

Four Theses on the Significance of Recent Paintings by Rostarr

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Rostarr's drawings, paintings, stop-motion animations, and other works present a remarkably consistent series of concerns with perception, the assimilation of visual culture, and the relationships between historical precedents, cross-cultural graphic forms and contemporary art. To survey such a wide-ranging body of work in a short space is almost impossible; instead, this discussion proposes several theses about these works, their meaning, and their historical significance. This provides a method for approaching the interlocking nature of Rostarr's concerns with the particular structure of painterly forms from the past century that produce a synthesis suggesting a new, prominent role for the observer in engaging with the art object.

Thesis 1: These paintings constitute a specific reaction to post-modernism and its relationship to the modernist period.

In 1980 Douglas Crimp announced the death of the museum, observing that “the museum contains everything the library contains, and it contains the library as well.”(anti 48) For Crimp, like many of his fellow post-modernists, this attempt to assimilate the knowledge and form of the entire world was a doomed project, one where no synthesis could even be considered because the process of systematization itself is contingent, thus ungrounded and, in their view, impossible: the vision this philosophy presented was one of fragmentation, dissolution, collapse, failure—an end game for an “end time.”¹ The post-modernists were quick to proclaim an end to art, history, painting, the avant-garde, the “human,” colonialism, knowledge, certainty and science. Since Crimp was among the first to identify the end of painting with the black paintings by Frank Stella,² it is no small

irony that these images provide a historical jumping-off point for Rostarr's synthetic abstraction, the latent representational imagery either literally embedded deeply in layers of paint, (as his stop-motion films amply document), or expressly a visible potential interpretation of the organization of the image itself.

The problem for the variety of post-modernism that Crimp developed was simple: nothing *actually* got around to ending—that reality itself was too busy existing to end. In retrospect, these claims of endings were simply fin-de-siecle millennialism, nothing more. Meanwhile, art has not only continued to exist; it has continued developing. The priorities and concerns of the post-modern period, while no longer constraining contemporary work, provide the intellectual backdrop for a transformation of value where the taboos of synthesis and continuity with history are now being specifically violated. The contemporary synthetic abstraction of Rostarr's work proposes both a reconnection to the historical avant-garde, and suggests the assimilation (reconciliation?) of post-modern concerns with modernist ones.

By the post-modern period, abstraction and representation had become radically separated, where the abstract was insistently non-representational, non-referential and often intensely identified as “pure”³; unlike works that are explicitly oriented towards critiquing this “purity”—as with Daniel Buren, Peter Halley or Allan McCollum⁴—Rostarr's paintings treat the question of “purity” as if it is an illusion, suggesting that the so-called critiques of abstraction are addressing the wrong question entirely: it is not the issue of the relationship between reality and abstraction, but between interpretation and visual form.

The concern with interpretation and the visual forms that conceptual framing

produces creates a different set of oppositions than those informed the transition between modernism and post-modernist painting. It develops from dual recognitions about Frank Stella's stripe paintings: first, that while the surface appears "flat" in a perspectival sense, the patterning creates a spatial recession and immanent motion (both of which cannot be acknowledged in "purity" theory); second, that the striped form shares formal attributes with the broad striping of Asian calligraphy. That this pair is potentially present in Stella's black paintings from the beginning is readily apparent; equally apparent is the general absence of its recognition in the artistic and critical responses to Stella's work. Reappraisals of the type Rostarr's work demands for its precedents demonstrates the process of reworking and redefining assumptions indicate a paradigm shift in progress.⁵ What he is doing makes us re-see the work of the past.

Thesis 2: By involving the spectator's interpretative ability directly in the process of seeing the painting, these works present a anthropomorphic universe.

