

ANN WALSH: COLORS



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Ann Walsh's Mechanics of Color

Franklin Einspruch

Legacy

Aside from the fact that a few hours of gabbing wore him out, I had no hint that Walter Darby Bannard's interview with me would be one of the last times he ever put himself on the record.¹ In the course of conversation, he proposed that the ever-enlarging art world ultimately meant that the abstractionists could split off into their own tribe with its own values. I asked him what, then, the Tribe of Abstractionists ought to work on. He replied:

Well, color is one. Nobody really gets into the mechanics of color. Even very good painters never got into the mechanics of color. Abstract painters shunted it aside because they considered it unimportant. As a consequence they used colors out of the jar. And they used color for area identification rather than coloristic effect.

He then pointed to Kenneth Noland as "a supreme example of someone to follow." Later he remarked, "It seems like there's no end to the possibilities of hard edge combinations."

Five months later, he penned an essay for a solo exhibition of works by Ann Walsh at Alexander/Heath Contemporary in Roanoke, Virginia.² He situated Walsh's work into the abstractionist canon, elucidating the intricacies of her working methods. For 22 years after the passing of Clement Greenberg, nobody was better able to describe the full implications of modernism, not simply as a historical style, but as an aspiration. Bannard's grasp of the material operations of picture-making equaled Greenberg's at the latter's best and not infrequently exceeded it. It stands to reason - Bannard, after all, was painting in a manner that Greenberg took seriously. The twist was that Bannard possessed such pronounced verbal gifts as well. He wrote this about her work:

Color in a Walsh picture may be separated from its usual role of area differentiation but this only activates their pictorial function. They talk to each other in the language of color, and once you adapt to the radical intentions of Walsh's art you enter in the discussion ... It's like a discussion among friends presented in a format that allows one to "hear" it visually.

Bannard recognized Ann Walsh as one of the few people who is employing color successfully, in the manner that Noland's work implied ought to be possible. Having thought about Bannard's legacy in his absence for a couple of years, and having continued to study Greenberg's, I believe that we haven't gotten to the bottom of why mere materials have as much aesthetic resonance as they do. Walsh's art is an opportunity to ponder this further.

The Path to Color Itself

Color is unruly. It breaks up surfaces and forms. To control it is to control most of what matters in abstraction.

It may not be obvious that color can't exist by itself. There must be a material component to convey it, despite some technically impressive attempts to make light appear as if disembodied. On my way from Boston to upstate New York to visit Walsh's studio in preparation for this essay, I stopped into the sprawling James Turrell tribute at MassMoCA.³ Turrell styles interiors using lights, projectors, scrim, and specially sculpted walls to produce spaces in which one can hardly

tell whether a glow of some kind is a hole or a surface or a mist. Their effect was surprisingly inartistic. They *had* an effect, which is more than you can say for other things in the museum. But it was akin to that of stage magic and it wore off quickly.

Walsh's use of vinyls and sprays comes from a similar effort to downplay material so that color can exist, as much as possible, as an independent phenomenon. But to the extent that a Turrell is disorienting, a Walsh is orienting, emphatically so. In particular it orients the viewer to a surface, with implicit, spinal-cord-level instructions to regard it aesthetically. Their artistic effect waxes. A plexiglass pane with three colors applied to it grabs the eye immediately. Prolonged attention upon it reveals no more complexity, but an increasing sense of rightness about the proportions of the shapes with one another, the straightness or curvature of the borders between them, and the visual interplay of the hues themselves.

As Bannard once noted, "Good art carries a high density of choice." He went on: "Mondrian struggled for 20 years, through realism, Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism before coming to his simple geometric paintings. There may not be much in them, but there is a hell of a lot behind them."⁴ So it is with Walsh. Simplicity is hard. To assert it with any authority requires insight borne of deep experimentation. This exhibition traces Walsh's path.

