

**ROBERT SWAIN** COLOR AS PRIME

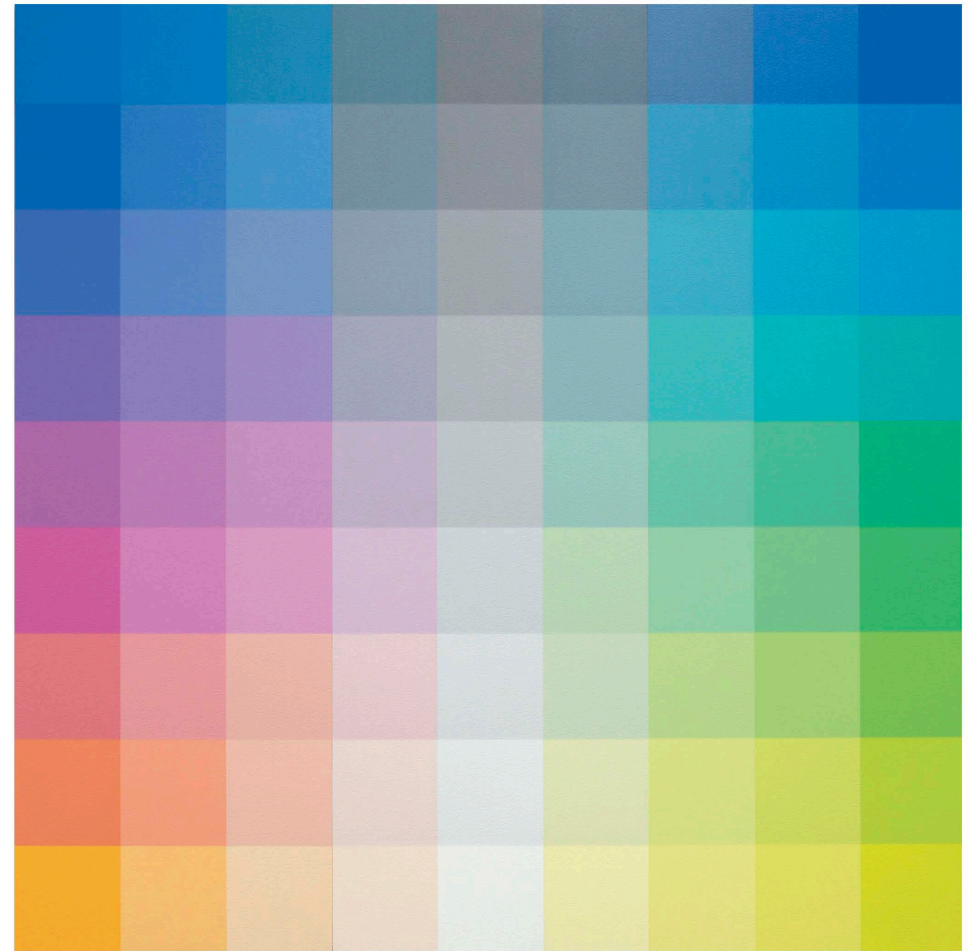
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## ROBERT SWAIN Color as Prime