The act of viewing is essential; it is what is absent from discussions of purity, whether positive or negative. In looking at Rostarr's paintings, as in the Phrenology series, or in *Negative Space Traveler*, there is a duplicity of vision. We see the lines and their arrangement, but we also see the head-face shape emergent from that pattern. This perception is emergent, but at odds with the depiction: the form this head takes is familiar from Stella's early minimalist paintings done in 1959 and the early 1960s—the same works that the present the "utter flatness" sought by the idea of pure abstraction.⁶ This situation is not a paradox; the flatness and anti-illusionist approaches of pure abstraction are oriented against a specific technical device: the creation of pictorial space through

linear perspective. The potential for graphic depiction, itself linear and flat, remains implicit in the flat, anti-illusionist forms deployed by Stella. As art historian Frances Colpitt has noted about Stella's black paintings and the engagement they propose for abstraction:

For Stella's generation, abstract painting was already a language and a tradition conscientiously inherited with the desire to say something that had not been said in the same way before. [...] Derived from Pollock's equalization of compositional elements, Stella's composition affects the space in front of the painting by displacing relationships from within to without, to the space between the painting and the viewer.⁷

The shift from an internal relationship to the relationship between viewer and painting prepares the way to a further shift to the internal "read" by the spectator looking at the work itself. It is a different kind of abstraction operative in Rostarr's works: in shifting perception between the abstract, flat form of the image and the emergent perceptions of face/head shapes, Rostarr presents an engagement with the process of looking that allows the viewer to engage in the same type of perceptual engagement that is involved in the creation of the works themselves. Because the emergent forms are anthropoid, these perceptions are a result of the image engaging our innate pattern-recognition abilities: our ability to recognize other people's faces. It is the same associative process that emerges in Salvador Dalí's *paranoiac-critical method*, Rosarch tests, and Leonardo's famous description of phantasmic visions caused by splattered paint on a wall. The transfer of this procedure into the form of Stella's work destabilizes the conventional interpretation of it as aggressively anti-representational, as being the logical conclusion of Greenbergian purity. Like all these interpretative digressions, the process of looking in these works is necessarily active—the viewer must engage the work's materials for the faces to emerge, that this engagement happens autonomously demonstrates the power of

these visual abilities.

These are not optical images but cogitative ones where our innate ability at form recognition⁸ plays an intimate role in the meaning of the works themselves: it is determined by our autonomous (internal) interpretative decision about the relationship between different parts of the image. Rostarr explores and advances this potential. As critic Rey Parla has noted, the artist calls this type of work “Graphysics”:

Rostarr is one again orchestrating his abstract polymorphic painting style known ‘Graphysics’, a combination of Graphic Art and Quantum Physics.⁹

This identification of his work with quantum physics is not accidental. Representation is contingent upon the combination of elements in our preconscious processing of the image; the types of sudden shift and instability involved in these images is an analogue for the flux of quantum states. Rostarr’s choice of term is apt—the relationship between these types of ambiguous images and quantum theory is a common theme of their empirical examination.¹⁰ Order emerges from our procedure of creating relationships¹¹; these decisions determines what we see—deciding that a group of wavy lines represent hair in *Negative Space Traveler II* produces the figure at the right of the canvas; however, the relationships between these components is unstable. In the blink of an eye they can shift and the apparent figure disappears into a network of shape and pattern—too much attention to any single detail and the figure collapses into abstraction.

The appearance of the figures in these paintings requires a decision about the representational content of abstract lines. Perception changes sense-data into vision by constraining our interpretation of that experience to organize what we see in a specific fashion: thus the process is “rational” even though the shifting through associations is

not, a fact Dalí also noted about his method.¹² It is a process which can be consciously directed, but at the same time, will proceed autonomously, causing the representational forms to leap forward into our awareness. This emergence gives these works a dramatic character, one that is entirely human-centered: there can be no question of imitation of reality with these works, since what they invoke is not an external, physical world, but one which is contingent on our perceptions. It is an internal reality, rather than an external space of appearances; Roland Barthes recognizes the role of the observer in this type of painting:

It is the human subject that is asked to move. ... It implies a relativization of the space of meaning: including the reader's gaze within the very structure of the canvas ... shifts from a Newtonian painting based on the fixity of objects represented to an Einsteinian art according to which the observer's movement participates in the work's status.¹³

Barthes' "Einsteinian art" is one where the observer "interacts" with the image to collaborate in the emergence of the painting's content; a more appropriate name might be "Quantum art." This is a significant transformation—it signals a shift from the conception of the viewer as a passive observer to an active participant in the work itself: the "making sense of" brings the observing mind of the viewer into an active role, makes that process of looking into an integral part of the meaning for the painting: the negative space traveler—i.e. the space around the marks—is that part of the canvas which has not been filled in, it is the blank area, through which the gaze travels in creating the figure. A similar activity appears in the Phrenology series: the study of the protrusions on the head for an understanding of personality; in both cases the unseen spectator is implicated in the process and meaning of the work itself.

