

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition evolved out of the desire to present an overview of the life and work of Robert Swain. Rarely are we given the opportunity to examine a life so completely dedicated to the making of paintings. Swain works outside the main currents of contemporary concerns, yet he numbers among the most significant color painters of his generation and he enjoys a distinctive place in the recent history of painting. As an artist/teacher he also lives in the hearts and minds of his students. With this exhibition, I hope not only to encourage appreciation of his art, but also to spur interest among viewers in developing a deeper visual intelligence and in exploring a newer and more informed realm of color. In recent years, inquiries related to psychology and perception have extended into visual and neural phenomena that allow for a revision of past color concepts. This study can stimulate a better understanding of our emotional and intellectual responses to color, causing radically new modes of color expression. The inventions of Swain's work—spanning well over four decades of uninterrupted inquiry—are astounding, and the compelling power of his art is manifest throughout his life's work. Swain's consistent investigation of color in painting, marked by an exacting quest for the real, is inspirational. Continuity, cyclical progression, and interrelatedness determined the selection of the works for this exhibition, which opens with a work from 1973, goes back as far as 1969, covers the 1980s and 1990s, and ends with a spectacular new body of work, presented here for the first time, that has preoccupied the artist since 2006.

Assembling a group of works to represent such a long and distinguished career was a daunting task. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the support and counsel of many individuals.

Of paramount importance was the artist himself, Robert Swain. I have benefitted from his teaching, guidance, and advice and I am most grateful to him. I also extend my gratitude to his wife, Annette Leibel, for her steadfast support. Many thanks go to Bob's assistants, former students all, who serve in apprentice-like fashion with spirit, great skill, and tireless devotion: Dan Crews, Changha Hwang, Pierre Obando, Shawn Powell, and Yao Zu Lu.

During the early stages of this project, several MA/MFA students in my graduate seminar, Jenny Liu, Teri Lehner, and Rachel Stokoe, helped immensely by probing the concept with me, conducting research,

and developing and implementing an independent website that has since merged with the artist's site: www.robertswainnyc.com. There, you will find additional information above and beyond what is included in this publication.

For their generous donation in support of all aspects of this exhibition we thank the Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation most sincerely. In addition, our deep gratitude goes to the Friends of the Gallery who, under the leadership of Phyllis and Joe Caroff, gifted funds to support the design and printing of the exhibition catalogue. We would like to acknowledge that without the support of all our donors this exhibition could not have been realized.

At Hunter, we would like to thank President Jennifer J. Raab. Further, thanks are due to the Gallery Committee; Thomas Weaver, Executive Director and Chair of the Department of Art; Joachim Pissarro, Bershad Professor of Art History and Director of the Galleries; and Kimberly Watson, Major Gifts Officer in the Office of the President. For her thoughtful suggestions, guidance and ceaseless effort we are deeply grateful to Tracy Adler, Curator. And thanks also to Phi Nguyen, preparator par excellence.

Thanks to the outstanding teamwork of video maker Peter Canale and his director, Rachel Stokoe, who produced a valuable and engaging visual record for us.

It is a pleasure to thank those who worked on the catalogue: Jenny Liu for writing the bibliography and Teri Lehner for her cheer and diligence in writing the chronology and exhibition record. Matthew Deleget proved an excellent and perceptive interviewer. Thank you to editor Brian Sholis, whose thoughtful help and suggestions strengthened the texts, and a special thanks to Tim Laun for the clarity and balance of his book design. I am also grateful to Sanford Wurmfeld, who, with Thomas Weaver, wrote his special appreciation of the Friends of the Hunter College Art Galleries and its superb leaders Phyllis and Joseph Caroff; thank you for responding in a supportive and most collegial manner at critical moments. Finally, William C. Agee, Evelyn Kranes Kossak Professor of Art History, contributed a thought-provoking, sensitive, and profoundly informative essay. I am deeply grateful to him.

Gabriele Evertz
Associate Professor of Art

ARTIST DEDICATION

This exhibition is dedicated to my wife Nanny, always with me in my heart and mind. I would also like to acknowledge Frances and Ralph Dweck for their lifelong patronage.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF
THE FRIENDS OF THE HUNTER COLLEGE ART GALLERIES

The publication of this catalogue has been underwritten by a generous gift from the Friends of the Hunter College Art Galleries.

