Lay Endless Space: The Work of Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, and Antonio Puri

Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art, Delaware Art Museum

Exhibition catalogue essay for Layering Constructs, 2016.

"A consciousness of limitation is paramount for an expression of the Infinite."

—Hans Hofmann

It is widely accepted that a technique for creating endless space on a two-dimensional surface using non-figurative forms was not offered until Hans Hofmann proposed his "push-and-pull" theory in the late 1940s. Hofmann balanced form and color to create dynamic movement across a painting's surface. As passages simultaneously advance and recede, the viewer is caught in a continual exploration of infiniteness. Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, and Antonio Puri embrace similar modes of abstraction, aligning formal and social concerns with their respective studio practices.

Margo Allman studied with Hofmann in the summer of 1953 while enrolled at Moore College of Art and Design and embraced his teachings on form and composition in her abstract prints and paintings from the 1960s. A greater understanding of three dimensionality came when Allman developed her sculptural practice in the 1970s. Carving directly into stone and wood, she experienced the tactile relationship between the inside and outside of a form and the physical shaping of space. Allman returned to two-dimensional work in the early 1980s, and began experimenting with layering, but it was not until the late 1990s that she created the first painting in the ovoid series, a body of work that has dominated her art making for nearly 20 years. The oval has been significant throughout the artist's life, and Allman explains that the biological form is the "modular unit" of her work. By repeating, gradating, and layering that element, Allman creates a composition that modulates between foreground and background and achieves the effects Hofmann instilled.

Artists associated with the most minimal approaches to Abstract Expressionism such as Agnes Martin, Mark Tobey, and Cy Twombly have been a strong influence on the work of Charles Burwell. While in graduate study at Yale University School of Art, the artist adopted a calligraphic approach, filling a composition with repetitive marks that approached the rigidity of a grid structure. Burwell's work over the past 20 years has maintained a reliance on a similarly systematic construction, beginning with vertical underpainting. What follows is a network of meandering lines that traverse the surface in a manner not unlike the whiplash lines associated with the Art Nouveau style of the late 19th century. Burwell began utilizing templates in the early 1980s and the complicated webs, and topmost solid forms, are based on these artist-made

cutouts. The source for the stencils is most often the studio itself—stacked or collapsed templates, a passage from another painting—and over the years Burwell has invented a visual vocabulary from which to draw. The artist repeats and layers the shapes into a composition that is simultaneously stable and unbalanced, symmetrical and asymmetrical, and ultimately an endless field of pattern.

Where Allman and Burwell create universes within the limits of their two-dimensional paintings, Antonio Puri questions the concept of painting itself to imagine limitless functions for the medium. Puri was born in Chandigarh, a planned city in northern India designed in the late 1940s by urban planners and architects, including Le Corbusier. The architectural atmosphere of Chandigarh has served as inspiration for Puri's work. In the artist's recent series of stacked paintings, Puri simultaneously constructs and disassembles the notion of painting. The layered forms are placeholders for an imagined form that extends past its current configuration into three-dimensional space, becoming the architectural building blocks of entire cities. In this way, the artist's monumental intention is testing the boundaries of structure and the conceptions of media specificity. Puri similarly employs the materials associated with painting to undertake a personal journey. The beads, drips, threads, and marginalia that layer the surfaces of the multiple panels in the Chandigarh series signify the fragility of memory, the infinite network of the human race, and the tenuous links that connect us.

Hofmann explains that the relationship between form, color, and texture "is the external expression of an orderly internal process of development." The physical and conceptual layering that is integral to the practices of Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, and Antonio Puri indicates an understanding of the formal limitations inherent in creating an illusion of endless space and the insistence to push those boundaries to their extreme.