The discovery of the observer, and the incorporation of that actively interpreting

mind into the work marks a significant return to the anthropomorphism which the historical avant-garde abandoned¹⁴; Rostarr's Graphysics participates in this shift in concern from the performance of the artist, presented as the work on display, to the engagement with the spectator as an active viewer whose interpretations are integral to the work itself. This shift marks a rupture, or reversal, of the relationships between artist, artwork and audience. As art historian Renato Poggioli has noted about the historical avant-gardes:

The speculative [interest] tends to lead avant-garde art toward the most absolute formalism, which is, paradoxically, iconoclastic and dehumanizing. Only a cultural ambiance dominated by a no longer anthropomorphic science—even an antihumanistic science—could render possible the composition of a treatise like that of the French abstractionist Fernand Léger, significantly entitled *Du corps humain considéré comme sujet*. All we have to do is contrast the apparent aim of that title with the Renaissance treatise of Luca Pacioli, *De divina proportione*, where the search for mathematical laws of the human body's harmony is a search for a pre-established harmony, spiritual and metaphysical in nature.¹⁵

For Poggioli, the shift which Léger's writing suggests is a move towards a dehumanized nihilism that is fundamentally a contradiction of an earlier totalizing view where humanity is an expression of a universal order, itself anthropoid. This is the distinction between a pre-scientific, mystical interpretation of the universe and the Newtonian or Einsteinian understandings of physics where humanity is essentially expelled; in Quantum theory humanity remains expelled as well, but with a distinction: the Quantum view places humanity at the center of interpreting the universe, but the order imposed is temporary, contingent and "illusory."

In the dehumanized view of the early avant-garde's Einsteinian universe, there is only a limited amount of concern with the pattern recognizing, representational visions which Rostarr's work deploys—the quantum physics dimensions of Graphysics. This

conception, in turn, is as alien to the historical avant-garde's understanding as that one is to the Renaissance *harmonia mundi*. Yet, in place of an anthropomorphic universe organized around humanity at its center is one where the appearance of order is also a projection of the human mind outwards onto an otherwise chaotic reality.

Thesis 3: These paintings are involved in a synthesis of previously assumed dichotomies.

“Visual culture” rather than the historical divisions between “high” and “low,” fine art and applied art, provides the basis for new developments. It is this backdrop which provides a particular context for the emergence of contemporary synthetic artists' work. This is a transformation that suggests a rereading of the historical development of Euro-American painting in the twentieth century. This innovation of post-modernism initially served to finish the task of breaking down the barriers erected around Art in the nineteenth century, which the historical avant-gardes attacked in successive waves from the 1860s onwards.¹⁶ The emergence of this discipline, sometimes called “cultural studies,” offers a different conception of the relationships between art and society, suggesting an understanding of “culture” that is not *universal* so much as *contingent* on specifics of politics and chronology. It is a conception of history that emerged in the 1970s and became the dominant conceptual framework by the 1990s.

Synthesis occupies a significant position in the conceptual framework Rostarr's work suggests. The linearity of his work is not the refined, highly finished line of a mechanical drawing, or even the precisely drawn line that might be expected of a geometric abstraction; it is the coarse, textural line expressive of movement, gesture and

emotion. We clearly see in all these works a fusion of expressive action with simplified geometric form, a combination that is surprising in itself exactly because it is unexpected. The clean geometries that these lines most immediately recall—both in painting and in calligraphy—are finely drawn, exacting arabesques. The expressionist aspect they deploy is more familiar from work that typically avoids such confinement. It is an uneasy fusion, and this is the source of its interest and power: precisely in the sense of a new synthesis of formerly considered oppositions.

However, these are not paintings of a dialectic. What emerges here is the revelation of a solution to an opposition that was implicit, structuring expectations; it becomes apparent only when we encounter it resolved.

