

How to Get Meaning from Abstract Painting: As Interpreted by the Artist, the Viewer, and the Writer

Written Review by
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The articles in this review represent different positions on how viewers, critics, and artists interpret meaning in modern and abstract art. After reading several articles addressing the ways in which pictures in art are looked at, written about and perceived by artists, critics, and viewers, four points of view emerged. The first viewpoint is that of opticality, defined by many of the writers as how one interprets meaning through the visceral surface, brush strokes, composition, and subject matter in a painting and how relevant the perceived meaning is to the work of art. Other writers, however, argue that the message or meaning does not exist in the surface but is instead the reflection of the viewer's opinion or personal feelings that bring meaning to the work. Still others state that the relevance of the meaning in a work of art does not lie in the meaning suggested only in the painting itself, but is instead what is stated by the artist to interpret his or her personal feelings and intentions. Another theory is that contemporary interpretations of painting rely on critical writing and the theories, for example formalism, used to place works of art in defined categories, meant to be used by the viewer as a reference to give meaning to the perceived artworks. The overall criteria used in finding meaning in abstract art are based upon the physical, optical, and the perceptual responses to an object of art.

Abstract art is defined by suggestion of the natural or real versus the concrete, indexical perception of absolute depiction found in realism. In understanding these precepts the reader of this review will gain insight into how the writers assess the various viewpoints presented by opticality and perception from the artist, viewer, and critic in finding meaning in the work of an abstract painting.

Opticality, how to view a work of art, can take the intellectual approach or take the form of a psychological game, sometimes perpetrated by the artist, as an optical illusion to be solved and other times to be used by writers through an intellectual approach in resolving the hidden meaning of the abstract painting.

James Elkins, in "Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?"¹ situates pictures into what he considers puzzles. Paintings present themselves to viewers to be solved through defining the meaning of what is being looked at. Elkins presents the viewer with many theories to optically decipher meaning in art. Without committing to any one theory in particular he presents the viewer with pieces of the puzzle as tools to help decipher and arrive at a final meaning. Jeanette Bicknell, in her article, "To See a Picture 'as a Picture' First," notes that more is written about individual pieces of art now than in history, giving the example of Giotto's *Tempest* by way of

illustration. Bicknell contrasts the extensive writing about this work today in contrast to the very little that was written about it right after it was created. She further notes the interest and generation of puzzle solving in referring to Elkin's writing, and notes that a painting is "something to be 'read'," a cognitive activity, giving the concept of hidden meaning and interpretation as a preferred method, as a way of seeing the picture as a picture.² In this method Bicknell agrees with Elkin's view that a picture needs cognitive interaction, puzzle solving, to be read but she disagrees that treating a picture as a puzzle uniquely applies to all art. Bicknell argues that picture puzzle solving avoids the emotional impact a painting may have and does not help us resolve its true meaning.

Robert Zimmer's article "Abstraction in Art with the Implication for Perception" suggests by example and reference that abstract art follows certain principles learned through experience and the psychology of perception. He leads us into his discussion with the necessary question of "What is Abstraction in Art?" He quotes Hegel that "essence" or "universal idea" is something man-made; the essence of something as conceived from nature, by taking a part of something, making this concept a universal idea in aesthetics. Hegel writes of the process of abstraction as allowing painters to recreate "the existent and fleeting appearance of nature as something generated afresh by man."³ Zimmer takes the reader through the languages abstract art creates to guide the viewer's perceptions of the essence of the picture. He speaks of "Concrete Art," and the different views of how it is perceived for example by Modrian, who wrote that abstract art is concrete, as being derived from geometry and this "concretion purpose is to translate abstract ideas into reality so that they can be perceived, "(quoted in Madrazo)."⁴ Examples of concretion can be found in Andy Warhol's repeated images of reality from soup cans to celebrities with the similar images modified to evoke familiarity through perception of the ordinary. From this point Zimmer broaches the psychology of art in relationship to abstraction and offers as principles underlying art several that have been written and discussed by the neurological scientists Ramachandran and Hirstein. Following are four of Ramachandran's principles presented as pertinent to Zimmer's discussion in perceptions of abstract art.

