

Geometric Abstraction as a Matter of Scale and Refrain: A Review of Recent Works by Dion Johnson.



Dion Johnson, Race Car, 2015, 60 x 80 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas (two canvases). Image courtesy Bentley Gallery.

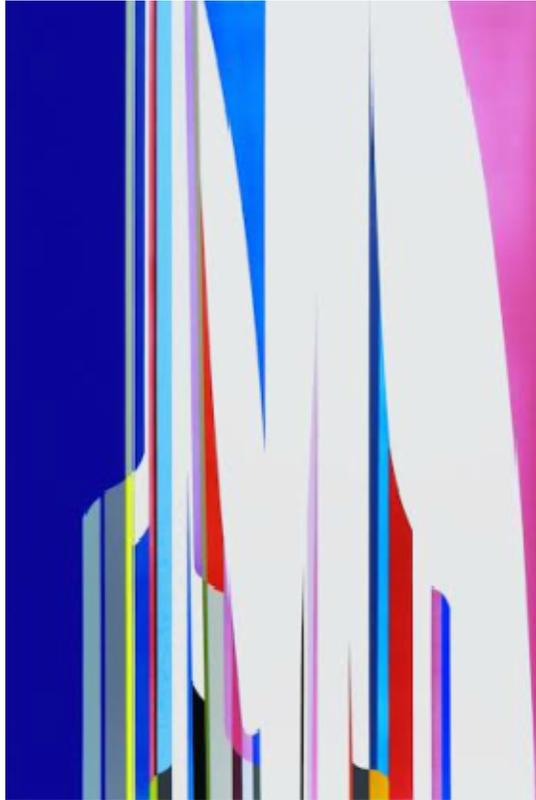
INTRODUCTION: The Three Orders of Geometric Abstraction.

0.1 The greatest problem faced by any critic reviewing the work of Dion Johnson would be that of providing adequate context. Those who enjoy contemporary art are likely to walk in the door of Bentley gallery and think that the work is full of eye-popping color, dynamic lines, and rhythmic compositions punctuated by the stark use of negative space. In other words, they are likely to receive Johnson's work as an exquisite example of pictorial design. And this is the case here in the Valley of the Sun too, where hard edge abstraction isn't shown as regularly as it is in Las Vegas, and certainly not as often as it has been on the west coast, the east coast, or the whole of Europe for that matter. Even so, there are two different contexts to be explored in relation to Johnson's work. The first is the historical dimension of his project, and the second concerns the value it holds for us in the contemporary moment.

0.2 Starting with the former, we have to understand that the history of hard edge abstraction has gone by many names over the course of the twentieth century, which has seen geometric painting referred to as being Non-Objective, Suprematist, Constructivist, Classical, Concrete, Op-Art, Minimalist, Neo-Geo and a whole host of other monikers. There isn't space in a short review like this one to write a history of these movements and their attending polemics, all of which consist of conflicting agendas even within artistic camps that go by one and the same name. Rather, we can only say that each of these schools falls into one of three categories, or general outlooks, that inform the process of making geometric art.

0.3 The first is that of being theocrats, which is to say, those artists who believe that the image refers to a higher order of organization, or rather, that it valorizes the idea of another type of order other than the world we commonly refer to as being 'naturalistic'. The second perspective is that of the iconocrats, which is composed of artists who make no claims on behalf of the image, and

for whom the image is considered to be entirely self-supporting, i.e., a thing that issues from its own internal logic or the artist's inspiration... or really, any mix thereof. By contrast with these first two groups we can say that the third order of geometric painters consists of those artists who are ideocrats, or really, those geometric painters who attempt to critique the ideas of the other two groups, usually in an effort to challenge some aspect of the existing social order, be it pictorial, political or otherwise. But how do these three dispositions show themselves throughout the geometric art of the last century, and what points of reference, and even influence, do they provide for us in assessing the works of Dion Johnson?



Dion Johnson, Cathedral, 2014, 60 x 40 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

PART ONE: Modern Geometric Abstraction and the Irrepressible Need to Believe.

1.1 In order to answer this question we have to start with understanding the kind of beliefs that can be attributed to the geometrical theocrats, a group that was inaugurated by Kasimir Malevich and his painting of a single black square at the exhibition 0.10 in 1915.¹ As the father of Non-Objective painting Malevich believed that creating modern art consisted of being a doctor to culture. He even wore a doctor's coat while he diagnosed what had gone wrong with his students work, and then presented options for how the same work could act in service of greater cultural imperatives, i.e., in the service of higher order considerations beyond that of simply expressing oneself.

1.2 What is not as well known about Malevich is that the kind of Non-Objectivity that he engaged with was against the rational order of industrialization, or rather, it was an attempt to introduce aesthetic considerations into this order so that the world would not be dominated by ends-means rationality absent any sense of poesis. This was the real meaning behind 'Non-Objective painting', which was not a machine aesthetic, but a hand painted, intuitively felt, and personally prescribed approach to aesthetic experience in an increasingly mechanized culture.

1.3 In this way, geometric art was born of a kind of misunderstanding that was communicated through mechanical reproduction. Thus, it is not without a touch of irony that hard edge painting,

and the myriad of forms and schools that adopted a seamless approach to the construction of images derived from the geometric impulse, emerged from this mimetic misconception about Malevich's work. Furthermore, when the first artists in Europe and America saw Malevich's pieces in person, and read his manifesto, they were just as shocked that his paintings weren't absolutely flat as they were that his ideas about a total transformation of society appeared to be rather robust. But the thing that is important to recognize about Malevich's version of geometric painting, like the other Suprematists and Constructivists that followed his art and general 'program', is that it was indeed, born of the notion of supporting a new theocratic order. It was to be an order that heralded the coming of a new transcendent reality that fused the utopic aims of art with the dominant mode of production. Another way of saying the same thing is that modern geometric art was birthed from the political program of joining art and life, but in this case, life was the communist revolution and the order was a kind of modern secular theocracy.

1.4 This double obfuscation, both of the intentions that comprised the theocratic origins of geometric art and its political agenda, are only ever barely hinted at in Johnson's work through the use of abstract forms like a cathedral or titles that can be thought of as referring to militaristic transport vehicles, like the painting Helicopter for instance. Only these forms are filtered through the idea of a new digital order, an order that is played out as an aesthetic proposition already implicated in the mode of production that issues from the electronic age. In this way, Johnson's art already accepts Malevich's general premise, but without making any avant-garde claims, or manifesto like declaratives, in support of its position in the field of aesthetic experience.

1.5 Instead, we can say that Johnson's paintings are retro-futurist by both design, and dare I say, intent. They are part of an already well-established theocracy, one that is circumscribed by the valuation of geometric appraisal in today's auction houses, in collectors portfolios and by a growing desire for a kind of painting that courts the look of computational design, simulated worlds and the virtuosity of a 'technical' aesthetic. In this way, we find ourselves living at the far end of Malevich's vision because the ideological basis behind of the fusion of art and life is now granted to numerical standards in the era of technocratic capital, and not the revolution of everyday life.

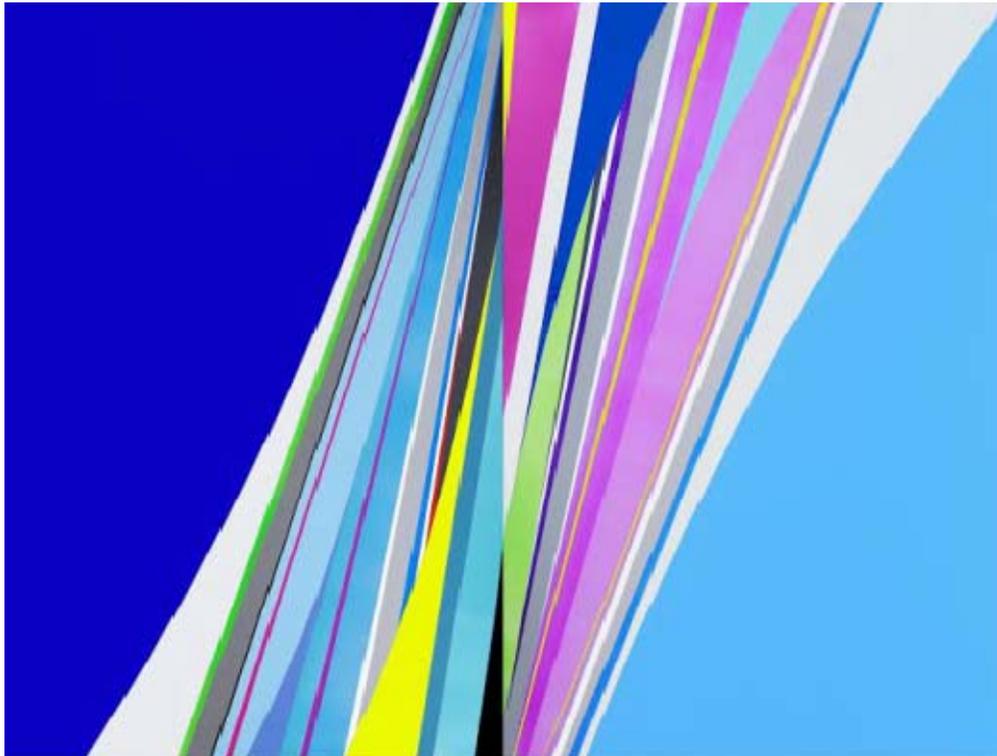
1.6 Or, looked at from another perspective, one could say that while Monet subjected the cathedral to a number of variations that became one of the most famous series of paintings in all of modern art because it highlighted the transient nature of color, and by proxy, challenged the notion of a stable belief in the substantive relation between form and color, Johnson's work gives us something else entirely. This is because Monet's theocratic beliefs drove him to explore endless variations in the spectral shifts of color throughout the day as the foundational experience of phenomenal reality while Johnson's work is a picture that issues from the theocratic order of morphological design and virtual impressions. Another way of saying the same thing is that in the age of digital reproduction the cathedral needs no variations because it is an object of pure ideation, and as such, it could be subjected to an unlimited number of digital filters, separated from the cyclical nature of day and night, forming a kind of series without end or even a concrete referent. That is why just one painting titled Cathedral is enough in Johnson's show. It points to a different phenomenological order, namely, the order of remediation, or of Monet's most well know subject re-presented to us through another kind of virtual experience.