Yet, this is also a broad-ranging synthesis, not limited to only expressionism and linear geometry. In Rostarr's work we encounter a wide-ranging urge towards assimilation: of surfaces, styles, materials and approaches—each of which finds itself drawn into the same fusion. The catalyst for this combinatory process is the sensibility of the artist himself. These are works that are difficult to imagine being produced by a staff, handled by assistants, or generated autonomously. There is no settling into a signature “style” so much as a signature approach, immediately apparent, but not readily quantifiable into the easily reproduced formal “style.”

It is clear that there are underlying principles for Rostarr's work, but these are idiosyncratic, subjective, fluid—changing from work to work, with the common features being a product of personality, such as handwriting, that are not readily reproducible by others. The synthetic aspect of these works is an essential part of this approach, one that clearly reveals itself through the uniqueness (even when produced as series) of each

experiment.

Thesis 4: The interplay between past experience and immanent encounter produces an uncanny effect that destabilizes traditional aesthetic considerations.

Language, especially calligraphy, depends on an interaction between the ability of the reader (or listener) to discern familiar patterns and assign to those patterns a specific, previously learned meaning. Without this lexicon of past encounters and successful interpretations, language does not function as a bearer of meaning—it is transformed into suggestive marks (or noises), unable to communicate. For works where the graphic nature of the communication is a component of the presentation, the meaning is doubled by the execution of the presentation; Rostarr's works incorporate this pair of communicating forms, requiring the viewer to navigate several dimensions of meaning simultaneously.

The pictorial language on view in these works places historical demands on the viewer: that the quotations and references to past painting be recognized, that the viewer acknowledge the assimilation and relationship of minimalist painting to the graphic forms of Asian calligraphy, that the spectator must recognize the representational dimensions of what may appear to be purely abstract compositions—these are a great many acknowledgements and recognitions to have. Yet these paintings provide an index to their own form; thus, in looking at a series of works, the spectator learns to “read” the visual language Rostarr employs. This becomes especially evident in the stop-motion animations that present successive paintings as continuities from earlier works.

The formal nature of this language begins with the serial concept of pattern and variation. The aesthetic model deployed through Rostarr's work has been described by

semiotician Umberto Eco. Past experiences with the topos of a particular serial define the aesthetic experience the audience has by recognizing specific variations within a predetermined framework.¹⁷ The spectator's interpretations employ frameworks created through previous encounters with similar types to anticipate and recognize divergences from established norms.¹⁸ However, the form of Rostarr's work presents a change in the order of the *expectations* themselves that are the focus of Eco's analysis:

Let us now try to review the phenomena listed above from the point of view of a 'modern' conception of aesthetic value, according to which every work aesthetically 'well done' is endowed with two characteristics:

It must achieve a dialectic between order and novelty, in other words, between scheme and innovation.

This dialectic must be perceived by the consumer who must grasp not only the contents of the message but also the way in which the message transmits the contents.¹⁹

The opposition in Rostarr's work is not between scheme and innovation—both are in a precarious balance, equaling out—what falls into opposition with these is the tension between recognition and its failure: between the invocation of a serial aesthetic and its denial. The uncanny effect of many of these works derives from this shifting between conscious awareness of precedents and the uncertainty of their application to the particular work been seen. *Wise Owl in Full Bloom I* and *II* hover between familiar recognition and the alienation of true novelty. The problem these images pose lies with the question of their relationship to established norms for art: they blur the distinctions between language forms (they resemble pages of illuminated text) and visual depictions; it is impossible to resolve this fracture in a comfortable, stabilizing way. In encountering them, the validity of apply past experience in interpreting these particular works is uncertain.

The uncertainty presented in these works is different only in degree, but not in kind, from that posed by Rostarr's paintings generally: at what level should we as viewers be interpreting the image—that of composite whole, individual gesture, the positive spaces produced by the marks, or the negative spaces which occasionally leap forward into facial forms? This instability is systemic, ungrounding the basis for aesthetic judgements precisely because we cannot determine where those judgements should be applied with any certainty; such a pervasive uncertainty follows logically from the artist's concern with a quantum mechanical reality. This is the issue of Graphysics itself.