- (1) The beholder's ability to group parts of a picture, viewing them as a whole;
- (2) The 'peak shift' principle; which he illustrates by a scientific experiment to show that we are drawn to exaggerations.
- (3) The beholder's tendency to isolate a single cue when looking at a painting;
- (4) The pleasure people find in solving problems.⁵

Zimmer takes his reader through these principles with clear examples of psychological meaning and purpose. One of these examples, "the peak shift," is described as a scientific lab experiment involving rats. The rats were subjected to different geometric shapes, one square and one rectangle. The rectangle shape contained food and therefore the rats were chose the rectangle

over the square. However when longer rectangle shapes were presented empty with the original squares and rectangles, which were filled with food, the rats chose the longer and empty rectangle shapes. This example shows an attraction to exaggeration, *the peak shift principle*. According to Zimmer these principles also appear in the other noted articles on opticality. There appears to be a common denominator indicating a grouping of ideas of opticality and perception rather than differences in the form of argument or disagreement. Zimmer states various Gestalt theorists were seen to consider the perception of art as an active process of structuring and organization and that applying Gestalt principles to abstract art could be a way of discovering things about abstraction in perception. This evidence opens the possibilities of further exploration and understanding of how abstract art is conceived, viewed and perceived. Finally, Zimmer gives the reader a clear picture of how abstract art is perceived and discusses the viewer's worldview or "schemata," Gombrich's theory of creation based upon what is known at the time.⁶ The schemata are defined as images that are particular, universal, and represent existence of structure.

Similar in thought and historically noted is "The Story of the Eye," by Rosalind E. Krauss as she argues that both modernism and art history are grounded in the conditions of opticality. She looks at artists in history and presents an argument for reflexivity to art history making modernism visible through the anti-visual approaches of the artists in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ Employing a reflexive approach, cause and effect, by giving examples of work created by artists in history, such as Modrian and Seurat, whose work exemplified the anti-visual approach to depicting imagery; Krauss demonstrates the opticality used by artists to achieve the effects of illusion with Modrian's work being the more abstract. She presents a case for deeper meaning through optical reflection as referenced by artist Marcel Duchamp, who told an interviewer, "I believe there is a difference between a kind of painting that primarily addresses itself only to the retina, to the retinal impression, and a painting that goes beyond the retina and used the tube of paint as a springboard to something further."⁸ (Krauss 1990) Krauss notes that the goal of painting is a combination of the "pure painting", an expression of an idea, with the translation of optical reflexivity, by giving examples of the literal in Renaissance painting and to the suggestive reactionary nature, that which invites reactions from the viewer, of painting in Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Abstraction. She evidences Duchamp's practice of manipulation of illusion and his interest in opticality, which he noted as his profession by putting his identification as an optics expert stated on his business card. Krauss brings together the opticality present in art perceived to be abstract by the viewer from the manipulated optical art of Duchamp to the reactionary nature of Modrian's painting, suggesting abstractionism.

Ann Gibson's article "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language" returns the control of painting's meaning to the artists by giving examples of artists' statements about their work. A common artist's opinion during the era of abstract expressionism was that the work should speak for itself and avoid the language that would describe the work. This allowed the

viewer to perceive and understand the artwork through their own perceptions and ideas. Gibson presents a side to abstract art that represents how an artist talks and/or writes about their work and in some cases how they struggle; for example, Rothko's difficulty in writing an article about his work for a magazine called *Tiger's Eye*.⁹ She presents the case through examples of writings by critics and artists alike for the difficult interpretations of abstract expressionism. The artist's intent was often left out in a critic's review, and in the case of Mark Rothko's highly abstracted work, it was overlooked by important critics like Clement Greenberg. Rothko, who painted his work with the idea that it could invoke strong emotional reaction from the viewer, was adamant in making his feelings heard and understood.

Surfaces in abstract painting may emerge from the artist's depth of emotion through automatic spontaneous painting and from the intentional, purposeful mark making. Jeanette Bicknell in "To See a Picture 'as a Picture' First" gives argument that modernist works in painting, music, and poetry are capable of causing deep emotional responses from those who engage with the works. She gives examples and then qualifies her statement about arousal of emotion in engagement with a note about the types of work that may cause high emotion as being tragic and thematically geared towards high emotional response from the viewer. She discusses the various instances of viewer's interaction with various forms of by art giving examples such as Mark Rothko's works moving people to tears upon encountering them. Bicknell is referring to James Elkins, an art historian who has written extensively about viewer's reactions to paintings. In his book *Pictures and Tears* Elkins describes how viewers react to the abstract paintings of Mark Rothko, who lived and worked in New York City during the height of abstract expressionism, and whose work is on permanent display at the Rothko Chapel.¹⁰ James Elkins writes of his experience when visiting the chapel to view Mark Rothko's powerful rectangles of morbid color. He spends a great deal of time exploring the canvases trying to discover what is hidden within the surfaces. He observes viewers from all walks of life entering the chapel and looking at the works: Some were meditating and others just staring. Elkins tries different methods such as detailed drawings and close looking to help understand the works through his own educated critical eye. After using analytical methods from studying the surfaces for telling marks to doing his own drawing analytically to find similarities or meaningful symbols he decides he is trying too hard to understand Rothko's intentions. Elkins also spent time in the Chapel's library studying the archived guest books placed on view for scrutiny by visitors seeking to learn from other's comments on Rothko's work. He read:

Probably the most moving experience I have had with art.

This makes me fall down.

The silence pierces deeply, to the heart. Once more I am moved—to tears.

A religious experience that moves one to tears, tears, a liquid embrace.

And the saddest one: I wish I could cry.¹¹

All of these comments lead back to the artist's original intent. Rothko in his own introspective way was making a very clear statement "The people who weep before my pictures," he said in an interview in 1957, "are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them." "I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions," he said in the same interview, "tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions."¹² Rothko clearly spoke through his paintings as evidenced by the thousands of visitors viewing his large abstract paintings at the Rothko Chapel.

Jeanette Bicknell summarizes "To see a picture first "as a picture" as having a variety of consequences. She argues that seeing the art first strictly in relationship to its medium as a success or failure as restrictive. She notes that artists and audiences demand more from works of art through deeper meaningful and symbolic aspirations of meaning and refers to Clement Greenberg's writing on Modern and Postmodern¹³ art to show how Greenberg's reaction to Warhol's pop art evidences his Kantian formalist views when he said, "I find his art sappy, the big screen portraits and all these things. Who cares about them?" Greenberg's critical statement attempted to dismiss Warhol's work as not valid or important to modern art. Bicknell states, "It is worth noting that Greenberg held this view, despite it being arguably the case that Warhol's works subverted illusion and succeeded in drawing attention to the limits of painting."¹⁴ She suggests Greenberg dismissed the success of the common and identifiable in Warhol's direct and concrete imagery as it did not fit into his theory of the importance of non-objective surface in abstract painting.

Citing commentators, for example Greenberg, who have violated the "injunction to see a picture "as a picture" Bicknell measures the value of all the different approaches to seeing a painting. She points out the meaningful and not so meaningful applications of seeing a painting as a puzzle, an enigma, a riddle. She argues that "several things may be lost, or at least overlooked." "First, we risk losing touch with the very thing that Greenberg pressed us to notice and admire: The skill involved in the production of artworks and the abilities required to create art that challenges its medium. For Greenberg the quality of the richness of surface, textural and tactile, flatness and the denial of illusion, held the qualifications to warrant it as good abstract painting. What the painting meant was of little importance to him. Second, certain paintings – those which do not lend themselves readily to extended exegesis – become somehow less worthy of our attention. They are not seen to be as interesting as works that are more readily and voluminously open to interpretations."¹⁵ Bicknell compares the viewing of the abstract painting as Greenberg states in "the denial of illusion" ¹⁶ to the viewing of realistic painting. Looking at the abstract painting denies one the walk through, touching and feeling of a realist painted scene by the Old Masters. Greenberg describes his interpretation of observing an abstract painting in "Modernist Painting," He states, "The illusion of space created by a modernist painter can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, "only with the eye." ¹⁷ In this view of abstract

painting, Greenberg invited the viewer not to feel or to seek definition but to accept only what is before you as the painting's aesthetic statement of existence.

The artist's intent again is negated in Donald Kuspit's article, "The illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art." Kuspit presents a less picturesque interpretation of abstract art by describing the art as painting without content or meaning. He claims that "the abstract work of art says no more and no less than "I am who I am," which tautology seems to preclude any attempt at description or identification."¹⁸ Kuspit denies any meaning in reference to abstract art and relies heavily on specific illustrations in his article to convince the reader, for example, Mark Rothko, *Light Cloud, Dark Cloud*, 1957, fig.1, and Paul Klee, *Classical Coast*, 1931, fig. 2, to support his claims. It appears important to him to represent this non meaningful art form with highly optical images that give the reader an opportunity to examine his statements about the purity of abstraction as not "exposed to experience."¹⁹ In doing this he subjects the artists and their work to a cold analytical idea, void of substance, of the artist's intentions.