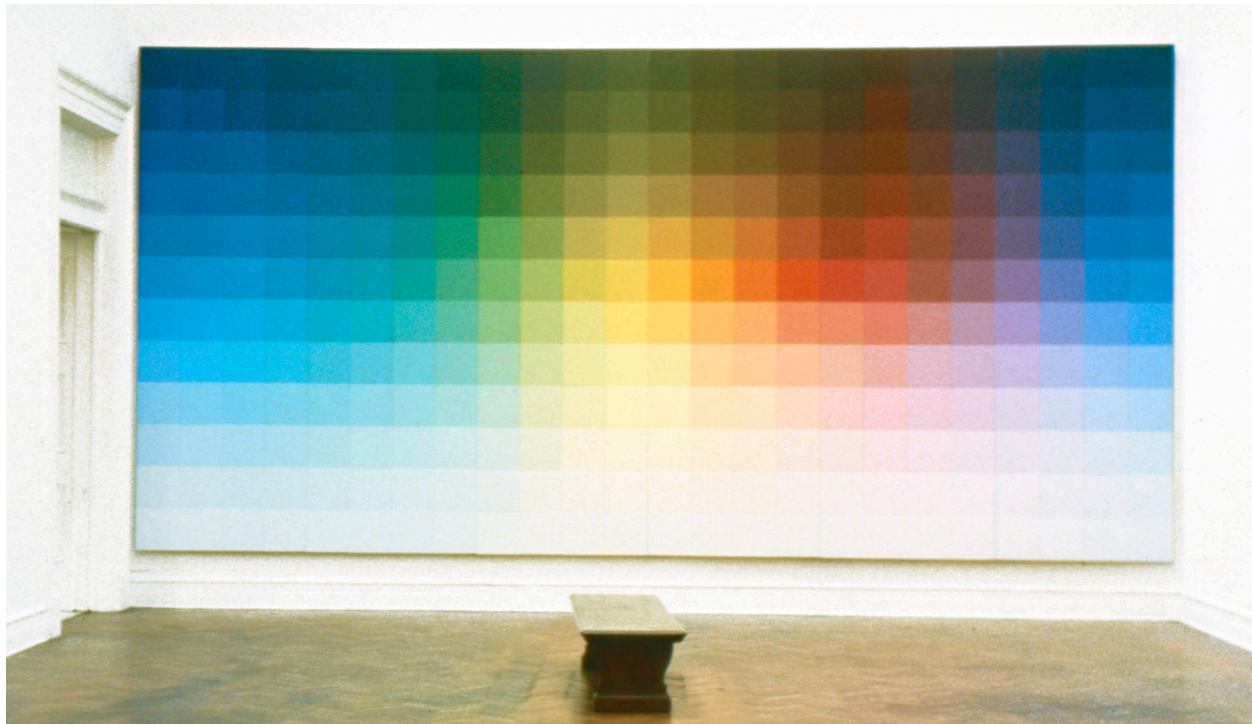
For the past twenty-four years the Friends by their contributions have enhanced the quality of education for Hunter College's art students through their financial support of exhibitions, catalogues, publications, community outreach, faculty development, student travel, and other educational programs.

They have held successful auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's, arranged tours to view private collections, and visited various art museums as well as the studios of established artists. These activities have contributed a significant measure of moral and financial support to Hunter's outstanding art programs.

The names of the Friends are listed in this catalogue. We thank the entire group for their sustained efforts, their generosity, and their loyalty. We must especially thank Phyllis and Joseph Caroff for their years of effective and loving leadership.

Thomas Weaver, Chair of the Art Department, 2006-present
Sanford Wurmfeld, Chair of the Art Department, 1978-2006





Previous page and above:
Robert Swain, *Untitled, No 7*, 1968-1969
Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 30 ft.
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Gift of Mary Howland Chase and the Friends of the Corcoran 1969.13

VISUAL SENSATIONS

by Gabriele Evertz, Associate Professor of Art, Hunter College

“Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet.”