In these paintings, all judgements reveal themselves to be contingent and incomplete, but nevertheless reside within a network of potentials whose range is the focus of the work. This attention to the possible ways of interpreting an single work undermines the easy dichotomy between scheme and innovation Eco describes. In its place we find instability and continuous transformation. It is an aesthetic distinct from the neo-baroque of post-modernism, or the classical order of the modernists—one where the seriality itself is in question even as what we as viewers encounter suggests a rigorous serial form. The problematic arises precisely in the ambiguity of how to understand the apparent serial form in relation to past experiences with serial artworks. By opening this part of the structure to question, Rostarr fragments the uniformity conventionally imposed through serial structures. However, this perception of seriality may be a fundamental error. It is entirely possible that the appearance of serial form is something else entirely—the distortions of form extended through time, where the individual instances are not individual examples of a given type at all, but rather different states of the same work; this potential creates an uncertainty about the nature of the work and how

we should be addressing it with our interpretations.

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The four interlaced theses about Rostarr's work discussed here are brief discursions into a much larger project that emerges when these 'snapshot' examinations are considered together: it is more than just a reconsideration of the historical development of the past two centuries. At the same time, it proposes a novel conception of how that Euro-American history can be accommodated to larger and longer histories of art that lie beyond its parameters. The synthetic dimension of this conceptual project forces an acknowledgement that both the post-modern and the modern are particular cultural developments of a specific tradition (and even in the post-modern phase this tradition displays a ravenous capacity for absorption and assimilation of other, older traditions). The synthesis displayed in these works is simultaneously an expression of this assimilation and a critical engagement with the expansion's demands. In making us aware of these "foreign" connections to what have been supposed to be the necessary, logical development of the Euro-American tradition, we become aware of the contingency of this tradition, its limits, as well as how that tradition can be assimilated into this larger history of art outside the confines of that tradition. Graphysics provides one vehicle for this transit, the ambiguity of these works as serials provides the another.

Between the invocation of a serial aesthetic and its denial lies the critical dimensions of these works. A seamless and complete assimilation of Rostarr's sources into a singular, finished (or organic) whole would efface the ruptures that mark the incompleteness of these interpreted connections, and thus would elide the critical aspect of uncertainty. The uncanny effect derives from these systemic ambiguities of

relationship, of a completion that has been transferred into our interpretations. These works are critical precisely because there is an ambiguous connection between the traditions invoked and the ability to connect those to the works themselves. It is the conscious holding-in-suspension in these works that forces the acknowledgement of the interpretative process. In looking, we become aware of how the process of looking involves both a historical dimension and a relativistic one: it is not just what we see *right now*, but the things we have *already seen* that condition our conscious interpretation not only of painting—but the larger reality itself. The flickering face-forms and spatial interplay of Graphysics describes how quantum mechanics describes an insubstantial, variable reality against the apparently concrete certainty of our experience. This intersection of art and physics is non-trivial; it closes the gap between the two worlds of science and art.

¹ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

² Colpitt, Frances. "Systems of opinion" in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 167.

³ Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) pp. 85-93.

⁴ Rosenthal, Mark. *Critiques of Pure Abstraction*, (New York: Independent Curators International, 1995).

⁵ Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶ Kelly, Mary. "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism" in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, (New York: David R Godine, 1992), p. 92.

⁷ Colpitt, p. 169.

⁸ Ehrenzweig, Anton. *The Hidden Order of Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁹ Parla, Rey. "Organic Harmonies" in *Wreckless Abandon*, (Miami: O.H.W.O.W., 2008).

¹⁰ Woolf, Nancy J. and Stuart R Hameroff. "A Quantum Approach to Visual Consciousness" in *Trends in Cognitive Science*, vol. 5 no. 11, November 2001, pp. 472-478.

¹¹ Holland, John. *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity*, (Reading: Perseus Books, 1995).

¹² Dalí, Salvador. *Oui*, (Boston: Exact Change, 1998), p.178.

¹³ Barthes, Roland. *The Responsibility of Forms*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1985), p. 142.

¹⁴ Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press; Revised edition, 1968).

¹⁵ Poggioli, Renato, translated by Gerald Fitzgerald. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

¹⁶ Betancourt, Michael. "Disruptive Technology: the Avant-Gardeness of Avant-Garde Art," in *CTheory*, a 107 (5/1/2002), <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=336>.

¹⁷ Eco, Umberto. "Interpreting Serials," in *The Limits of Interpretation*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press: 1994) pp. 83-100.

¹⁸ Eco, pp. 91-93.

¹⁹ Eco, p. 91.