The earliest works are constructed around a method in which she smeared acrylic paint onto polyethylene sheets, allowed it to dry, peeled it, and applied it in reverse to canvases. Many of these pictures are striking in their vitality, chief among them *Nimbus* from 1986. Its palette - largely caramel and butterscotch - reflects Walsh's intuition that paintings of this complexity would not be able to support much intense color.

Golden Artist Colors has a long history of asking artists about their studio practice, in detail, in order to find out what they need their paint to accomplish. Aware of Walsh's efforts, they formulated an acrylic medium of just the right rheology and gloss to produce the effect she wanted. The contact side of delaminated acrylic is as flat as can be. Consequently, for all the gesture there is no texture, except the texture implied by the viscous surface, most of which is illusory, seemingly on the far side of a glassy barrier.

Walsh had become captivated by the possibility that the right manipulation of materials could exist as a freestanding object that appeared to come into existence by force of its own being. It could at once look like it was made by an artificial process but retain all of its humanism. Like many artists, Walsh had studied *David Smith by David Smith*, a compilation of the artist's writings, and considered them in relation to his seminal innovations in sculpture.⁵ Collected after the artist's unexpected death, it contains a poem titled "The Question - what is your hope."⁶

I would like to make sculpture that would rise from water and tower in the air -
that carried conviction and vision that had not existed before
that rose from a natural pool of clear water
to sandy shores with rocks and plants
that men could view as natural without reverence or awe

but to whom such things were natural because they were statements of peaceful pursuit - and joined in the phenomenon of life

After the reverse paintings, Walsh worked to intensify her palette. “My idea of color,” said Smith, “is real gutty.”⁷ Walsh followed suit. Primaries like the ones she and Smith preferred might be destructive to a painting built on the principles of *Nimbus*, but applied all over a volumetric form, as Smith did, the volume would prevail. Walsh began working on simple boxes, constructed from wood and covered with a synthetic paper that was completely opaque. This paper would take washes to some degree, but unlike watercolor paper, was slick.

Little Blue (1996) relegates painterly activity to discrete faces of a three-part form of rectangular prisms. The rest of the volumes are painted pure blue. From there, Walsh pressed further. *Local Color* (2001) shows her closing up the forms - moving back in the direction of painting - while discarding the overt drips, splashes, and smears of her earlier work in favor of a gently varied application of acrylic.

Rattle from a few years later puts an end to Walsh’s previous uncertainty about sculptural form. One gets the sense from it that she was, in this and contemporaneous works, finally able to differentiate her project from Smith’s. Smith subordinated color to form. Walsh wanted the converse. The solution was the monolith. The thinner sides of the block, either by catching light or ducking out of its way, produce the variations of color needed to make the object register as a kind of picture. Color that had been locked to singular planes of more complicated volumes could be allowed to abut on the monolith without disrupting the overall unity. That meant more possibilities of color, and Walsh set about exploring them. *Rattle* is vernal, with plum, tangerine, lime, and sky blue in an evenly distributed stack.

Walsh’s use of vinyl, which began around the time of *Rattle*, was not so much a change of materials as an outsourcing of labor. Vinyl is cast in a thin, liquid layer on a surface from which it can be delaminated after it dries. This is the same effort that went into the making of her reverse paintings, at an industrial scale. Vinyl comes in a fabulous array of colors and it allows her to get on with the making of art more expeditiously, which after all is what prepared artist materials are for. Also, acrylics adhere to it, allowing for even more options of color and handling.

Having discovered the efficacy of the monolith, Walsh was naturally inclined to try enlarging them. Her freestanding forms such as *Block* (2012), which is eight feet high, have hardly ever been exhibited, and it is exciting to see them in person. A scale that obliges the viewer to stand back in order to admire them takes some pressure off of the surfaces to be perfect, and the sheer expanse of color is effective in itself. The possibilities of this format might be limitless. One wishes that Walsh could make them by the hundreds.