1.7 And Johnson knows full well that Malevich and Monet are both forerunners to the use of Photoshop filters, pixels and a kind of technological thinking, and he exploits it by adding one more variation to the art historical record that was first impressed upon us by Monet's indelible series and Malevich's definition of Non-Objectivity, both of which take as their central theme, the idea of working with new impressions. Johnson does this of course, because Monet was already working at the limits of the tangible and even the somewhat illegible, by creating pictures of an ethereal aspect of our visual world as well as rejecting the harsh contours of academic painting. In this way, Monet presented us with a higher order of reality based on the continual transformation of perception, just as Malevich's strict reductionism gave us a purer form of graphic impressionism. Their aesthetic goals were the same, only their politics were different.

Malevich embraced a poetic version of industrial design while Monet paid off the city officials to make sure that the local train route didn't fall within the horizon of his favorite garden.

1.8 Yet, what they both have in common is that they broke with the need to reproduce the visible world in a mechanical manner, where Mondrian represents something of a middle path between Malevich and Monet because he simply made his own geometric world and moved into it, exploring his own impressions of geometry as evidence of 'the order' that exists behind all other orders. While Malevich tried to make a new world; and Mondrian made his life into a total work of art; and Monet explored the order outside, all three artists were still theocrats because they believed others would follow their lead and ultimately establish a new order of art.

1.9 By contrast, Johnson's work is in dialogue with an aesthetic born of another reality altogether, one that is provided for by the Ethernet, rather than the ethereal impressions of light, the expression of geometric neo-Platonism, or the political expression of revolutionary motives. And so, his work is a kind of second generation project in a theocratic refrain, one that relies on embracing an unreal order that is as absolute and unchanging as the set operations from which it is composed, where each pictorial arrangement functions much like what the philosopher Alain Badiou calls a 'Platonism of the multiple'.² But such a claim cannot be understood in its full measure unless we also attempt to account for Johnson's relation to the iconocrats and the ideocrats of the last century as well.



Dion Johnson, Helicopter, 2013, 60 x 80 x 2, Acrylic on canvas (two canvases). Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

Paradise Lost on the West Coast: The Demise of the Modern Theocrats and the Rise of the California Iconocrats.

2.1 This brings us to the second order of geometric artists that appeared on the avant-garde scene in the twentieth century. Although no one referred to them as such at the time, they were the great iconocrats. This group of artists was largely comprised of southern California painters that were reacting to the unabashed organicism of the New York School, or to the growing influence of Abstract Expressionism around the world. And while geometric painting was being made in different artistic communities everywhere as a kind of reaction-formation to the reigning

ethos of the 'Cool School', it was really this rather small but dedicated encampment in Southern California that got the lion's share of attention for codifying a counter-proposition to the major names who made New York into the new art capital of the world. And of course, I've selected to highlight their contributions here because they are also the obvious forerunners to Dion Johnson's chosen aesthetic. Obviously, I am referring to the group of hard edge painters known as the Abstract Classicists.

2.2 While the most well known of the group was Lorser Feitelson, who studied the sacred geometries behind nature and classical art, and then let these designs inform the kinds of decisions he made in his compositions, many of his contemporaries took different routes to producing what was later deemed a 'classical' method. Taken as a group however, the Abstract Classicists were far more influenced by the Surrealists, and how images could emerge from unconscious associations in an almost gestalt like manner that could be built up to represent a series of visual tensions, both harmonious and dissonant.

2.3 In this way, the dialogues that defined the Abstract Classicists moved from depicting a transcendental order to engaging with a personal one, or rather, they tried to create a bridge between the two worlds by using geometry in much the same way that a number of Ab-Ex painters claimed that primal Jungian archetypes were the basis of their gestural imagery. This too, is another reason that geometric painters on the west coast got more attention than a lot of other hard edge painting being done at that time. They represented both the pictorial negation and the conceptual integration of the same themes that dominated the New York school, which was something of a rare accomplishment in itself.

2.4 And yet, the Abstract Classicists ultimately had more in common with the most abstract works of the Surrealists and even the Magical Realists to some degree. In fact, Feitelson referred to his longest standing series as "magical space forms" rather than classical abstractions based on the rules of proportion or ideal notions of visual balance and enduring stability.³ This is most evident anywhere a paradoxical sense of space dominated the compositions of the Abstract Classicists, a movement that is still much more widely recognized for having played depth against flatness, intense colors against muted ones, and rectilinear forms against curvilinear shapes.

2.5 As a consequence, the Abstract Classicist weren't very classicist at all, which, had it been true, would have shoehorned them in with the previous group of theocrats. But this was not really the case when one reads their manifestos, letters and personal biographies. Thus, the kind of iconocratic effects evidenced in the works of the Abstract Classicists live on today as an enduring example of the power of iconic geometries. And of course, we see a strong current of this same ethic toward cultivating the graphic power of the image in the works of Johnson too, but only as an aesthetic program of sorts, and by that I mean, as a set of formal comparisons that can be drawn between his oeuvre and the hard edge painters that are upheld as the pinnacle of geometric art on the west coast.

2.6 And yet, Johnson's work also marks a clear departure from the aesthetic of this school inasmuch as he has warped and twisted their compositional preferences into a twirling play of geometric designs that are juxtaposed against big bold block shapes that have more to do with color field painting than any classical outlook per say. In other words, Johnson perverts the working ideology of the iconocrat-classicists by being more playful with his pictorial choices, even while he still believes in some of the foundational tenants that make their work so impressive, even by today's standards.

2.7 In this way, we can only say that Johnson is an iconocrat in the sense that he wants his work to have the same force of visual impact as the classicists, even though his particular aesthetic comes out of an entirely different set of generational concerns. If anything, he remains a theocrat if we allow him the indulgence of being seen as a sort of second generation 'classicist', or really, as an example of a 'second-coming' of this regionally celebrated school of geometric painting, placed under the sign of so many baroque variations. Afterall, both the renaissance and the

baroque were theocratic orders, which is to say they were orders founded on belief, and in the case of the baroque, on a belief in forwarding the achievements of a previous generation of artists that had the same space of reflection and time for reinvention as Johnson has had in relation to the Abstract Classicists.

2.8 As such, Johnson's work falls into the same category of revisionary ratios as his So Cal forerunners, both at the level of belief and aesthetic taste.⁴ This is because his project follows from the first generation of theocratic painters who believed in forming a new order of sorts, and yet, Johnson's pictures grab their aesthetic punch from making die-cut geometries out of the motifs that dominated the Abstract Classicists. Only, his pictures are not as restrained nor is his method of making quite so sacrosanct.

2.9 And, as we shall see a little later on, the baroque became the opening gesture of postmodern hard edge painting as well, and Johnson's work really represents something of a synthesis not only of these two schools as a kind of theocratic gesture that has to do with the belief in geometric painting as a paradigm of purported purpose and contemporary purchase, but also as an art practice that develops through a series of negations, syntheses and integrations based on former paradigms.



Dion Johnson, Turnstile, 2015, 32 x 36 x 2, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.
The Beginning of the 'turn' in Geometric Art: The Birth of the First Generation of Ideocrats in Hard Edge painting.

3.1 But before skipping too far ahead, we have to take a brief look at the last painters of the geometric idiom in the modern era. But to be entirely fair, taken as a group, their works span the period that reaches from mid-century modernism well into post-modernism and beyond. Thus, we can say that by contrast with these first two orders of geometric painting, the third order of geometric artists consists almost solely of ideocrats, and it is worth mentioning they are still very much in vogue even today. This group stretches from Joseph Albers to Bridget Riley and includes all of those artists engaged in Op-Art, Art Concrete and a whole host of other movements that wrote extensively on the operations of color and retinal experience. The 'idea' of the ideocrats was to explore the full expanse of operations that exists between the eye and the mind, between

perception and comprehension, between phenomenal experience and cognition. In the postmodern era, this would be expanded to include radical optical dissonance and even social and political concerns, i.e., the evaluation of cognition in the broadest sense of shifting perspectives, social awareness, consciousness raising, etc.