– Paul Cézanne, as quoted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception*

For over forty years Robert Swain has dedicated his practice to the investigation, application, and experience of color sensations in abstract painting. He states: “Color is a form of energy derived from the electromagnetic spectrum that stimulates our perceptual processes and is instrumental in conveying emotions.”¹

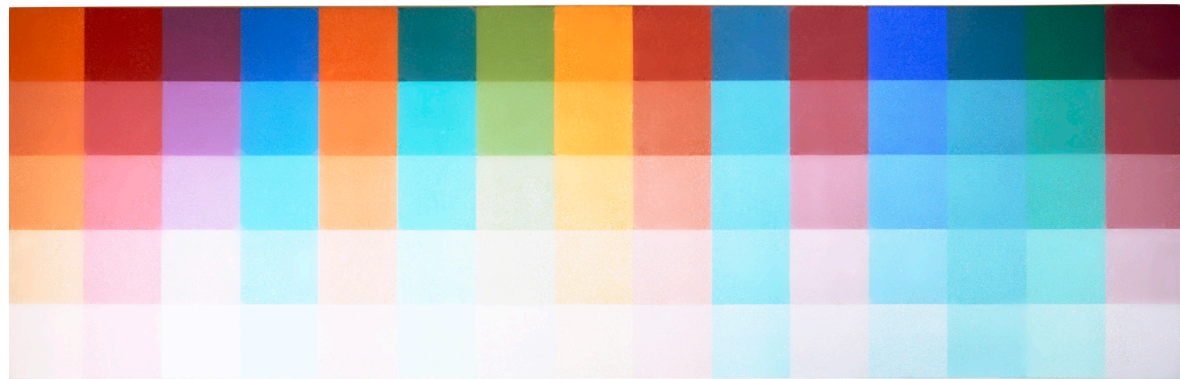
It is an extraordinary and concise observation—made not by a scientist, but by a painter. Indeed, the history and theory of color organization is peopled not only by art historians but also by many experts from diverse scientific disciplines, such as biology, experimental psychology, philosophy, physiology, and chemistry.²

Painters have always been interested in color, for pigment is one of their principle materials. Any discussion about the colorists among them could begin with Giotto, for example. But color served as an index and a sign; in painting it was used as local, or surface color, as a means to identify a depicted object. Painting has a long memory, but in the twentieth century—relatively recently—a break occurred, namely the advent of abstraction. This development allowed color to free itself from its subordination to objects and to emerge as an autonomous element in painting. Artists began developing an entirely new language, one that still awaits its analytical and critical assessment.

Fast forward to the mid-1960s, when Robert Swain arrived in New York City. Visual effects such as luminosity, luster, and iridescence were already known and had been explored in art. A new (though short-lived) international movement, Op art, spawned simultaneous investigations by many artists living in different countries.³

Around the same time, new scientific investigations of color perception were published. The study of the perceptual properties of color is founded on the biological basis of artistic behavior. With the revolutionary techniques of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), during the 1970s and 1980s the study of the human brain became possible, and by the 1990s MRI technology was monitoring neural activities in “real time.” We painters discovered that the seemingly countless variations among color’s mysterious sensations—though dauntingly difficult to enumerate—could be studied systematically, as many of their psychological and physiological causes were finally being revealed.

When Swain decided to devote his life’s work to color phenomena he was well aware that there was no available paradigm to reference and no consensus about the subject in the art world. He found that the prevailing cultural dialogue did not suffice. Post-structural thought, with its focus on words and other symbolic codes, consigned thinking about cultural history and the philosophy of the human subject to the margins. Feelings, emotions, intuition,



Untitled #1, 1967
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 90 in.
Private collection

sensations—the life of embodied experience—was essentially ignored in favor of semiotics. With the study of sensations and perception, however, an understanding of our humanity is available to us. The above-mentioned innovative scientific technologies allow a new type of direct access to the complexity, flexibility, and vitality of our mental resources. In contrast, the signification of text, discourse, and code seems limiting. But color painters and art historians had kept up a conversation about color and sensorial perception in parallel to more well-known post-structuralist conversations. And the evidence of science made that sense-based artistic dialogue harder to ignore. In 1984, in the second edition of *The Sense of Order*, the eminent art historian E.H. Gombrich stated that “there exists a sense of order which manifests itself in all styles of design and which I believe to be rooted in man’s biological inheritance.”

Swain has an empirical but essentially intuitive way of working that yields visual expressions of great resonance and beauty. He knows that the feelings produced in the viewer by colors are a direct effect of sensory perception and not a result of cultural or historically conditioned associations. And he is aware that different viewers with normal color vision can actually perceive colors in slightly different ways. (It has been suggested that part of the problem lies with the naming of colors.) Color painters, like Swain, devote their attention to the durational observation of the properties of color in perceptual abstractions. The groundwork for such investigation was laid with the establishment of painting as an experimental activity in the 1880s by Seurat; after the death of Cézanne in 1906 it became more insistently so. In a way, painters were experimenting in the early days of abstraction as the experimental psychologists did. The Danish psychologist David Katz, himself a painter, has described experiences of local and film color effects that Kandinsky writes about in his 1913 autobiography *Reminiscences* and that artists and teachers, such as Josef Albers and Johannes Itten, expanded upon during the middle of the last century. Their instructional books on color phenomenology and in particular their ideas of color strategies for painters, first published in the mid-1960s, are still in use.⁴

