

Margo Sawyer



Synchronicities



BY KATHLEEN WHITNEY

Margo Sawyer's work process is one of escalating complexity. She starts with specific grid formulas, determining proportions while drawing in Illustrator. Her drawings are further developed via CAD, establishing colors, dimensions, edge treatments, and the arrangement of sheet metal panels. Sawyer's design team then becomes involved if the work is a commission. Because her work demands multiple procedures, Sawyer collaborates with industrial fabricators who are willing to experiment, working with them to design attachment systems and specialized color coatings. After fabrication, Sawyer uses a system that she developed to indicate placement. The final realization of a

Opposite and above: *Contemplation Plaza and Sawyer Pool*, 2010. Cement, glass, tile, water, vegetation, steel, and painted aluminum, 15 x 300 x 600 ft. overall.

project involves coordination with and oversight of contractors and crews at the work-site. Sawyer builds in potential for last-minute changes by making extra panels with different colors. From initial concept, her design process can take three months to three years; fabrication, construction, and installation may take up to a year.

All of this planning culminates in subtly colored works characterized by closely packed or strategically spaced dimensional squares and rectangles. Sawyer's patterns and configurations are quilt-like and sensual, giving the groupings a weightless and meditational quality. Her work does not reference mathematical systems; instead, complex arrangements grow out of an intuitive sense of relationship and exposition. Sawyer refers to the geometries and complex topologies of her work as examples of "instinctual mathematics." Her instincts are

finely honed, the dimensional squares and rectangles synchronizing scale, color, light, and location.

"Synchronicity" is vital to Sawyer. She uses the term in the Jungian sense to refer to the experience of causally unrelated events as connected, their chance juxtaposition taking on meaning and purpose in the mind. The majority of her titles use the word, and it aptly describes the circumstances of her work—the successful coming together of color and object, object and site, and different viewer responses, as well as the conjunction of concepts embodied in the finished product.

Individual color selections are the result of intuition and a consideration of such factors as the curvature of panel rims, how edges meet, and the nature of the light in a given space. Sawyer is always working with the physicality of color and its psychological impact on the viewer. Sensuality of color and light are the elements that animate it and its environment. Her ideas about color take into account spiritual desire, symbolism, and psychology.

Sawyer's thinking has evolved from a dense confluence of influences: art history, the primary structures of Modernism, functionality, Asian aesthetics, and the notion of sacred space. She cites numerous painters and architects as influences, including Malevich, Mondrian, Louis Kahn, and Le Corbusier. Asian art and Japanese temples have shaped her ideas about spiritual space and the public and private uses of art and architecture. Cities like Jodhpur in India (also known as the "Blue City") have had an impact on her color choices, as well as her ideas about the psychological impact of color.

Over the past eight years, Sawyer has been commissioned to make works for a number of public, private, and corporate spaces. In these projects, her intention has been to translate the ancient idea of sacred space into a contemporary idiom. Participation and transcendence are at the core of her ideas about civic and personal space. Her public projects have been met with remarkable enthusiasm, creating community and dramatically enhancing their immediate environments.

Sawyer's first major public project, *Synchronicity of Color—Red/Blue* (2008), was

designed for Discovery Green, a 20-acre park in Houston. Her contribution to this large project transforms two utilitarian spaces — the aboveground entry/exit structures for the Southeast and Southwest parking garages — into iconic elements of the park. One structure employs shades of red, the other uses blue, the components coming together in huge quilts of color. The walls are also pierced with square and rectangular windows that illuminate the stairwell and create an homage to Le Corbusier’s chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp. The quilts of color, which refer to Houston’s multi-cultural communities, are particularly unusual, and memorable. Sawyer and Austin Thin Films pioneered the use of dichroic film coating on her pre-painted aluminum boxes, allowing her to create colors that change as the viewer

moves. Fourteen hundred panels in 40 different colors and eight different sizes were used to cover the walls.