3.2 Thus, this rather large group of artists helped to move the discourse around geometric painting from the supposed 'classicism' of the California school of hard edge abstraction to a fascination with the open ended play of haptic qualities that issue from the relativity of impressions given over to the viewer at the site of reception. In other words, it was not a transcendent order or a classical order of stability that these artists were concerned with, but the shifting ground of all experience, and the varied 'order' of embodied perception. Just as hard edge painting in California was the formal negation and conceptual synthesis of Abstract Expressionism in New York, the ideocrats were the formal negation and conceptual synthesis of the classical attitude in geometric art, removed from any notion of a transcendental order outside of the experience of the here and now.

3.3 This is because the ideocrats valorized the activity of the image as the most abstract of abstract possibilities, where perception itself was seen as a site of negotiation, interpretation and even suggestibility. They didn't want to resolve the gestalt function of the image, but to place the onus on the viewer to carry out the operation of doing just that on their own terms. In this way, the ideocrats were not gesturing toward another order of meaning, or making grand overtures about the power of aesthetics to participate in world revolutions. The modern ideocrats wouldn't even permit an expanded field of concerns to enter into their program until the rise of postmodern geometric abstraction.

3.4 Instead, the ideocrats of the modern era focused only on creating a revolution in how we think about and experience perception, as well as how disordered our collective reactions are in interacting with the vibrating graphics of a geometric image. The problem was that this art was also representative of a disruption in the collective unconscious as well, especially as modernism began to run aground, both as a logic of production and as an epochal outlook. The appearance of the ideocrats, or of an ideocratic outlook on artistic production, almost always represents this function in the logic of culture, namely, it marks the exhaustion and critique of a certain system of values, or in this case, beliefs.

3.5 In this way the ideocrats appeared as a school at the end of modernism and postmodernism alike, which provides a clue to the fact that we aren't beyond engaging with abstraction and geometric abstraction in particular as the spirit of the age, especially if we stop to consider its relation to the increasing levels of computational abstraction that are the explicit content of capitalism in all three of its forms: industrial, post-industrial and hyperbolic. This shows itself in the geometric idiom in painting in the period of industrial abstraction as the working 'ethic' of the Suprematists, Constructivists, Classicists, etc. Painting as a type of industrious activity was the keynote of these movements and their manifesto's. Again, the geometric order mirrors the dominant mode of production in the post-industrial era by dealing with 'working space', or with a kind of theatrical production where the emphasis is on immersive experience. This, of course, is the hallmark of Op-Art, Minimalism and Neo-Geo. And finally, in the hyperbolic period of art production that we fondly refer to as being pluralist, or much more properly, as being neo-baroque, the geometric idiom finds itself dominated by works not unlike Johnson's in one singular aspect, which is that they are almost wholly recombinant in means and synthetic in their themes.

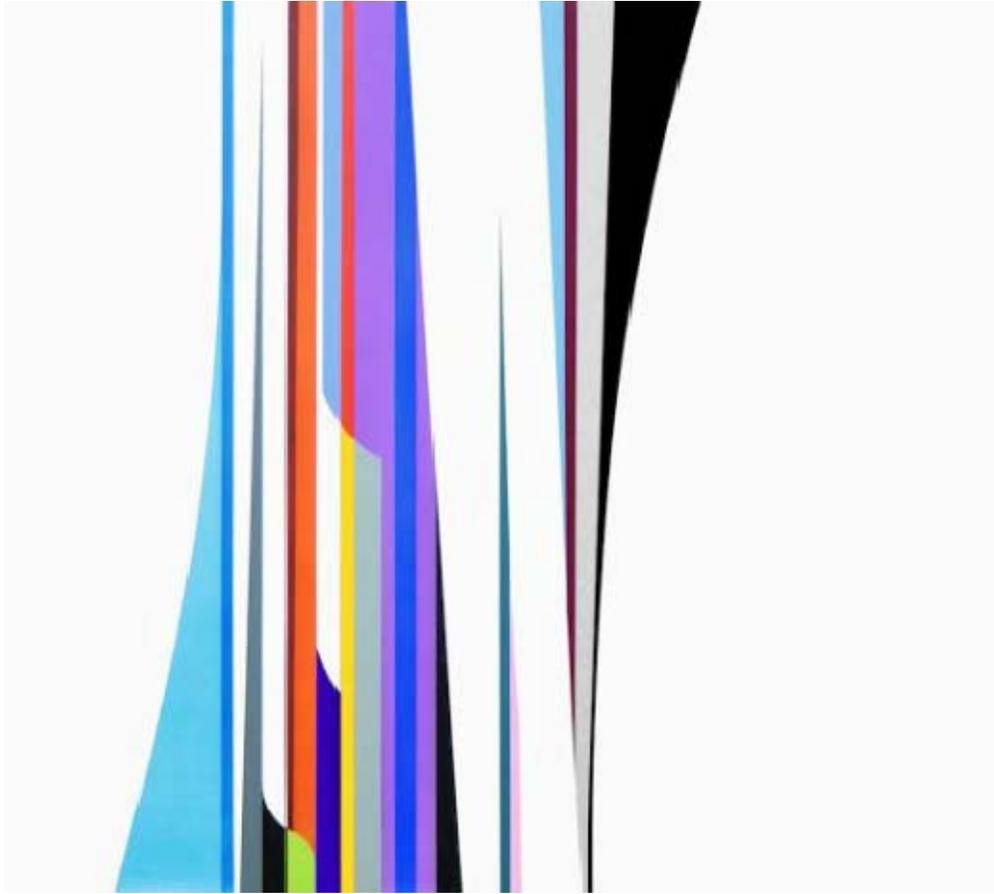
3.6 But again, I've jumped too far ahead here because I am only referring to the dialectic triad of modernism, postmodernism and pluralism as evidence of a conscious exploration of the idea of hard edge abstraction and the fact that over the course of the last one hundred years, hard edge painting has produced a perfect Hegelian triad twice over - thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis - that reaches from 1915 to 2015. This problem, of tracking the play of ideation, which never left the scene of geometric art, (or any form of art for that matter), was misplaced as talk about the 'death of painting' in postmodernism, which once again, is simply a way of characterizing modernism as

a period of productivity and expansion, of postmodernism as a period of exhaustion and negation, and pluralism as a period of recovery and integration.

3.7 And yet, to the dismay of the postmoderns and the pluralists, who denied and still deny every linear account of the conceptual machinations of art associated with production and 'development', it is becoming increasingly clear that these paradigms make up the substantive content of the 'return of Hegel' in both the artworld and aesthetic theory because pre-, post-, and pluri- are the three moments Hegel describes as thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis in any epochal formation.⁵ Of course, this is only true from the point of view of consciousness, which was the basis of Hegel's actual thesis on art, a thesis which itself, depends on two interdependent notions. The first of these is that after the 1800's art would increasingly be about the Idea of art. The second part of Hegel's philosophy about aesthetics consisted of the notion that he left for us art critics to sort out, namely, that visual interpretation is nothing more than the possibility of the exploration of an Idea given by the confines of its discursive field, which in this case, is that of hard edge painting.

3.8 Regardless of whether anyone understands Hegel's point today, or whether anyone wants to venture a line of art historical observations that illuminate how the art object is evidence of consciousness as the evolution of a type of pictorial ideation, we can say quite unequivocally, that what defined the modern ideocrats was working with the 'idea' of perception itself as the content of geometric abstraction. Another way of saying the same thing is that each school that comes at the end of a generational logic is punctuated by a moment of absolute Hegelianism, of art production as an instance of the Idea reflecting on its own course through two stages, namely, that of thesis and anti-thesis. And of course, some of the vibratory qualities that issue from the high moment of Op-Art, or of 'medium specificity' reflecting on its own conditions as being absolutely relative; or on the lost value of 'the truth to materials' becoming disrupted by the viewer's own subjective impressions; or of the claims of 'purity', either as a means to a certain teleological end or a new politic altogether; or simply their subsumption into an industry of affective delights known as 'fine art' --- we can say that all of this is present in Johnson's work in his adoption of principles like simultaneous contrast and the push and pull created by certain colors as well as in a knowing nod and wink to his intended audience at the site of reception about how color and sensation work. These were, after all, the ideas that Albers and Hoffman fought over in *The Search for the Real*, or rather, their respective searches for the reality of color relations in art, which is another way of saying 'the Absolute' in art production.

3.9 And yet, this is not the explicit content of Johnson's work. Johnson certainly wants us to have an active optical experience, but not one that creates instability at the level of affect. He wants us to take a certain degree of pleasure in visual consumption, but not as a means of courting disparate forms of pictorial disquietude or hallucinatory effects. These were, after all, the stock and trade of the modern ideocrats. In this sense, Johnson's pictures are more reserved than the mid-century ideocrats because they work with the acute effects of color while leaving the relationship between the viewer and the painting relatively undisturbed. This gives us a second confirmation that we may be in the presence of a postmodern, or really, a pluralist theocrat when we look at the works of Dion Johnson because he worships at a different temple, or doctrine of production, that celebrates the geometric in art rather than the realm of commitments that belong to the ideocrats, be they modern, postmodern, or otherwise.