How, then, does a young painter go about setting up his studio to make abstract color paintings? When Swain painted *Untitled #1* in 1967, a thirty-by-ninety-inch painting that consists of five rows of seventy-five discrete color squares, organized in a grid formation of modulated hues—ranging from intensely glowing saturated colors at the top to largely unsaturated colors at the bottom—he had deliberately addressed and controlled the three dimensions of color, namely hue, value, and saturation. He could have stayed there, content to keep making these very satisfying paintings.

But Swain was interested in color phenomena. When he painted the larger-than-life-size tondo, *Red and Green Color*, in 1969, he applied red and green, which are direct complements, of similar value in a brushy manner. The afterimage heightened both colors dramatically, offering a well-known and predictable effect. But there occurs a second effect at their horizontal border, a flickering halo of intense light, known as the Mach band. A third effect ensues, as colored light intermixes to a medial sensation, known as the subjective gray, at the bottom and seems to work its way up, as if a cloth was unfolding upwardly.

These sensations are fleeting but powerful. They involve eye, mind, and body. It seems that paintings like this one set the course for Swain, and he devoted himself in subsequent years to unlocking the mysteries of perception. To do so, he had to turn inward and find a personal approach, his own language of color.

How, then, does a painter find and determine color relationships? The most

straightforward expression of these is the color circle, and Swain proceeded to paint several versions of it with an increasing number of segments, beginning in 1971 with a twenty-four-part wheel that had an eight-and-a-half-foot diameter. It is interesting to note that the color yellow is placed at the top center in several of these early works, such as the color wheel studies and his *Untitled #1* of 1967. As an organizing principle this choice is perhaps indicative of Swain's particular sensitivity toward the polarity of tonal light/dark values. And it is one of the reasons why his early work can never be confused with color charts: it always involves a spatial dimension.

Over the years, in an effort to gain insights afforded by his practice into the ever-expanding vocabulary of color behavior and effects, Swain has devised a catalogue of close to five thousand color samples. Organized according to his unique numerical system, these color chips are carefully filed in narrow drawers in his studio and serve as aids in formulating color relationships for his paintings. It becomes self-evident that Swain's concern is neither to expose the hierarchy of colors nor to illustrate a theory or symbolism of cultural codes. Rather, his impulse stems from the desire to make us *see*, and thus *feel* and *think*, color at its most active, existential, and most refulgent.

His works are not immersive. Instead, factureless and painted in precise, modular grids, they demand a practice of looking with heightened attentiveness that engages us completely in the disquieting visual, cognitive, and intensely sensuous experience of color's constant flux. Our reward? There is knowledge and understanding to be gained by active and attentive looking. For instance, Swain seems to favor the two extremes of color organizations: contrasts and assimilation. Similar colors have the tendency to group together—we call them analogous colors—while complementary colors contrast and heighten each other's presence. Here reality and the sensation of color collide. When contrasting colors are precisely painted with a focused, definitive edge, they will not only create phantom lights that seem to come forward into the viewer's space but also create two ways of seeing color; one of which is the “true” color (seen at the center of the shape) and the other a kind of flickering around the edges where multiple colors meet. Diffused or unfocused edges, as in the paintings by Mark Rothko, for example, cause the viewer to “move” into the picture space, a way of viewing paintings familiar since the Renaissance. On the other hand, if we are patient and quietly observe Swain's paintings from varying distances, they can lead us to a new understanding of color painting: we are invited to participate in the complication and fluidity of color experiences that appear to change, move, and glow with heightened intensity. But the colors also come to rest again as the individual shapes take their turn at the center of our attention. Since viewers create these effects within themselves, each may experience them at slightly different times and in varying spatial modes of appearances. Such effects are considered intensely private experiences and therefore it is tempting to associate these paintings with religious or mystical states. The contemplation of Swain's paintings, while they always retain their own identity, provokes a concentrated, even heightened awareness of our direct access to our own consciousness. And for Swain, each of his paintings is hard-won in this way, by empirical investigations of color's behavior, its relationships and interactions. Swain selects individual colors by looking at one given color, say a saturated orange, and then attentively waiting for its complementary partner, a certain saturated blue, to emerge in his mind's eye. The same method holds true for his “Value” paintings of black, white, and gray. Color painters consider the achromatic tones of black, white, and gray as colors since they are subject to similar psychological effects as chromatic tones, but only their brightness changes within the



