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## Dion Johnson's Symphonic Vertical Vibes

By Annabel Osberg

Dion Johnson's abstract paintings bristle with chromatic resonance. Warm and cool grays and whites set off variegated curtainlike structures of contrasting stripes of carmine, cyan, gamboge, chartreuse, sea green, ultramarine violet, and a dizzying array of other hues too numerous to name. Sinuous color shifts perform hairpin switchbacks up and down these factitious vertical rainbows, dazzling the eye with their optical oscillations. The drama is heightened by fields of atmospheric color in paintings such as *Shadow* (2021), where translucent curvilinear shapes seem to emerge and recede like umbras, reflections, or even rays of light refracted through phantom windows.

This exhibition's title, "Vibrant," encapsulates the prismatic energy of Johnson's paintings while also invoking psychological and metaphysical undercurrents beneath their facades of digital-age detachment. Standing before any of the ten canvases here, one is immediately struck by its palette evoking the obtrusive synthetic brilliance of a digital monitor. From a distance, the forms almost appear computer-generated for their precisely delineated contours and perfectionistic gradients. Indeed, the Los Angeles-based painter conceives of his compositions in Photoshop and mixes acrylic paint swatches to match on-screen hues he has selected within the program. However, these visions take shape on canvas via decidedly manual technologies: measuring devices, hand-cut stencils, and copious quantities of masking tape.

Privileging color over texture, Johnson rarely employs traditional brushes. Gradations are achieved via airbrushes and large spray guns such as those used in painting cars; stripes are applied by running putty knives and rubber spatulas over wet acrylic on masked-off areas. Despite the industrial nature of these tools, the artist's touch is ever-present: His changing pressure in pulling the knife across the canvas causes fluctuations in the thickness and flow of the paint, contributing to a sense of tonal depth. When closely examined, some of these passages, such as the thin magenta bands toward the bottom middle of *Synchronous* (2021), take on a translucent radiance like slices of stained glass. Each painting's surface tactility is further rendered palpable by subtle spray-gun splatters and infinitesimally raised thicknesses of taped-off lines.

Though he has not always painted so abstractly, Johnson's current work furthers his longstanding exploration of relationships among technology, visual culture, and compositions evoking motion. In an essay for his first solo exhibition shortly after he received his MFA in 2000, *Los Angeles Times* critic David Pagel lauded his works as "animated paintings," comparing their visual kineticism with the "out-of-sync scrolling flow" of an "old TV on the fritz."<sup>1</sup> At the time, Johnson's paintings featured vignettes of diagrams and illustrations out of children's books against abstract backgrounds of patterns and lines. A few years later, he decided to eliminate the figures and focus solely on the linear forms, literally bringing his nonobjective backdrops to the forefront as he pared down his materials and visual language. Glimpses of telephone lines and elevator switches that had populated his early images thus gave way to bold compositions channeling the aesthetics of computer graphics. In 2015, Pagel summarized his work as "the hi-def version of SoCal abstraction."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "David Pagel on Dion Johnson," pg. 6, essay in pamphlet for Johnson's exhibition, "Expanding Horizons" at Rebecca Ibel Gallery, Columbus, OH, November 24-December 1, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> David Pagel, "Chromatic Momentum," essay for Johnson's exhibition by the same title at DeBuck Gallery, New York, NY, January 8-March 7, 2015.

The experiential attributes of Johnson's paintings have since evolved. In 2017, he began incorporating shading into his geometric compositions, which over the past few years have grown more complex and ethereal. Yet his work remains consistent in refracting legacies of California abstraction—particularly Hard-edge Painting and Light and Space—through the lens of contemporary technology. His shallow pictorial spatiality brings to mind the bright, barren vacuousness of abstract realms portrayed on the default backgrounds and screensavers that come pre-loaded on smartphones and computers.

If his early figurative paintings alluded to the flow of information through analog electronics, his current work condenses sensorial experiences filtered through screens and other ubiquitous trappings of our digital era. For example, the bands in *Optic* (2021) bring to mind iridescent patterns wavering across the underside of a DVD. At the center of the painting, a series of convex curves interrupts the continuity of the lines, causing one's vision to bounce from side to side in a manner recalling the hypnotic effect of staring through changing lenses in an optometrist's phoropter.

Similar successions of longitudinal ribbons also appear on each of Johnson's other canvases. Gazing at them elicits sensations of rapid progression, often evoking the scrolling waves of digital interference seen on glitchy computers and TV screens. But in contrast to the randomness of such malfunctions, his painted bands seem organized according to some sort of code that can't quite be deciphered. They could embody a shorthand for the passage of time, with periods condensed into widths and colors symbolizing their varying durations and importance.