Dion Johnson, *Ice Skate*, 2014, 32 x 36 x 2, Acrylic on canvas. Image Courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

PART TWO: The Postmodern Reprisal to Modern Geometric Art and the Need Not to Believe.

4.1 This quickly brings us to the conclusion of the modern influence of geometers in painting if we are practicing interlocution as the art of interpretation, or at least, looking at art through the lens of consciousness. As such, we have thus far, summed up the motives behind the kind of investigations taken up by three different orders of geometric artists in the first half of the twentieth century as well as their subtle influence on Johnson's aesthetic. From here, we must examine the motives of their post-modern counterparts, and then finally, take a look at how these three outlooks are still at play in the pluralist era, and in Johnson's work in an entirely new way. Thus, we have to continue our analysis with another figure of the 'turn' between modern and postmodern art, a painter who is decidedly characterized as being on the postmodern side of the paradigm shift that took place a decade or two after midcentury. Here I am talking about that geometric painter who recently got his day at the Whitney in retrospect, one Mr. Frank Stella.⁶

4.2 Hotly debated even now, Stella's paintings upset the ideocrats of his time by producing works that relied on a kind of geometric hermeticism that ultimately proved the Greenbergian teleos untenable, or at least, somewhat uninteresting as a way forward for abstract art. Stella's most famous suite of works, which were the paintings that really defined the 'break' between modern and postmodern abstraction, consisted of making geometrically contoured canvasses that were then 'filled-in' in a way that mirrored the outer boundaries of the work, repetitiously completing the painting at its center-point. This ultimately removed the question of organic unity from being of any importance at all in the minds of most abstract painters by fulfilling the dictates of the desire for flatness, purity and the truth to materials in the most auto-didactic manner possible. This was

aesthetic utility and organic unity at best, which is to say, as an embodiment of the highest levels of dialectic contradiction!

4.3 As a consequence, Stella's works showed how the supposed drive toward reductionism and essentialism was itself, reducible to little more than a mechanical set of operations, and by proxy, a mechanical way of thinking. This reframing of the kind of aesthetic absolutism that the fine art world traded on at that time ultimately relegated the Greenbergian paradigm, and its attending system of values, to the dustbins of history. And of course, it is not without irony that this reframing was both conceptual and literal, or that it was comprised of the acts known as negation and synthesis... which ultimately resulted in a new thesis about the geometric enterprise in art.

4.4 This is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that Stella 'turned' away from essentialism as a type of absolutism by birthing something like a school of geometric expressionism that continues unabated today. In Stella's break with his early work, his geometries expanded, not only to include gestural marks and sign systems from the culture at large, but his art practice eventually took on a sense of full relief as sculptural installations that included every kind of geometric motif imaginable. This helped to establish a new iconoclastic order in abstraction, one which Stella himself said must compete with the greatest accomplishments of the baroque era in his seminal text *Working Space*.⁷ But this was not because of his belief in another order, but in the order of the image to be self-supporting as an example of the totality of contradictions associated with the formal operations and sign systems that function as iconic symbols for 'art' in a secular age.

4.5 And in this way, Stella managed to set the tone for all of postmodern geometric abstraction as a program of reacting to the accomplishments of the modern era. In Stella's case, this consisted of subverting the conceptual premise that relied on identifying the producer with his or her given forms as being of a singular iconic value, such as Pollock's drips or Newman's zips. Instead, Stella wanted to move the discourse of abstract art from the endless reproduction of reified motifs, which is to say of art-as-style, to a logic of radically open iconicity. In other words, he wanted a more disordered sense of order.

4.6 Thus, we can say that Stella desired completely impure geometries, depth of field in literal space as well as pictorial space, and the play of formal elements as truly elemental forces in the work, and not just for himself as a matter of personal preference, but as so many options for the next generation of producers. In other words, Stella desired a kind of unbounded iconicity that was played out through an expansive hermeneutic of conflicting operations, or something like, a theatrical approach to subverting the moderns who simply thought of iconicity as the 'stamp' of success, or of making art into something like a production line based on the cult of celebrity, art-for-art's sake, or so many other rhetorical positions.

4.7 The implications of Stella's new working program was that it resisted massification and the industrialization of production, and this is what constituted his break with the moderns, both as an aesthetic choice and as the introduction of a post-industrial mode of painting, i.e., a post-modern model of making. Of course, this only resulted in a higher level of contradiction, where iconicity was pursued for its own sake rather than reproduced as variations on a single motif ad infinitum. But, for a new generation of hard edge painters who had longed to marry the worlds of hard edge painting and expressionism, it returned the power of the image to a higher order of means and a greater sense of freedom.

4.8 By contrast with works from this era, Johnson's project embraces the chromatic opulence that Stella brought back into the discourse of geometric art, and at times, Johnson has even indulged painting in 'the expanded field' too by making installations that cover the walls from floor to ceiling, producing the feeling of a 'total work of art'. But by refusing the desire to create forms with a deeper sense of relief we can only say that these restrained forays beyond the canvas show a type of influence that Stella's permissions open up in Johnson's oeuvre. And so, it would be wrong to use Johnson's occasional derivations beyond the picture plane as an excuse to lump him in with the perspectives proffered by the postmodern iconocrats.

4.9 Of course, we can't say what direction Johnson's work might take in the future, but we can rest assured that his current art practice is decidedly not of the order of immersive aesthetics that have followed Stella's iconoclastic efforts to make the image stand out before us, in the most literal and metaphoric way, which is to say, using its varied grounds mixed with the symbols of the geometer, be they protractors, triangles, gradations, etc. That honor, of following Stella's program into a richer depth of field, into polemics of re-appropriation and the critique of reification, as well as working with space and place belongs instead to the Judy Pfaff's and Jessica Stockholders of the artworld, and not really, to Dion Johnson.



Dion Johnson, *Night Light*, 2015, 32 x 36 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

From Geometric Expressionism to Systems Thinking in Hard Edge Painting: Minimalism as an Idiom Subtracted from Subjectivism.

5.1 Even so, this kind theatrical approach to making geometric painting come off the wall, and out into real space, was the effect which was given a reductive twist by the time that Minimalism was in full swing, vis-a-vis, the rise of pictorial asceticism. And like all of the aforementioned camps of hard edge painting there were just as many conflicting views at the heart of the Minimalist movement as every other movement that adopted a geometric set of sensibilities. Most notably, there was the dramatic divide between Agnes Martin, who claimed a kind of transcendental function for her work while most of the other painters included in the Minimalist camp characterized their programs as one type of 'systems' painting or another.⁸ And yet, from either perspective, the final outcome was a new generation of painters that talked about the theater of effects that issued from their works as producing affective states separated from subjective expressivity. In this regard, they furthered Stella's program by not only removing the issue of

iconicity from identity but by actively disassociating the most commodifiable aspects of their production, ultimately placing the emphasis on the use of 'the unexpressive' as a condition of aesthetic appreciation. In other words, the Minimalists talked about their art as being generative rather than intuitive; as being operational rather than inspirational; as being put in motion, rather than appealing to a set of emotions. Or, as Sol LeWitt famously declared "The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."⁹

5.2 In a way, the Minimalists were to be the negative image of Abstract Expressionism and they took part of their program from the synthetic propositions of Stella's 'working program', but subtracted the expressive modalities he had developed in his own form of geometric expressionism. In other words, the Minimalists embraced Stella's idea of using theatrical effects from painting that blended the sculptural and the painterly, only they transformed it into a more austere theater of objecthood described so well by Michel Fried.¹⁰ This taking up of Stella's thesis, forming a kind of anti-thesis, and coming out with a new synthesis of sorts, was just one more step on the journey of art moving deeper into the realm of ideation, or of the Idea as exalted above the intentions of the producer in order to form another synthesis in the dialectic play that defined the journey and development of geometric art over the course of the twentieth century. As with all movements, it would naturally engender the return of the repressed, which is to say, a critique of pure ideation by the next generation of geometric painters. After all, this is part and parcel of the logic of cultural consciousness, generational reaction-formations, and even, the capitalist emphasis on the constant need for perpetual innovation.

5.3 Thus, a turnabout in the polemics that surrounded Minimalism as a 'critical paradigm' occurred a generation later. This happened not only because Minimalism was about the idea of the operations of the object in space and time as evidence of a system of thought that was implicated in the contradictions that were internal to modern art as an 'expressive model', but because the Minimalists achieved this unique accomplishment of making objects that felt absent any producer without ever realizing that an object that 'felt' removed from authorial attention, as well as transcendental claims about history, teleology, or progress, was also very likely to be reclaimed as a mass aesthetic faster than any other avant-garde movement of the twentieth century.