Robert Swain, photograph of the artist with
30 Part Circle, 1971, Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 6in. diameter
 Private collection

context of a painting. Once the color structure is determined by Swain's choice of the colors' location and quantity, a particular and unique color expression is arrived at. After he has mastered this set of relationships, he subtly altered his considerations—and entered a new phase of work. During the 1980s, for example, he broke down the compositional structure of his paintings into differently sized blocks of colors. They were still set in relation to each other, but were shifted around. Some works were organized according to the Golden section, a mathematical ideal that, Swain said, came to him intuitively.

Phenomenological energies can be experienced as well when we look at Swain's large-scale mural work. This involves peripheral vision. While we observe the center of the painting, its edges can only be sensed and the colors seem to blend in motion. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Swain explored subtle but innovative adjustments to the scale and the size of individual elements, their order and configurations. Each painting exists on its own terms; nothing is arbitrary in this work. Its structure arises purely from formal or expressive considerations generated by its component parts. It takes awareness, time, and imagination to figure out the individual experiential sensations these paintings evoke. It is up to viewers to enter into a dialogue with the work.

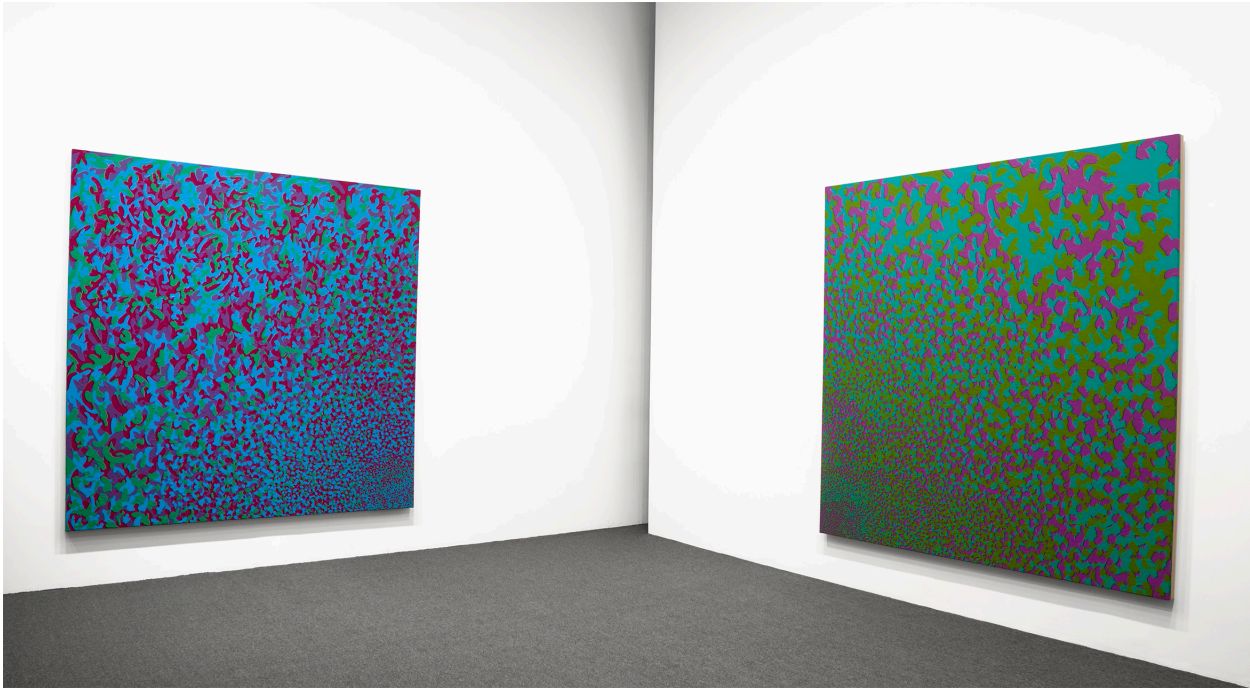
New Work

Inspired by new insights, in 2006 Swain set out to radically change his style. With this new body of paintings, he returned to earlier problems that had been abandoned for want of clarity. He revisited his efforts from the mid-1960s, when he attempted to combine the irregular shapes of the brushstroke with particular color concepts. It was a way to grapple with the heritage of Abstract Expressionism. But this new work is not merely a cultural citation.

