of This Century*, in 1945. In 1946, Jackson Pollock and Clement Greenberg saw Sobel's

work and admired it. In his essay, "'American-Type' Painting," Greenberg described Sobel's canvases as the first "all-over painting" that he had seen. It might have been Pollock who "broke the ice," as his contemporary Willem de Kooning famously said, but all-over painting neither started nor ended with him, and we should not forget this. There's Yaoyoi Kusama's' "Infinity Net" paintings, which she started in the late 1950s; Cy Twombly's "Blackboard paintings," which he worked on from the late 1960s to the early '70s; and Jasper Johns' crosshatch paintings, which preoccupied him from 1972 to 1983. Since Pollock's death in 1956, there seems to have been a handful of artists in every decade who do something new and original with all-over painting, which clearly has not been exhausted. Anderson has become one of the most recent practitioners to expand our understanding of it.

What connects this diverse group of artists is the unity characterizing their compositions — a continuous linear structure, a looping line, or clusters of abstract lines (or crosshatching). Anderson, however, does something different from his predecessors; he varies his shapes while combining a palette of solid colors with one comprised of tints.

His irregular geometric and organic shapes, ranging from opaque to translucent, don't appear to repeat, while the placement of solid colors and tints never becomes predictable. Instead of the unity found in much of his predecessors' work, Anderson's paintings are full of surprises and unexpected shifts. The paintings might be mosaic-like, but they seem to have undergone a series of disruptive tremors. This change in the articulation of the plane is central to Anderson's contribution to all-over painting.

In 1980, Neil Anderson jettisoned subject matter in favor of process — what he could discover during the making of a painting. What remains consistent despite this change is his continued belief in the formal constraints governing a two-dimensional surface, the necessary acknowledgement of flatness. This understanding was already evident in his representational work, which Sid Sachs described as "beds of leaves aligned parallel to the picture plane, as if viewed from above. This was the flatbed picture plane."[i] Sachs' citing of the "flatbed picture plane," a term coined by Leo Steinberg, reminds me of another assertion of Steinberg's, that the "Abstract Expressionists were still nature painters."[ii] Steinberg's statement focused on painting's shift in emphasis from nature to culture, which took place in the late 1950s and, in his view, was brought about by Robert Rauschenberg.

I am more interested, however, in the underlying connection between Anderson and Pollock, which is nature. Whereas Pollock declared to Hans Hofmann, "I am nature," Anderson uses what is underfoot as a source. The beds of leaves and branches he once drew and painted have become a starting point for his abstract work. What Anderson did was more than shift from representation to abstraction — he has found a way to reimagine all-over painting, which is very different from trying to revive it. What is also evident is that he arrived at all-over painting by way of his representational art; he followed the implications of his own work.

One thing we should remember when looking at, as well as thinking about, Anderson's paintings is that to focus on the source is to miss out on the reverberating pleasures that his recent work offers. Sometimes, the longest distance

between two points is the most gratifying, particularly when the goal isn't about arriving but about traveling. Anderson's journey has produced surprising results.

This is how the artist describes his recent paintings:

> What do I think about? Proportion and balance between all the parts, no one part of the painted surface is more important than any other. The whole plane is the subject of the painting. Line, color, shape and texture are the vocabulary through which I speak.

Anderson rejects the easiest and most efficient resolutions, but without fetishizing difficulty or slowness. He uses what he calls an "irregular linear grid" (or a series of ribbon-like lines) to divide the surface into distinct sections. The logic of the grid, and the shapes that the picture plane has been divided into, is internal to the painting, rather than something imposed from without. Drawing is one of the keys to this work, the fluid line dividing the surface into discrete sections. Equally important is the fact that Anderson's grid doesn't inject equilibrium into the composition. Instead, something nearly the opposite happens.

A continuous series of seams and pressure points run through the paintings: the interactions between the distinct individual shapes and their larger, similarly colored aggregations; the colors that seem to slide under one another and emerge elsewhere; the shapes that seem to simultaneously break apart and come together; the shifts in color and tonality; the solid planes interacting with semi-opaque ones; the light that surfaces from the depths of this seemingly shattered field of shapes. Nature is Anderson's source, but he no longer represents it. The paintings are resolutely abstract and gain strength from that fact.