5.4 Of course, this ran contrary to the intentions of the Minimalists because they put a decided emphasis on viewing objects in the round and activating perception in a way that incorporated a lot of the relative effects of the first generation of ideocrats, while still pursuing a theocratic effect that eschewed authorship by pointing to the workings of a strictly internal logic. Without a doubt, Minimalism was the worship of order as order. It replaced organic unity with a set of empirical operations. Or, to put it another way, Minimalism was the dialectic negation of the ideocrats' identification with optical pleasures, only they subtracted the focus on affect and substituted it with a kind of systems thinking, or a type of game theory of artistic production. In other words, their worship of order was of the immanent order that can be created in this world without any allusion to a horizon of meaning beyond it. One again, the cultural logic of geometric art moves itself forward as a genre by way of negation and synthesis toward purer and purer 'working models' of Ideality.

5.5 And while it goes without saying that this logic was put into motion by the artist, and that it was also dreamt up by the artist, the final result was almost always rational and without compromise, giving us a school of works that look as though they emerged from a strictly Platonic order, or even, a kind of 'scientism' of aesthetic/ascetic propositions. That was minimalism's 'secretive' methodology, to attempt to raise ideation-as-process to being a transcendental gesture subtracted from the inflections of authorship, or to give us art as an logico-scientific paradigm. The contradiction here being, that all it left the audience to talk about was the little bit of subjective inflection that occurred, quite by accident, in the execution of systems painting, as the last remains of 'taste'.

5.6 Thus, minimalism achieved the effect of subtracting itself from the cult of iconicity as the

repetition of personal expressivity at the very same time that it succeeded in becoming an object that most decidedly resembled industrial manufacture. This amounted to raising the level of dialectic contradictions even beyond the kind of program that Stella had been courting in the first part of his career, not to mention, the outright rejection of the ostentatious aesthetic that developed in his later years. In other words, in pursuing the theocratic order of ascetic Platonism, the Minimalists accidentally fell prey to embracing an industrial mode of production, leaving the reigning theocratic belief in abstraction intact as a kind of absolutism that was coextensive with the ideology of capital and technocratic scientism. They did this largely by working in serial forms as a model of experimentation and innovation. This was theocratic art 2.0, 3.0, 4.0, etc., and it mirrored the logic of 'systems' innovation in post-industrial capitalism to a tee. And while this is a rather paradoxical situation in the history of geometric painting if ever there was one, it created the conditions for Buren and groups like Surface/Support to self-apply the geometric order to the social landscape as a form of critique that escaped the problematic aspects of putting objects that looked like they belonged on the sales room floor of high end decor boutiques in a white cube that was supposed to trade on trafficking in greater 'designs'.

5.7 As for thinking about Minimalism in relation to Johnson's work we can say that we don't really get much of a hint of the influence of this period of geometric abstraction from his pictorial choices except through the repeated use of empty spaces, of black and white, and perhaps, even the complete absence of touch. But most of this was already in play in the work of Minimalism's forerunners. If anything, the asymmetry that circumscribes Johnson's different bodies of work often feels as though someone has inverted the Minimalist sensibility in order to give it the feeling of formal participation from within, or systems painting gone awry. Johnson's paintings have a kind of internal activation and even a wild frenzy about them that is closer to making the geometric into an instance of schizoid aesthetics when juxtaposed against the canonized works of Minimalism's heyday.

5.8 This makes it safe to say, that Johnson comes at the idea of geometric abstraction from a very different place than the Minimalist theocrats, who gave us a Platonism of production, a synthesis of deductions, and a belief in the power of the object over that of the image as an expressive potential. But what is important to remember here is that it is these same qualities that Johnson will work against, even while remaining a theocrat himself, and so a paradigm that bares little formal resemblance to his work can be seen to provide a necessary dialectic tension at the level of motivations, which is to say, as a conceptual program. An easier way to say the same thing is that the hidden continuity between the goals of the first generation of theocrats, who aimed to fuse industrial production with secular principles of design is realized in the work of the Minimalists, whose objects would be most at home in the buildings of the western block architects who thought up 'Brutalism' as the final outcome of Constructivism run by committee. Minimalism is after all, something like this same aesthetic in the States with an added dash of color, and our embrace of it as a mass aesthetic has to do with the fact that Minimalism as a model of making is best suited to function not only as a common re-articulation of design elements, but it is also the closest thing we have to art functioning like a communist approach to mass design.

5.9 The real kicker here is that today's parametric approach to architecture, which often consists of letting a design algorithm play itself out as form, and then using that form as the substantive content for a building, is the kind of architecture that Johnson's paintings would be at home in. Thus, a further reduction in authorial intention even from the working program of the Minimalists has resulted in a third generation theocrat outlook whose radical secularization consists in getting as close as one can get to having no producer at all. Paradoxically, this further reduction in intentionality or expressivity has resulted in organic forms rather than architectonic Brutalism. Furthermore, there is an echo of this aesthetic in the works of Johnson too, or at least the influence of the kind of architectonic look associated with neo-organicism in 'fluid' architecture represented by the later works of Frank Gehry, Greg Lynn and so many others. So, if we are being entirely honest, the theocratic enterprise has never been disrupted, but only refined in three stages: architectonic design (Non-Objective, Suprematist, Constructivist, Bauhaus), architectonic design with new technological means (Minimalism, Deconstructivist, Postmodernist,

Simulationist), and architectonic design with sophisticated means (Parametric, Folding, Blob, Emergent, Neo-Baroque). It is no surprise that the 'spirit' of these three moments in the evolution of the idea of a secular theocratic order follows the logic of thesis, (the creation of a new society), anti-thesis (the reduction of that impulse to the pure play of its constitutive elements), and synthesis (the joining of that order with the reigning social order, i.e., technocratic capitalism) just as it follows that Johnson's aesthetic taste belongs to the last of these three schools in geometric art and/or architecture. After all, Johnson's work is not outside the order of the ages, the logics of production, the dictates of the genre, and the common currency of the theocratic enterprise, or at least, that's all we can say before coming to a qualitative description of his works.



Dion Johnson, *City Girl*, 2014, 36 x 64 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas (two canvases). Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

The End of Postmodernism and the Return of the Ideocrats in Geometric Art: Critique as the High Moment of Synthesis in Hard Edge Painting.

6.1 But before delving into any criticism concerning the contemporary conditions of artistic production and Johnson's work in particular, we have to first look back at the end of the twentieth century, which brought with it the critique of every order of ideation, but self-reflexively, as its own Ideal. And this was evidenced in Pop abstraction and Neo-Geo, both of which gestured at the re-appropriation and the subversion of culture writ large. The first of these two schools was obviously known as Pop Art, which aimed its self-reflexive critique at the massification of 'culture', while the second critical encampment, Neo-Geo, took a stance against the transcendental claims made on behalf of fine art, and geometric painting in particular. In other words, neither movement subscribed to the logics put forward by the postmodern iconocrats or theocrats. And they both did this by playing those particular methodologies off against themselves.

6.2 Most notably perhaps was Lichtenstein's adoption of the method of mechanical reproduction as a means of resisting the cult of originality in high art as the dominant mode of production, while Peter Halley re-appropriated the history of geometric art as a means of underscoring the geometries of control associated with techno-bureaucratic 'systems'. Much like Lichtenstein, Halley adopted something of a cartoon-like aesthetic in order to point to the depthlessness of postmodern culture and its failure to produce a sustained 'cultural revolution'. And this too, was meant to double as a twofold critique of 'high culture' as well, not to mention being a commentary on the reification and fascination with 'affects' for their own sake, which was the hallmark of psychedelic art, hippy culture, and the utopic dream of 'tuning in, turning on and dropping out' of the superstructure of late capitalism. In other words, the dialectic tension of the ideocrats, at the end of both the modern and the postmodern eras, is always hyperbolic in terms of how they engage with different games of self-reflexivity about art and the dominant mode of production.

The only difference between the first and second generations being that the first worked for increasing freedom in the mode of artistic production while accidentally breaking art into its constituent parts in the era of formal subsumption by capital while the second strove for greater freedom in the realm of intellectual labor as part of the ideocratic paradigm, which was indicative of real subsumption, or the period of post-industrial capital. And yet, this double set of contradictions does not mean that the postmodern ideocrats are any less synthetic in their operations, and negative in demonstrating their positions, than say, the second generation of iconocrats and theocrats.

6.3 And while I could be accused of being a little ahistorical for mentioning Pop Art after Minimalism I am really referring here to the simulationist works of Lichtenstein from the period of the early eighties, when he focused almost entirely on making flat paintings that imitated gestural abstraction. Of course, it was during this same period that Halley began composing his essays about the critique of geometric art, which is no small coincidence. Thus, it is a short jump for Halley to pick up on the 'simulationist' aesthetic that both Lichtenstein and Warhol adopted and then turn it into a movement by infusing a bit of French theory, alla Foucault and Deleuze, at the very moment that semiotext(e) was translating the first portions of seminal works by a number of famous French Post-structuralists.