Kuspit further explains the masks artists may use intentionally as ways of hiding emotion and events. The abstract paintings may evolve from and associate with the artist's "world-weariness."²⁰ Associations of this sort stop short of requiring the viewer to work out a hidden meaning within the abstract art. Rather the perception is masked by intentions of the artist and is not considered to be a part of the resulting "pure art." However, he suggests that this purity of form, the absence of meaning should be viewed with reverence. This visual examination may reveal sacred meaning therefore giving permission to the viewer to perceive through their own consciousness the possibilities of the illusion of the image. In this way abstract painting becomes the suggestion by the artist giving permission to the viewer to find meaning.

In "Notes on Surface, Towards a Genealogy of Flatness," David Joselit presents an intriguing concept in claiming that flatness of surface creates depth in psychological meaning, and that it stimulates visual interpretative responses from the viewer of abstract art. Through theoretical discourse and observation, Joselit shows how the work produced by the abstract artists, as in Jackson Pollack's "Autumn Rhythms," 1950, fig.23, pg.297, can evoke psychological meaning of great depth through surface manipulation of paint and studio debris. The art critic Clement Greenberg's formalist ideas and statements supported this concept but only to a certain degree. Again Greenberg's concern was with the characteristics of the surface of the painting, not with the hidden psychological meaning. Joselit says that "Greenberg employed an analytic, formalist approach in the service of abstraction. He followed the modernist literary tradition of T.S. Eliot and the New Criticism, with the focus on the object."²¹ Pollack's chaotic yet controlled style through exterior manipulation challenges Greenberg's theory by introducing a deeper emotional psychological meaning, going beyond seeing the surface as object only.

Andrew Benjamin in "Lines and Colours" discusses Paul Cezanne's use of color and line and how it may be interpreted and perceived by the viewer.²² Benjamin cites the painting *Mont*

Sainte-Victoire, seen from Bellevue, also known as The Viaduct, leading the reader into Cezanne's use of brush strokes and their meanings. He compares this painting with the detail of another work Chateau-Noir (1902) or Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves (1902-06). Benjamin gives us vivid description of the brushstrokes and depiction of trees and their importance to the picture plane and design as well as the elements of contrast and juxtaposition. The first painting exhibits more interplay with the angle of the brushstrokes and the placement of the trees showing the line as always a secondary effect. "The realization of the line is the work of technique." Benjamin gives a defining description of Cezanne's central intersections where lines are at work. First, he notes the line between the tree and the viaduct and then the juxtaposition of the horizon and the viaduct with lines depicting trees and fields strategically placed within the picture plane. Benjamin notes the significance that figures are not the after effect of lines; but are the result of colouring and therefore have a certain immateriality. In his article he argues towards perception and opticality by suggesting that the success of the work is not its completion through the criticism and the written words but by its incompleteness of lines and color applied physically and purposefully, by the artist, allowing the content to be optically perceived therefore completed by the viewer.²³ Cezanne's approach allowed for reaction from the viewer in constructing the picture by completing it through optical suggestions placed there by the artist. In this sense the way of seeing is both reactionary from the viewer and intentional mark making from the artist. It is both intent and opticality that allows both the artist and the viewer to master the power of meaning in the painting.

When confronting an abstract painting and searching for its meaning these authors have given the reader many opportunities to learn about the ways of viewing and perceiving meaning when encountering an abstract work of art.

In writing this literature review I have presented the various viewpoints from noted research and published works of scholarly essays and books to help guide the reader through the maze of ideas and attitudes regarding how to obtain meaning in abstract art. All of the opinions and arguments are well researched and backed up with solid proven material archived in the rich history of Abstract painting. Their help guides us into the future of abstract painting with the viewer's perception and understanding adding to the paradigm of how to obtain meaning in abstract painting.

In conclusion, the literature on the ways to see meaning in abstract art focus on the attributes and qualities of painting and also on the artist's intent taking into consideration the reactions and involvement from the viewer. These are important elements in seeing meaning, and the writers in this literature review have addressed the optical, perceptual and psychological theories and attitudes. Some of the writers have crossed over the lines dividing the ways of seeing from surface only to artists' intent. Others have taken careful looks at theorists and critics writing about the psychological effects and their meaning as written by the reviewer and perceived by the viewer to establish true meaning. All of the viewpoints have considered the

artist and held the artist work accountable for analyzing the possibilities, optical, perceptual, and psychological, of how to get meaning from abstract painting.