It's easy to see a resemblance between Johnson's spectroscopic striations of clashing hues and those of Karl Benjamin, his professor at Claremont Graduate University, whose work had been featured in the seminal 1959 "Four Abstract Classicists" exhibition that led to the classification of the movement ultimately known as Hard-edge Painting. The arrangement of lines in *Optic*, for instance, recalls Benjamin's vertical compositions such as *#15* (1978). But unlike his teacher, who garnered optical effects by combining sections of flat color, Johnson incorporates shaded planes and tonal gradations that create illusions of depth, anchoring his paintings to a sense of lived reality absent from Benjamin's pure nonobjectivity. Referential titles further forge his abstract forms' tie-ins to scenarios both real and imagined.

Two curved translucencies cascade from the top of *Waterfall* (2021), converging downward in a V shape whose point disappears into a pattern of mostly blue, violet, white, and gray ribbons. Lines and curves alike interweave to form a triangular vortex that pulls one's vision toward the bottom of the painting. The silvery threads become heavier, darker, and more opaque as they descend, accreting into a single inky belt demonstrating the increasing power and speed of the rushing stream reaching a torrential crescendo at the nadir. The dense intricacy of this activity to the left is counterbalanced by the vast openness of the fade from dark to light blue resembling a splash zone of rising mist at the painting's right-hand side. This piece was inspired by the artist's wonder at the omnipresence of cataracts on a trip to Iceland.

Other paintings touch on perceptual aspects of the urban California environment. The soaring arches in works such as *Composure* (2021) evoke buttresses of freeway overpasses seen from below, with the vivid belts seeming to signify the motion of traffic. Luminous color transitions, such as the gold evoking a smoggy sunset in *Honey* (2020), frequently call forth the skylike gradations of resin sculptures by Light and Space artists such as Peter Alexander. The sail shapes at the middle, right, and left sides of *Synchronous* echo the back-and-forth movement of boats on the water; while the stacked translucencies of pink and red occupying the central portion of the painting recall the broken spatiality of Robert Irwin's columns layered from sheets of acrylic, as well as the peekaboo effect of Helen Pashgian's blurry shapes suspended inside lucid towers.

Benjamin estimated color as “the subject matter of painting. ... the material from which paintings are made.” He reveled in its “powerful emotive quality, unique in each individual.”<sup>3</sup> Echoing his mentor’s sentiments, Johnson embraces a synesthetic approach, choosing the constituents of his palette for their emotional and sensory associations. He sees his vertical arrangements of hues as “ensembles of sounds,”<sup>4</sup> citing as an influence the musical sensations suggested by the color grids of Paul Klee and Stanley Whitney. Indeed, his stripes seem imbued with a sense of meter and tempo, visually vibrating to and fro. Through his larger expanses of color, on the other hand, he seeks to harness the evocative capacities of individual tones. For instance, the sea green gradation at the left of *Composure* conjures up impressions of plunging deep into water, with the lone chartreuse strand as a blade of kelp.

Fanciful details enhance ambiguously implied narratives in other paintings, too, several of whose titles refer to supernatural phenomena. The acicular sliver of gray in *Vampire* (2020) is easily read as a fang; it also resembles a tornado against a stormy sky. Nearby, a rounded shape at the bottom left of the stripe pattern brings to mind a chemist’s vial leaking blood.

Such allusions to the paranormal play on the mythical nature of abstract painting itself. From an empirical standpoint, abstraction is fiction insofar as it transcends real-life parameters, encompassing imaginary visual forms that can evoke things beyond themselves yet could never truly exist outside pictorial boundaries. The purpose of fiction is to reveal something about reality. Johnson’s abstractions invite us to weave our own stories around their sparse threads of plot.

Looking at *Telepath* (2020), I imagine myself peering between beads and veils at the threshold to a fortune-teller’s tent. The crisp linear patterns at the left fade to indefiniteness toward the right—their forms become rounder, rosier, and evanescent like reflections, suggesting a transition from real to the psychic realm, as though the painting were frozen on the verge of revealing a mystery.

And what secret might emerge? Perhaps this: Even within the banal aesthetics of the mechanized, computerized world that surrounds us, a kind of transcendence can be achieved.

Annabel Osberg is a Southern California based artist and critic. She writes for *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *The Financial Times*.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Benjamin, quoted on Geoform.net, curated by Julie Karabenick: <https://geoform.net/artists/karl-benjamin/>. Accessed on December 13, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with the artist, November 28, 2021.