6.4 Lichtenstein however, is very clear in his interviews that at the level of ideation, he mirrors the camp of the Minimalists in 1) reacting to abstract expressionism by negating its formal means, 2) adopting a machine aesthetic that many people refer to as 'anti-art' because art at this time is so completely identified with the cult of expressivity, and 3) in only introducing minor variations on the original image as a way of commenting on the dominant aesthetic taste in mass culture at that time. Thus, Lichtenstein had the same essential working program as the Minimalists, only he incorporated both figurative and abstract imagery, and made distinctive changes in the content of what was being said by the characters in his works, and/or the formal arrangement of his graphemes.

6.5 The point here being, the logic of postmodernism is the same at the level of ideation, which is to say, as negation, when we consider simulationism to be the same kind of program that circumscribes Minimalism, Neo-Geometric art and Pop Art, not to mention Fluxus, Happenings, Photorealism, Neo-Expressionism, etc. But by comparison with these movements, it is only the addition of a greater level of self-reflexivity that allows Halley to work in a critique of older versions of hard edge painting in the same way that Lichtenstein took up the critique of mass culture. In fact, there is more continuity between Lichtenstein's artist statements and Peter's Halley's essay's "The Crisis in Geometry" and "Nature and Culture" than one might first suspect. So much so in fact, that calling Lichtenstein the father of Neo-Geo is more appropriate than citing Warhol in many ways, and Halley goes out of his way to obscure this connection in his writings by consciously foregrounding the originality of his own perspective, which simply consist of running Lichtenstein's program in the negative.¹¹

6.6 And beyond the simple recognition that Neo-Geo, (or simulationism), is simply Pop Art by other means, or rather, it is really Pop Art with a more selective focus on geometry, there is still something much more fundamental that is often overlooked at the level of ideation. What everyone seems to miss is the obvious Hegelian triad that issues from the efforts of the ideocrats in (Neo)geometric painting. The first moment of which was to place all emphasis on the operations of color as relative, and to consider this relativity as a kind of absolute statement about what can be done with the medium in its 'specificity' (Albers, Hoffman, etc); the second move by the postmodern ideocrats is to critique the removal of the medium from its 'specificity' in cultural terms (Lichtenstein, Halley, etc.); while the synthesis provided for by today's pluralists is simply to embrace this as a positive condition and to extend the idea of geometric systems and the activation of color to include the context of the exhibition, greater allusions to nature, cinema, photography and any number of racial, sexual, and gendered differences (Reed, Marcaccio, etc.). This, once again, provides us with a perfect Hegelian triad in the form of a thesis about new order of investigation ('pure' color relations), the negation of that order as being separate from the

conditions of the world in which they exist (re-contextualization), and finally, these two opposing perspectives are brought together by using them synthetically in order to build works of every greater complexity (pluralism). For a great example of what I'm talking about see the recent works and reviews of Odili Donald Odita's exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery.

6.7 As for whatever small allusion there is to this period of geometric art in Johnson's work, it is most certainly related to Halley's day-glow pallet and Lichtenstein's synthetic taste, both of which take an unabashed joy in celebrating the artificial. And really, that is about the extent to which we can draw any parallels between this camp of geometric painters and Johnson's work, which only further confirms the notion that Johnson may very well be a theocratic artist. And yet, together, these warring camps of theocrats, iconocrats and ideocrats created a dialogic contest over which school of art would become the reigning aesthetic in the paradigm of geometric painting in any given decade, and they did this by way of thesis, negation and synthesis at the level of intention, contestation and pictorial re-evaluation. But why is this so easily missed today?

6.8 First, the 'schools' of thought about hard edge painting no longer run in succession but are all co-extensive. In many ways modernism was a period of discrete camps, postmodernism began to see more overlapping movements and greater dialog between them, and today, we have different methodologies all happening simultaneously in a global exchange of image production throughout the world. Second, this is happening because of the hyperbolic mode of over-production, which is to say, as art schools pump out more and more graduates than ever before, each new wave of geometric painters is better educated and working from a greater diversity of opinions and influences than at any other time in history. In other words, pluralism is an endemic condition, or a kind of defacto status, that can now be attributed to the ethos of all artistic production with anyone in particular knowing what it means. Third, most critics overlook the dominant mode of production in capitalism, the changing logic of ideation, and the competition between painters in forwarding their program and/or the programs that came before them because they think that it stinks of reductionism, when in fact, it makes the art of interpretation into a rather complicated and messy business. Fourth, and finally, in the age of pluralism everyone hates to admit that these ideological positions continue to hold sway not only as the subtext of a given artist's working method; and not only as the context that allows new works to be received as meaningful; and not only as the obvious wall-text that accompanies canonization; but it is also the only intelligent way we can begin to speak about the pluralist era as an interlocking cartography of interests and conflicts about the motives behind artistic production.

6.9 Of course, this rather long digression brings us up to the present moment, and to a much greater question, which is how we think about geometric art in the early twenty-first century, and Dion Johnson's recent works, because these are the schools of thought which he was educated in, which he is in dialogue with, and which he owes a certain debt to at the level of inspiration, negotiation and sensation.



Dion Johnson, *Sky Diver*, 2015, 32 x 36 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of Bentley Gallery.

PART THREE: The Pluralist Polyphony as the Proliferation of Differential Hybrid Orders.

7.1 But before we proceed to comment directly on Dion's work, there are a few key points to understand about geometric painting today. Compared to the last century, most of today's hard edge painters are syncretists of a sort, who have adopted a hybrid aesthetic and polyvalent programs of making. Perhaps some of the most prominent examples are the ideocrat Sarah Morris who is post-Neo-Geo in adopting a multitude of mediums to comment on the growth of the same kind of corporate and governmental powers structures that Halley's art talked about in the 80's. Or there is the iconocrat, Mary Corse, who mixes Op-Art with Minimalist geometries in order to create a synthetic experience that exists somewhere between the ephemeral and the absolute. Or there is the theocrat, Tim Bavington, who brings together the theatrical presentation of his geometries by abutting his piano-key like paintings with large monochromes, mixing two different genres of production, one which is about the timing and the space of color as well as its variations, while the other is about the singular experience of an uninterrupted color field.

7.2 So even as these various perspectives continue to hold sway in the art world as so many mixed propositions about the future promise of hard edge painting, where do we place Johnson's work at this moment in time, and how is it in dialog with his immediate contemporaries? While Johnson's name traffics in L.A. alongside those other rising stars of geometric abstraction like Joe Lloyd and Thomas Burke, (both of whom are also represented by his Los Angeles gallery Western Projects), there is something uniquely different about Johnson's aesthetic that one shouldn't overlook. But this something is perhaps best understood by contrasting his work with those who show at his same gallery in L.A. and who also stand in the long line of ideo, theo and iconocrats in geometric art.

7.3 Certainly, Joe Lloyd's paintings pick up where Diebenkorn left off, only Lloyd works with a similar program in the negative. That is to say, Lloyd plays the geometric and the gestural off one another in an effort to create maximum visual tension absent any talk about essentialism and the landscape. He is an iconoclast to the degree that his work is absolutely anti-essentialist, and evidences this through the play of negation and synthesis: the negation of Diebenkorn's essentialism and the synthesis of his formal elements into higher orders of aesthetic contradiction. But what makes him an iconoclast is that he knows the iconic value of Diebenkorn's project, and he wants to further that sensibility by taking it beyond Diebenkorn's aesthetic commitments, commitments that may have kept him from realizing a greater vision for the integration of the geometric and the gestural as the two major conflicting tendencies of twentieth century abstraction.¹²

7.4 By contrast Thomas Burke has extended Stella's program in the negative by giving us warped geometries that look three dimensional in reproduction but are entirely flat in person. It is a project about programmatic hermeticism and optical inversions that aims to negate Stella's claims in Working Space about the future of geometric abstraction as an aesthetic project while using Stella's geometric motifs so you won't miss the allusion to the system of thought that undergirds his project. In other words, like Lloyd, his method is negation and synthesis: the negation of Stella's early aesthetic program by way of a synthesis of his iconic geometries from before the 'turn' mixed with the pictorial illusion of roundness, rather than say, actually creating works that operate in the round like late Stella. Thus, his is an intellectual project on par with other contemporary ideocrats who are running the working programs of twentieth century painting in reverse, almost like checking for bugs in a computational system, and then adding a new line of code to the OS. After all, in our era, this is how we distinguish the synthetic-pluralist ideocrats from their more ideologically motivated forerunners in the modern and postmodern periods.

7.5 In opposition to these two projects, we can posit the notion that Johnson is a theocrat inasmuch as we can identify the aesthetic programs that he embraces from the get go. He knows the power of the image, its genealogy in the history of geometric painting, and he intends to carry it forward by intensifying the internal logic of his geometries and broadening the extensive possibilities of what they refer to. But make no mistake, like his contemporaries, his method is that of negating essentialism, and synthesizing formerly opposed methodologies. This is, after all, what the entire pluralist generation has in common, even while they each make a claim of 'originality' for each new fusion of formerly opposed idiograms.