In the meantime, it turns out that the planes don’t have to turn a corner in order to produce the needed variation. When the colors are this intense and so devoid of evidence of their own making, slight differences in lighting - the kind that inevitably come out of a bulb - will do the trick. Via the monoliths, Walsh was able to return confidently to flat planes. Walsh began standing sheets of plexiglass upright on minimal bases, and coloring them in vinyl and acrylic. Such is *Bow* (2014), a hot composition of vermilion, tomato, and fluorescent pink.

Those efforts led to her making conventionally wall-hung pictures again. *Hurry* (2015), painted in sprayed acrylic, consists of curves of navy, primary blue, and forest green, arcing gracefully

and simply across a fifty-inch rectangle. Much of the effectiveness of this painting relies on the greater width of the primary blue in its center compared to its sides. Where the area changes, it interacts with the adjacent colors in a subtly but importantly different way. Comparing the curvature to that in *Nimbus*, one can witness a talent annealing: cooling off, growing in density, solidifying into something durable.

Knowing and Looking

It is a wonder that art so simple can invite and satisfy prolonged looking. Greenberg differentiated art from demonstrations in “the Duchampian sub-tradition” by observing that “you have to experience [art] over and over again in order to keep on *knowing* it.”⁸ But the mysteries of knowing and looking echo far beyond him. As Dogen put it, “If you say a painting is not real, then the myriad things are not real.”⁹ The recently departed William Corbett, in a poetry collection which he titled in tribute to Wittgenstein’s admonition, “Don’t think, but look!”, lamented,¹⁰

I meant to see
the swallows go
and mark their
going. Missed again.

David Smith wrote decades earlier:¹¹

How little I know - until I see what happened in the night on
the snow - the movements of animals, their paths, and why - the animals
that fly the night birds leave no tracks except on the mind

One of the many reasons to be grateful for Ann Walsh’s exhibition at the Sam & Adele Golden Gallery is that it allows us to continue the investigation of knowing and looking. We are not nearly done with this work, just as Walsh has many more colors to juxtapose, making art that is at once obvious and glorious.

1 Franklin Einspruch, “Presentational: Walter Darby Bannard on his early reductive paintings,” *artcritical*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.artcritical.com/2015/04/08/franklin-einspruch-in-conversation-with-walter-darby-bannard/>.

2 Walter Darby Bannard, exhibition statement for “Ann Walsh: Recent Work” at Alexander/Heath Contemporary, Roanoke, VA, September 2015.

3 “James Turrell: Into The Light,” Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, <https://massmoca.org/event/james-turrell/>.

4 Walter Darby Bannard, *Aphorisms for Artists*, Franklin Einspruch, ed., 2011, Aphorism #29, <http://aphorismsforartists.com/book/good-art-carries-a-high-density-of-choice>.

5 David Smith, *David Smith by David Smith*, Thames & Hudson, 1968.

6 Ibid., excerpt from “The Question - what is your hope,” final version 1950, <http://www.davidsmithestate.org/statements.html#hope>.

7 Ibid.

8 Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 56-57.

9 Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, North Point Press, 1985, p. 137.

10 William Corbett, excerpt from “Melancholy,” from *Don’t Think: Look*, Zoland Books, 1991, p. 11.

11 David Smith, *ibid.* See also Candida N. Smith, “The Fields of David Smith,” Storm King Art Center, Thames & Hudson, 1999, pp. 17-38, archived at <http://www.davidsmithestate.org/candida%20fields%20photos/fields.html>.