Notes

¹ James Elkins, Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? Some Thoughts on Writing Excessively,” *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 259.

² Jeanette Bicknell, “To See a Picture ‘as a Picture’ First” Clement Greenberg and the Ambiguities of Modernism,” *AE: Canadian Aesthetics Journal* (2008) : 6.

³ G.W.F. Hegel, Trans. T. M. Knox. *Aesthetics 6 and 7*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

⁴ L. Madrazo “Structure as shape,” In *NDS Sem. Winter semester 1998/99*, (ETH Zurich :1998), <http://caad.arch.ethz.ch/teaching/nds/ws98/script/shape/frFshape.html>

⁵ Robert Zimmer. “Abstraction in Art with Implications for Perception,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 358, No. 1435 (2003): 1285-1291.

⁶ E. Gombrich. *Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. (London: Phaidon Press):1960.

⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, Anti-Vision,” (*October* 1086 1985): 147-54.

⁸ Rosalind E. Krauss and David Carroll, editors, “The Blink of an Eye,” In *States of Theory: History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 175-199.

⁹ In 1947, a new magazine called *The Tiger's Eye* made its debut with the goal of being "a bearer of ideas and art." Though only published in nine quarterly issues from 1947 to 1949, the magazine was widely read and considered a lastingly influential magazine of art and literature. *Yale Bulletin and Calendar* 30, No. 16, February 1, 2002, accessed April 15, 2012. <http://www.yale.edu/opa/arc-ybc/v30.n16/story20.html>

¹⁰ “About the Chapel,” accessed April 15, 2012 http://www.rothkochapel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=31. The Rothko Chapel, founded by Houston philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, was dedicated in 1971 as an intimate sanctuary available to people of every belief. A tranquil meditative environment inspired by the mural canvases of Russian born American painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970).

¹¹ James Elkins. *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* New York: Routledge, 2004.

¹² James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, 3.

¹³ Clement Greenberg, “Modern and Postmodern,” in Clement Greenberg and Robert C. Morgan, *Clement Greenberg Late Writings*, ed. Robert Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 27.

¹⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Modernism or Barbarism: An Interview with Karlheinz Lüdeking,” in “*Late Writings*, 222.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” accessed April 15, 2012 <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>

¹⁶ Clement Greenberg and Robert C. Morgan, *Late Writings*.

¹⁷ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 5.

¹⁸ Donald P. Kuspit., "The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art," *Art Journal* 31, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971): 27.

¹⁹ Donald P. Kuspit, "The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art," 30.

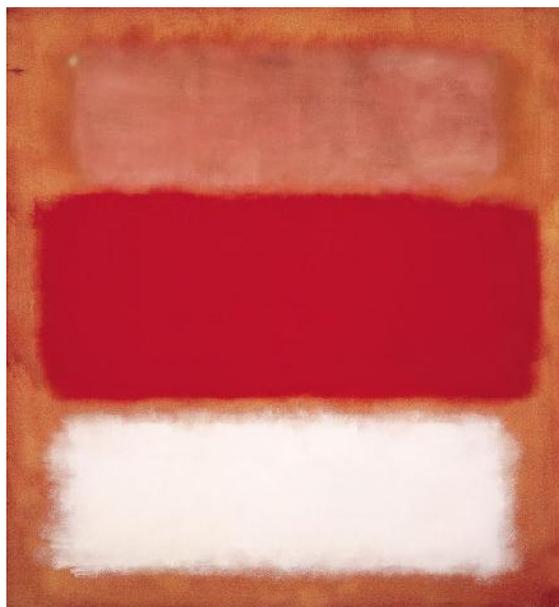
²⁰ Donald P. Kuspit, "The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art," 27.

²¹ Richard Kalina. "Guardians of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America Magazine* (September 2008): 47-54.

²² Andrew Benjamin, "Lines and Colours: Cezanne's Abstraction and Richter's Figures," *Angelaki* 8, 2003.

²³ Andrew Benjamin, "Lines and Colours," 35.

Fig. 1



Light Cloud, Dark Cloud
1957
Mark Rothko
American, born Latvia 1903-1970
Oil on canvas
66 x 61 3/4 inches

Fig. 2



Artist: Klee, Paul (1879-1940)
 Title: Classical Coast ('Klassische Kueste'), 1931
 Genre: Painting
 Period/Style: 1900/1945
 Location: Nationalgalerie, Museum Berggruen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

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