7.6 Nevertheless, in Johnson's work we encounter a set of aesthetic relations that are theocratic inasmuch as Johnson still believes in the power of the geometric image as a diagnosis of the times we live in; as a space of unconscious associations and a program of optical pleasures; as a blend where reductionism and vibrancy hold sway in equal measure; and which, for lack of a better term, can work as a critique of all those geometric programs which don't embrace the potentiality of the genre to be engaged in games of perpetual self-transcendence. That is, if you will, Johnson's working program. It is one which not only rehearses many of the high moments of geometric art from the last century, but it is the work of a theocrat when compared against the programs of Lloyd or Burke because it still believes in the kinds of pictorial orders it is indebted to.

7.7 And while the painters of Johnson's generation all cite the influence of digital technologies, the ability to sample from history, and talk about painting in terms of occupying a space between the virtual and the real, these are a kind of half-hearted retort that is repeated in a mantra-like fashion in graduate school programs around the country in order to create an air of cache around geometric art in the early twenty-first century. Does Johnson subscribe to these critical memes too? Of course, they are the grand themes of our generation. And does he fall prey to being derivative of the kinds of work that merely reproduce the digital as affect, like the paintings of Torben Giehler, Alex Brown and so many others? No, Johnson's work is of a higher caliber, on par with the likes of Philip Argent and Adam Ross, both of whom know their art history and yet still give us challenging images about the present by creating a diverse catalog of works in the geometric refrain. Like those artists mentioned above, Johnson's work makes you believe

something else is afoot that one dare not say in the pluralist era, and that something is that Johnson believes in the power of hard edge painting to hold its own against the ideocrats and the iconocrats by playing with an expanded set of visual registers. And in Johnson's work, just what are these registers?

7.8 Of course, he mixes large uninterrupted passages of bold color with stark contrasts in a middle key, and even though Johnson's mark making is absent any evidence of the hand, he still moves further down the chromatic and pictorial scale to include the most minute of compositional variations. So why is something which is so readily apparent to anyone who sees the show, namely its ability to play the visual octaves in a wider range of variations than most geometric painting from the past, of any enduring value today?

7.9 It is because most of the ideas that have driven geometric art have resulted in playing at one end of the pictorial scale or the other, but never in the full measure of what is pictorially possible. Most of the geometric paintings of the twentieth century have either been somewhere between working with mid-range to big bold moves, or small gestures growing only somewhat larger. Simply think of Franz Klein and Jackson Pollock at mid-century, or of the geometries of Mondrian and Malevich at the birth of modern geometric art, or even the later period that stretches from Frank Stella to Peter Halley. You almost always find an orchestra of mark making that is absent a section or two. Or worse yet, that is playing in all high key color chroma, or nearly absent color altogether if you happen to be the Minimalists. In fact, much of the geometric art of the twentieth century lacked virtuosity or was hemmed in by its own program in one way or another, limited either by the expression of its 'beliefs' about painting, or limited by its 'belief' in painting as a type of paradigm, camp or a set of codices.



Dion Johnson, Tremolo, 2015, 60 x 80 x 2 inches, Acrylic on canvas (two canvases). Image courtesy Bentley Gallery.

CONCLUSION: The Dialogics of Dion Johnson's work as a Pictorial Passion Play about the Need to Believe... in the Theater of Artistic Production.

8.1 By contrast, Johnson gives us the full range of color, line and plane as a type of cipher for the idiograms he creates and as a theocratic gesture aimed at transcending the limits of former

paradigms. He wants us to feel the tempo, both as the formal demarcations of 'color notes' across his canvases, as well as how his pictures play with the beat of art history even as they venture into the virtual landscape of unrealized possibilities. This is also why his titles always seem to be referring to a dramatic swing of sorts, an extreme of experience or the torque needed to continue to evolve a modern genre of painting into a more expansive and inclusive set of propositions. His names for each work not only have an affective purchase in directing us toward thinking about a larger spectrum of bodily experience, but they allude to how the paintings themselves are made up of swinging gestures, toppling rhythms, and pictorial punctuations. It isn't lost on even the occasional art patron that such forms and titles allude to the extremes of corporeal experience, or bodies held in tension by the forces of the earth and the desire to transcend such limitations. This is yet, another subtle confirmation of Johnson's theocratic focus on the dialectic tension created by 'peak' experiences, be they material, spiritual, aesthetic --- whatever.

8.2 But, unlike most of what has come before in the genre of hard edge painting, these works insist on a sense of fixed instability that mixes the logic of the syncopated and the sectioned off with oblong forms and crescent shaped arcs. Whether the tilt of Johnson's compositions are vertical, wavering or straight as an arrow, we know that in the entre into his spaces of visual compression and interrupted activity, it is us, the viewers, who will be going along for a ride that has something of a rollercoaster-effect about it. Or, like a classic three act play, his works have an anticipatory introductory sequence, a place where some of these relations experience a dramatic turnabout of sorts, and conclude with a modicum of quite reserve based on so many dissipating story 'lines'. They are an instance of the short, intense, passion play, in pictorial form - -- a type of play in miniature that was rehearsed for the theocratic order of the 17th century --- and which, by size and duration, bares the same reduction in scale and length to the stage like presence of the largest works from high modernism.

8.3 And beyond the rise and fall of formal characters that comprise Johnson's imagery, there is the simple description of the work itself, from the counter-punctual color harmonies of Tremolo; to the double shades of blue sky that serve as the ground of Helicopter; to the frozen whites that dominate Ice Skate; to the cosmetic pallet and skipping rhythm of City Girl; to the lofty and suspended forms of Cathedral; to the hot reds that dominate the visual expanse of Race Car; to the last minute compression sequence in Sky Diver that falls on the far left of the picture plane; to the slowly encroaching curve of the color black in Night Light; all of this could be described in greater detail, piece by piece, painting by painting, and it still would not bring you closer to the experience of the work. To get a sense of how Johnson has composed with scale, and how he makes the psychology of perception function as a filter for the aspirations of form, there is no substitute for seeing the works in person. They are most certainly in a dialogue with more than a few schools of geometric abstraction from the past, but where they pull away from their contemporaries is in the way Johnson approaches the idea of being a theocratic painter.

8.4 Johnson believes, and he wants us to believe, that there is still more that is possible for the genre of geometric abstraction beyond the logics of production proffered by iconocrats and ideocrats in hard edge painting. Furthermore, Johnson wants his art to deliver us a sense of awe in the house of hushed whispers we call the institutions of contemporary art. And while they undoubtedly make good on that promise, Johnson's growing body of work also shows the potential to take its place alongside the very best of what hard edge painting has so far offered its audience and its critics alike, which is a place to think about the valences of the geometric impulse as it relates to artistic intention, be it in the past, present or future tense. Following from this premise, we can say that his works are given over to us through a measured sense of aesthetic experience that asks us to think about the geometric idiom as a means of judging the orders of belief that circumscribe contemporary existence. And for this, his images have served as an excellent means of thinking about geometric abstraction as a matter of scale and refrain.

FOOTNOTES.

1 In 1915 Malevich was not concerned with hard edge painting as a graphic aesthetic, but instead referred to it as being "not an empty square, but rather the feeling of non-objectivity." Malevich often referred to his reductive paintings as even being naturalistic in a sense, and claimed that they referred to seeing a plane flying in the sky above or a structure at a great distance. Black square was not even referred to as being a black square but rather, as a rectangle. And considering that the sides of it are not truly parallel to one another, it's really something more like a tilted parallelogram. And for Malevich, not being concerned with hard edges in the painting was related to it being an expression of a feeling, a feeling for a new type of order, or an impression of a different kind of 'objectivity'. It's fitting to start the reflection for this review here in 1915 to cover a hundred year span of the kinds of influences that Johnson would have been exposed to in lecture halls and survey courses covering the last century of art practice. Of course, what he wouldn't have been exposed to is the recent controversy over Black Square, which, when x-rayed, revealed a racist joke, that the image was of a "battle of negroes in a dark cave." Of course, this doesn't conflict with the thesis put forward in this review because theocratic orders are often racist, with the Catholic, Protestant and Mormon churches not allowing black people to serve as ministers as late as the 1970's. The artworld, for all of its supposed progressiveness, is actually behind these conservative institutions in only just now broadening the cannon of geometric painting beyond its white "Suprematist" origins with shows like "Hard Edged" at the California African American Museum.

2 Platonism of the multiple is a thesis put forward by Alain Badiou following from the observations of set theory that there is no set of sets, or no place of pure platonic forms in a realm of ideation that could count as the totally inclusive set that includes all other things. Badiou instead claims, that "it should be noted that the 'independent existence' of mathematical structures is entirely relative for Plato... Next, the Platonists desire is for maximal extension in what can be granted existence: the more existences the better... Lastly, the Platonist acknowledges a criterion whenever it becomes apparent that a choice is necessary as to the direction in which mathematics will develop." So what does this have to do with geometric painting? The answer is nothing other than the idea that no geometric painter ultimately ends up following the order of another; and the more types of geometric orders that proliferate in hard edge painting, the better; and wherever a choice becomes apparent as to the direction the artists investigation will take is itself, what allows geometric painting to develop. The last century of hard edge painting demonstrates the idea of a 'Platonism of the multiple' in painting, and adequately demonstrates the convergence of the Platonic thesis with Cantor's set theory. Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 49, 55, 55.