The fragments, layers, and space become the vehicles by which Anderson makes color sing. He is interested in elevating minute distinctions to a level of constant, shifting intensity. While there is no focal point in Anderson's paintings, something subtle and sharp is going on no matter where you look. Rather than making an image, he arrives at a complexity that holds your attention, no matter how close or far you are from the surface. He attains proportion and balance by inventively joining his innumerable small shapes together.

In one area of *Earth Song No. 26* (2016), near the left edge and just below the middle, there are two gray shapes beside each other; one is translucent, the other is slightly darker and semi-opaque, and both are adjacent to solid black shapes. Once I began to see the distinctions among these shapes, I realized how many others are waiting to be found. This is the bedrock strength of Anderson's abstract paintings from recent years. They captivate our attention, as well as remind us in the most gentle of ways that looking can be slow and full of the primal pleasures that only color can stir up.

At a certain point, while considering the palette that Anderson used in *Earth Song No. 26*, the pinks, salmons, magentas, and reds, along with the blacks, I thought about high school proms, cosmetic counters, patent leather shoes, and tuxedoes. Musically speaking, these colors form the dominant chords of the painting, with the accompaniment provided by the gunmetal grays and yellow-tinted grays, which we might associate with veils. There is nothing to suggest that any of these associations crossed Anderson's mind while he was working on the painting. His work is open to interpretation and association in the best sense.

While it is likely to connect the color and light of an Anderson painting to a particular experience or memory, he never points at any particular event. As a field of fragments, the paintings are like aerial maps, with movement and change constantly implied. At times, the fragments evoke a broken kaleidoscope, or glass shards, or pieces of a fallen vessel, or, finally, a shattered picture plane that no one can put back together. Instead of lamenting this loss, Anderson uses color and light to give each shape and each line its own identity. He honors them by structuring nuance, by infusing them with a tectonic rigorousness that is also visually beguiling.

Anderson's ability to enhance as well as complement a dominant palette of solid colors with one composed of pale tints is one of his distinguishing strengths. The combination of the two palettes instills each painting with its own character. These are not variations on a theme. Each work is particular and unrepeatable, like a snowflake. In the two-panel painting, *Quartet for America No. 3, (Earth Song No. 24)* (2016), the shapes – which are defined by different blues, greens, blacks, and ochres – evoke maps and aerial views, the dividing of America into states, counties, cities, townships, villages, and homes. A sensuous lacework of highways and roads simultaneously join and divide these areas. Lines loop over themselves. Others stop in a field of rich, saturated color, or what Sachs, in another essay on Anderson, called "flooded estuaries." Some configurations are made up of many small, sharp shapes, while others are larger and unbroken. At no point does the painting become predictable.

Anderson's ability to achieve continual differentiation within strict limits is what gives his paintings their staying power; we must open ourselves to the myriad shifts and changes, find our way through them, knowing there is no goal other

than the reverie of seeing. When we do open ourselves to these paintings, we are drawn into them, as one is drawn into a maze. While they seem to court chaos, they never tilt into that domain. We intuit an underlying logic to their clusters and patterns, but we cannot put our finger on what holds them together, prevents them from flying apart. Is it one color holding another in place? Well, yes, it is that and much more. The pandemonium that lurks inside Anderson's paintings never overtakes them. He seems to know exactly how to hold it at bay without completely suppressing it. The dance between part and whole plays out on a number of levels; our eye is always busy.

In his marshaling of sharp-edged shapes, Anderson hints at the likelihood that the painting is the outcome of a violent event, what I earlier called a disruptive tremor. He understands that the history of painting is a series of tremors, from extreme to subtle, and a tangle of paths stretching out and circling back.

What Anderson has structured in his ongoing series of *Earth Songs* and *Quartets for America* is a subtle integration of color and tint, structure and spontaneity, distinct shapes and irregular grids, natural tones and neon intensities. He has opened up all-over painting and made it new again. His colors are luscious and erotic, austere and even autumnal. They celebrate the freedom that he has attained for himself. The fact that he keeps raising the stakes is to be applauded. Having come this far, Anderson wants to go further. I see this as a major accomplishment.

[i] Sid Sachs, "Traveling the Plane, *Neil Anderson* (Bridgette Mayer, 2008), catalogue essay

[ii] Leo Steinberg, "The Flatbed Picture Plane" *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (University of Chicago Press, Reprinted 2007).