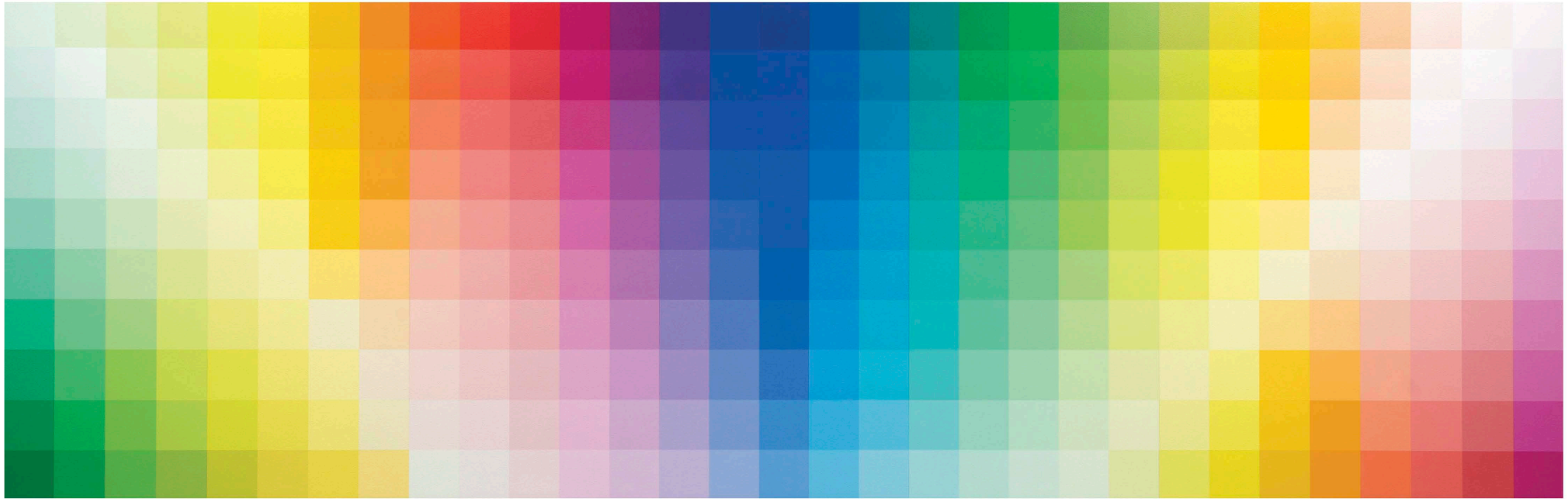
Robert Swain's paintings are difficult to categorize. His intense engagement with color gives him an affinity with the Impressionists and their heirs. Yet the gridded clarity of his color patterns recalls Minimalist geometry. Just as Carl Andre arranged twelve by twelve inch metal plates in floor pieces he called "carpets," so Swain assembled the paintings in this exhibition from birch panels of the same dimensions. Of course, each of Swain's panels is covered with acrylic paint in a hue adjusted with exquisite precision to the surrounding hues—and to the overall pattern of the painting of which it forms an indispensable part. With vision caught up in the sensuous yet stately flow of color across the surface of the painting, thoughts of Minimalist grids and boxes evaporate. Despite his use of geometric structure, Swain could be seen as an anti-Minimalist. But that is too narrow a view of his achievement. By focusing so directly on color, Swain has challenged assumptions basic to Western culture's view of reality.

Writing in the 5th century B.C., the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras stated that matter is prior to color. In his cosmology, as in others from the period, color was contingent, a quality added to material form by the quirks of human vision. This distinction between essential form and inessential color persisted over the centuries, affecting not only science but also art. Thus line and tonal modeling predominated in Renaissance painting, where color serves as form's embellishment—though the high-keyed palette of Titian, Tintoretto, and other Venetians of the Renaissance provided some resistance to the authority of linear form. Nonetheless, it was not until the mid-19th century that Claude Monet and the other Impressionists dared to make images from the play of sheer color. What the Impressionists achieved intuitively, the Neo-Impressionists—Georges Seurat and Paul Sérusier among them—subjected to systematic analysis. They were guided in part by the writings of a chemist named Michel Eugène Chevreul, a figure Swain mentions in one of his statements.

Invoking Chevreul's *Law of Simultaneous Contrast*, Swain notes that when red and green are juxtaposed "the contrast is heightened." He adds that our experience of the contrast originates in "the energy generated by the convergence of [the] unique spectral wavelengths" of these colors. Over the decades, Swain has organized 4,896 hues into a vast system. To make a painting, he selects a range of colors and deploys them in graded sequences. Following a row of color-blocks across the surface we watch as, step by subtle step, a cool color becomes warm.



Untitled, 9x9-4A, 2014, acrylic on birch panels, 108" x 108"



*Untitled*, 2014, 120" x 372", acrylic on birch panels

## ROBERT SWAIN

A low-keyed color becomes bright. Degrees of saturation—color intensity—modulate. Interweaving these shifts in hue, brightness, and saturation, Swain brings the surface to life.