One of Sawyer’s most extraordinary projects is located at Austin Ranch, a multi-family residential complex in Plano, Texas. The two side-by-side elements are known as *Contemplation Plaza and Sawyer Pool* (2010). Sawyer designed the landscaping as well as the two structures: a rectangular, 15-foot sculptural monument with two blue-toned sides and two red, and a long, three-to-nine-foot-deep wading pool intended for children and adults. The predominantly white floor of the pool is punctuated by three inverted step pyramids tiled in blue, red, and green. Because of the refraction of light through the water, these three areas glow like jewels. The effect is particularly dramatic under nighttime illumination.

Synchronicity of Color—Walls and Garden (2012) was created for a private residence in Santa Fe. Sawyer’s design is a hybrid of sculpture and architecture, a functional installation. The delicately shifting palette of color that changes with the light and the viewer’s location is achieved through dichroic nano-film fused to aluminum; the body of the work is made from MDF. Inside, Sawyer’s grids wrap two functional columns: one conceals the kitchen pantry, and the other houses a fireplace. These structures infuse the interior space with warmth and intimacy. The garden is a concrete grid and xeriscape with tinted glass cubes that light up at night. The delicate, subtle colors were inspired by the New Mexican landscape.

Synchronicity Light Receptors, Dallas (2011) is a two-part work located in the city’s West Village. The three acrylic cubes are placed in two plazas with seating areas and a garden: two in one plaza, the other standing on its own. Sawyer worked with landscape architects to design the site configurations. The pieces cast shadows onto the surrounding concrete that change color and form during the day as the angle and quality of light changes. Each multi-colored glass structure uses either an interior dichroic film or two exterior sheets of colored acrylic. Each face bears two different colors, and no color of the 15 faces is the same. At night, the cubes are illuminated by streetlight and cast entirely different chromatic shadows.

In 2012, Sawyer designed an interior wall piece, *Synchronicity of Color*, for Eskenazi Health in Indianapolis. This piece, still in progress, is placed on and within two walls adjacent to the outpatient clinic. The steel panels are painted with an automotive lacquer called Kameleon that changes color and depth according to the viewer’s position. The placement of the panels is painterly and jazzy, like a Mondrian composition. Sawyer’s chromatic choices will reference the colors used in Formula One cars, signaling the importance of racing in the city.

Color can be a tricky tool in the hands of a sculptor. There’s a danger that it will trivialize the work, that it will be too decorative or lack conceptual depth. Although many of Sawyer’s concerns seem to be painterly in nature, her sculpture absorbs painting—its

Below: *Synchronicity of Color—Red*, 2008. Bottom: *Synchronicity of Color—Blue*, 2008. Painted aluminum boxes mounted on aluminum panels, mounted to metal hat-channels on a concrete building, 2 elements, 12.5 x 9.5 x 50.5 ft. each.





Above and right: *Synchronicity of Color—Walls and Garden*, 2012. Interior: powder-coated aluminum, painted and anodized dichroic film, and painted MDF; garden: cast and fused glass, bronze, concrete, and foliage. 2 views of indoor and outdoor work.



topography resolutely refutes the flat or illusionistic. When the dimensions of painting and sculpture come together, the result is an eroticized tableau in which color and form are equal partners. In Sawyer's work, sensory pleasure and visual intelligence merge. She does not use color to infer meaning; the grids are neutral and the color used to measure, inform, and define the limits of a space. No "pictures" come to mind because she makes no attempt to manufacture or specify a meaning through color. The use of

Synchronicity Light Receptors, Dallas, 2011. Laminated acrylic, 3 elements, 3-4 x 3-4 x 3-4 ft.

the grid makes meaning or identity impossible: a non-rectilinear reality will not adhere to the rectilinear; it's a form that excludes anything but itself.

Sawyer's work is about the metaphysics of color, its power to transform a neutral space into one charged with spiritualized energy. Her iconic forms are in conversation with art, architecture, and landscape. Her installations are marked by internal stresses between the illusion of engulfing color and its containment, flat versus spatial, light versus dark, translucent versus opaque, and high versus subtle contrast. Such nuanced works require focused attention to achieve

their true distinction—the way in which it all comes together in the viewer's mind.

Sawyer's work is now on view at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum in Austin through October 5, 2014.

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