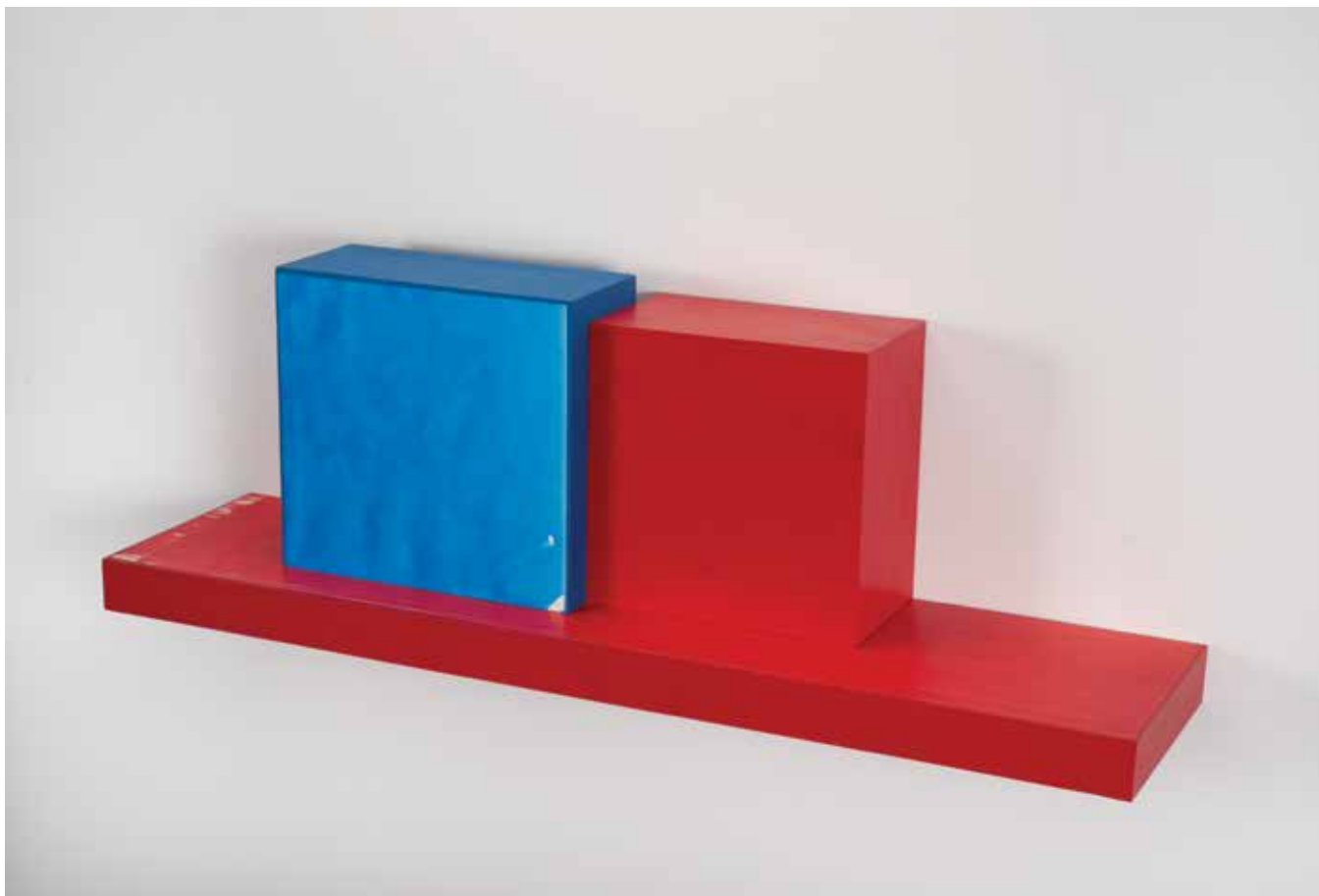
Basket of Gold, 1986, Acrylic on Canvas, 19" x 26"



Nimbus, 1986, Acrylic on Canvas, 21" x 26 1/2"



Little Blue, 1996, Acrylic and Synthetic Paper on Wood 13 1/2" x 11" x 7"



Local Color, 2001, Acrylic and Synthetic Paper on Wood, 14" X 38" X 9½"



Rattle, 2004, Acrylic On Wood, 25" X 25" X 6"



Block, 2012, Vinyl on Laminate, 96" X 36" X 12"



Bow, 2014, Paint & Vinyl On Plexiglass, 35" X 24" X 5"



Hurry, 2015, Acrylic on Canvas, 40" X 50"



Circle, 2016, Vinyl on Plexiglass, 18" X 23" X 4"

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Swell, 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 43 1/4" X 66"