Félix Fénéon, a leading proponent of the Neo-Impressionists, noted that their “brushstrokes are the outcome, not of swift dashes of the brush, but of the application of minute dots.” From a distance, these dots merge into colors more luminous than any created by mixing paints on the palette. And an image of some recognizable subject appears. By expanding the Neo-Impressionist dot to a twelve by twelve inch surface, Swain ensures that we will focus on color itself. For there can be no figures, no horizons or skies, in his paintings. So we call him an abstract artist, yet this doesn’t seem quite right. For he has not abstracted—or extracted—his imagery from some prior source. His colors have an aura of primacy.

The ancient cosmologists posited certain forms as elemental. Swain persuades us to imagine that color came first, that its sensuous power is the origin of all that exists. Form emerges as a means of ordering and intensifying the effects of color.

Turning to the largest painting in this exhibition, we see an immense surface bisected by a column of blue. Comparatively high-keyed at the bottom, the column deepens in tone and saturation as it ascends. Grandly flickering patterns of near-white ascend in opposite directions—but identical angles—from the midpoint of the work’s lower edge to each of its upper corners. The overall symmetry of the image is so strong that it is almost a shock to realize that the color transitions to the right and left of the central column are not identical. To the right, blue becomes green. To the left, it shades into magenta. With further looking we see that the right side of the painting does mirror the left, though Swain has inverted the pattern so that, for example, the dark green in the lower left-hand corner reappears on the right along the upper edge. With adjustments like these, he charges the painting with currents at once elusive and powerful. We are swept along, immersed in a feeling of plenitude. Swain gives us, through color, a sense of the fullness of being.

**Carter Ratcliff, 2015**

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Robert Swain, born in Austin, Texas, lives and works in New York City. He completed his education at the American University in Washington, DC in 1964, and since moving to New York in 1965 has exhibited regularly. His paintings have been the subject of eighteen one-person shows, including three at major museums: the Everson Art Museum in Syracuse, New York (1974), the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts in Columbus, Ohio (1975-76), and recently the Santa Monica Museum of Art entitled “Robert Swain: The Form of Color” organized and curated by Jeffrey Uslip (2014). In 2010 a major retrospective was held in New York City’s Hunter College /Times Square Gallery, surveying his work of the past 45 years, curated by Gabriele Evertz. In addition, Swain has been featured in over 150 group shows.

His work is represented in over 300 public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Walker Art Center, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Milwaukee Art Museum, Denver Art Museum, Detroit Institute of Art, Everson Art Museum, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts. He has completed major commissions for IBM, Johnson & Johnson, American Republic Insurance Company, Schering Laboratories, Harris Bank, Travenol Laboratories, Tupperware World Headquarters, and the University of Buffalo.

Additional information concerning Robert Swain’s work can be found at <http://www.robertswainnyc.com>.

On cover: *Untitled, 9x9-3A*, 2014, acrylic on birch panels, 108" x 108"

## **499** PARK AVENUE / The Lobby Gallery

499 Park Avenue (at 59th Street), New York, NY 10022

Gallery hours: Monday – Friday, 8am – 6pm

### **Acknowledgements**

499 Park Avenue, through its exhibition program, actively contributes to the cultural community as an expression of ongoing commitment to excellence in the visual arts and architecture.

We would like to thank the artist for the loan of the paintings in this exhibit.

Curators            **Dorothy Solomon**, DSA Fine Arts; **Lenore Goldberg**, Hines

Essay                **Carter Ratcliff**

**Carter Ratcliff** is a poet and art critic. His most recent book of poetry is *Arrivederci, Modernismo*, and his first novel, *Tequila Mockingbird*, was published last summer. Ratcliff's art writing has been published by major art journals in the United States and abroad, including *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Modern Painting*, *Tate*, *Art Presse*, and *Artstudio*, and in the catalogues published by American and European museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Guggenheim Museum, New York; El Museo del Barrio, New York; The Royal Academy, London; Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and others.

For more information about the work in this show, please contact **Dorothy Solomon**,  
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