3 The Magical Space Form series actually lasted from 1948 to 1963 and marked a break in Feitelson's own work with the classical ideas that had dominated his paintings in previous decades. In this series he "abandoned illusionism and volumetric forms in order to explore what he called a 'duality of interchangeable form and space' achieved through flat two-dimensional forms." In many ways, this already provided the set-up for Stella's integration of form and space a decade later, making the logic of the iconocrats in geometric painting rather transparent. Michael Duncan, "Lorser Feitelson's hard edge abstraction", *Lorser Feitelson and the invention of hard edge painting 1945-1965* (Los Angeles: Louis Stern Fine Art, 2003) 19.

4 The term revisionary ratio's was coined by the literary critic Harold Bloom to refer to the degree that each new artist or writer revises and extends the achievements of others who are working in the same genre or with similar themes. Of course, the term is even more apropos in relation to geometric painting for obvious reasons.

5 Of course, here I am not just referring to the large scale reassessment of Hegel that has been brought together in collected editions like *Hegel and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, (ed. Dennis Keenan) and *Hegel and Art* (ed. Stephen Houlgate), but much more specifically, to the seminal essay by Robert B. Pippin in the later entitled "What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)". Now, anyone who has studied Hegel won't be surprised at all to find the generation of negation, namely, the postmodernists, claiming that the Hegelian history of model is

flawed because of its supposedly linear teleos. And it is even somewhat funnier to watch artists have this conversation at the Tate Modern as they stand under a big linear model of art history, or that many simply seem to forget that we still teach art as one movement after another, including contemporary movements like 'relation aesthetics', 'speculative realism', and tomorrow, something else. But linearity was never Hegel's point, because the analytic of finitude, which is to say, the problem of being finite beings gives us only a very limited capacity to cognize everything that happens in the world, and that the best chance we have of making sense of things is not as timelines and a logic of succession, but as the evolution of consciousness. In fact, is one wants to understand the failure of most criticism's of Hegel, it is simple this: where does the line of developmental logic presented in Hegel exist but in space, and of course, this is the space of consciousness, which is to say, the very possibility of being conscious of any form of developmental logic at all. In this regard, Pippin's essay is wonderful in summing up all the key moments of Hegel's thought and his contribution to how it foreshadowed the "intensification of self-consciousness" about art production after it left the paradigm of realism; how abstract art is a better "concrete" example of thought taking on the trapping of re-presenting the play of ideas; and that all art after Hegel is something akin to the "growing externalization of self-understanding." But where Pippin is really at his best is in describing the movement of the spirit, or of consciousness as being that of self-alienation, externalization and reconciliation. This is a perfect description of the birth of modern art in the period of industrialization, the externalization of this particular form of artistic production as alienation during the postmodern period, and finally, of pluralism as the period of reconciliation, synthesis or what I call integration. The problem of course, both with Hegel, and the period of art that stretches from Modernism to the present, as well as Pippin's essay is that it sees this process as one of increasing liberation and specifically, of the liberation of consciousness in a given sphere of production which misses the fractal, holographic, and integral picture of the universe that many modern theories of science propose, and in so doing, may fall prey to the kinds of arguments Marx made about the reification of thought and the increasing alienation of the arts under capitalist imperatives --- which is to say --- under ever increasing academic specialization. This essay can only point to this conceptual divide, and suggest, that much like the Hegelian paradigm, we will see a new thesis of concerns come together around this very issue at the end of Pluralism. See Robert B. Pippin, "What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel). Hegel and the Arts. Ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 2007) 244-270.

6 Of course, there have been both good and bad reviews of Stella's retrospective, but some of the worst, such as Ben Davis's piece for Art News entitled "Stella at the Whitney is All Style and No Substance", misses the point entirely. Every criticism Davis makes doesn't take into account the historical trajectory of geometric art at that point, or in the latter course of the 20th century. Davis simply lambasts Stella for being the first example of an art star who got his fame too young and then continued making rapid work for the next five or six decades. He indulges in the kind of art criticism that aims to be provocative but only shows a total lack of understanding, both of context and content, and which ultimately devolves into name calling. It seems that Ben Davis doesn't understand the first rule of logical argumentation in a court of law or public opinion, which is that just stating your opinion is not 'making a case' for the values of a work, or in this case, an entire career.

7 Stella put it this way: "No one wants abstraction to turn itself around to accommodate the innate taste for illusionism; but abstraction has to recognize that the coziness it has created with its sense of reduced, shallow illusionism is not going anywhere. Caravaggio and Rubens made manageable pictorial sense out of the dynamic illustrative diversity of 16th century painting, building a strong base for future painting. What we need today is a similar base for the future of our own painting." I only mention Stella's argument here because, it seems that in the next few decades, abstract art would not only take up Stella's general thesis, but in many ways, even surpass it in the age of pluralism. Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1986) 66.

8 Of course, the texts to be consulted here are Agnes Martin, *Writings* (New York: Cantz, 1992)

and exhibition monographs like *As Painting: Division and Displacement* by Phillip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001) or *Logical Conclusions: 40 years of Rule-Based Art* (New York: Pacewildenstein, 2005).

9 *Logical Conclusions: 40 years of Rule-Based Art* (New York: Pacewildenstein, 2005) 1.

10 While Fried quite rightly sums up the Minimalist paradigm, or what was called ABC Art, Primary Structures or Specific Objects at the time as being 'largely ideological', his reading of those paradigms doesn't account for the place of minimalist painting in materialist terms as other than coming at the end of a period where painting is "seen as an art on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem - how to organize the surface of the picture - is severely restricted." Of course, the ideological question proper is how did painting become restricted, why, and through what series of dialogical operations is it now valorized as a critical form that escapes the entropic malaise that is presupposed by Fried but never really clarified. Simply making a case for non-art, the collapsing of the dialectic between painting and sculpture, or between producer and system, which are Fried's key themes, does little to tell us why objecthood is a necessary condition of production at that time other than declaring literalness to be a 'critical move' against modernist painting and Op-Art. Again, the second obvious question is, why do either of these movements have to be negated in the first place? In other words, Fried's arguments are ontologically consistent but epistemologically ungrounded. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 149.

11 See Lichtenstein's statements in *Lichtenstein* by Laurence Alloway (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981) 105-107, and Peter Halley, *Collected Essay's 1981-81* (Zurich: Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, 1988).

12 Of course, in order to understand this dialectic outcome we have to really grasp what the logic of the iconocrats means at the level of form and ideology. This consists of understanding the valances between two distinct moves. First, the iconic value of the Abstract Classicists is that they differed from the theocrats inasmuch as they were not trying to found a new order of society. They were not like the Suprematist, Constructivists, Futurists, etc. What was meant by deeming the hard edged painters in Southern California 'classicists' was not so much that their works really harkened back to classical naturalism but that they proposed that the kind of iconography they were developing would be of enduring value for generations to come because it spoke to the balancing of forces, both formal and psychological, i.e., their compositions were not wholly erratic, and they did not look unconsidered, gestural, or for lack of a better word, haphazard. Second generation iconocrats like Stella, integrated the gestural and the geometric in a second 'classical' move of sorts, because the entire language around notions of the golden mean and other classical schemes was the tension created between line and spiral, geometry and gestural sweeps, the orchestration of light and shadow, etc. Stella simply re-introduced these missing elements in order to make a second order classicism, or a baroque classicism of 'enduring' iconic value, and he explicitly made his arguments along this line of thinking about the power of iconicity. That is to say, no one can ever enter a room of the first or second generation classicists and not recognize the work on the wall as having iconic purchase in both the sense of being identified with the producer and as a very specific arrangement of formal gestures and marks that make their impact by being self-supporting, i.e., part of a secular order of composed geometries with their own internal logic. By contrast with the first and second generation iconocrats, the pluralist iconocrats, (which in California probably begins with Ed Moses), mix geometries and gestural painting quite freely, but also tries to avoid being so readily identifiable. In other words, the logic is of the growing expression of the powers of iconicity itself, first as geometric, then as geometric and gestural, and finally as an open-ended play of the possibilities of the gestural and the geometric in any configuration whatsoever, even beyond working in series. Each piece can be its own icon, and this conclusion was reached by way of thesis (Abstract Classicists), negation (geometric expressionism) and synthesis (iconicity unbound). This quite directly fulfills the Hegelian thesis by giving us evidence of the growing freedom of the Idea of art, and the Idea of iconic abstraction, as the exploration of its own possibilities within a domain of discursive

potentials. The problem, is again, that the triad represents the freeing of the idea from the constraints of nature, something Hegel was for but Marx abhorred. And, the next 'new' thesis which may carry the idiom of hard edge painting forward again may be a return to understanding the kinds of radical geometries which actually do undergird our natural universe, such as the amplituhedron, and their implications not only for overturning the obsession with iconicity for its own sake, but for renewing the promise of the Classicists by working with a series of geometric forms that not only issue from a higher order of organization, but which were unknown in the time of the classicists, both ancient and modern.