To Swain, all his previous work began to appear passive. It seemed to evoke a certain kind of quietness, if one can manage to disregard the often bright color. A quietness or equilibrium, due perhaps to the vertical and horizontal divisions of the pictorial field. But this new body of paintings, he decided, would be given open structures of irregular lines that mimic brushstrokes. And in them, viewers can discover discrete elements of curved structures, repetitive units of individually jagged edges, and torn shapes unlike any encountered in nature. Almost always organized from top to bottom and diagonally across the picture plane, Swain's shapes reduce in size as they descend toward the lower left of the composition. Suddenly, afterimages appear within these shapes due to the effects of successive contrasting pairings. Their movement and frequency of pace creates the tension between control and aliveness of the paintings' surface. Swain's earlier concern with color contrasts has expanded in this new body of work to include the "active shape." Tensions arise, not just on the surface, but between such applicable characteristics as expansion and contraction, static and active, accumulation and dispersal, and the cross-blending of fields and structures. Every visual element is run through every possible permutation.

These new works read as dynamic fields without referring to landscapes. Further, the jagged edges of the "brushstroke" shapes are applied in thicker layers of impasto, and their shadow line lends an additional visual element, further rendering unique each new painting. And even in paintings where we discern not more than three colors, they are set into a disruptive contrast by the closeness in value and hue relationships and varying distribution of changes in size, quantity, and location.

In the former work, viewers could observe in time all the apparent movements of



Untitled, 9-25-8 x 13-25-7 x 19-25-6 x 25-25-6 (left), 2010
Untitled, 11-25-7 x 23-25-6 x 27-25-6 (right), 2010
Both acrylic on canvas, 7 x 7 ft.
Collection of the artist

immaterial, merry blocks of light and color in their stimulating, advancing, and receding restlessness. These new canvases ask viewers to engage with the materiality of color as paint, something visceral and physical, the “physical fact” that Albers spoke of in relation to “psychic effects.” Reduced in number, the colors still emanate light and sensation, as, for example, in an untitled 2007 painting, a seven-foot-square canvas that consists of the split complementaries of red-violet, yellow-green, and blue-green median value. They are distributed in an all-over manner, in dramatically decreasing marks as they approach the lower left of the painting; the effect is of a fan-like spread. At that corner small patches of colors of a close value tend to mix optically. But when the texture is too coarse, the pure complementary hues create a phenomenon called complementary vibration, whereby the constituent colors seem to repel each other and cause optical movement or vibration. Observe the lower left areas of this canvas carefully. Which is it? Optical mixture or optical contrast? Scanning the entire surface, viewers notice a distinct sensation of everything being animated. The agitated lines of the brushstroke shapes, as they shrink in size, appear to collide with the colors that flare up in contrasting and successive afterimages of luminous light. At a heightened state of consciousness the tension is almost unbearable, the equivalent of an epic struggle: shape and color are enmeshed between states of emergence and resolution, existence and extinction, until closure sets in and all concern fades away.

Summary

Painting can be comprehended only through direct experience. With these new works Robert Swain has achieved a visual expression that can be seen both all at once and in all its permutations. Viewers are presented with a series of particular problems that are solved differently in each individual work. His repertoire is vast. Swain has at his disposal a seemingly unlimited palette and his sequences of experiential sensations, such as simultaneous contrasts, after-images, and other induced effects, keep viewers in a reciprocal relationship with the paintings. Luminous shapes, brighter and more brilliant than the painted shapes that generate them, can be observed to appear, disappear, reappear, or cyclically fade out as our color-sensitive cones become fatigued. Swain has pushed the limits of perceptually functioning art from a gentle but lively impression of individually interacting color phenomena to a more aggressive and energetic fusion of cause and effect. The result is a new color expression that can reach all of us since we share the biological make-up to perceive it. But its experience is individual and private, taking us beyond visual sensations to our own radiant universe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 www.robertswainexhibit.org
- 2 To devote an exhibition to the experience of color in painting at this moment seems only fitting when we remember that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s seminal work on color phenomena, *Theory of Colours*, was published exactly two hundred years ago, in 1810. First trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake, London, 1840. First MIT Press paperback edition, March 1970.
- 3 Key texts include: Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy* (1950); Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954); Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color* (1961); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962); Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (1963); *The Responsive Eye*, exh. cat. by William C. Seitz, New York, Museum of Modern Art (1965) .
- 4 John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (1999).

ARTIST STATEMENT: COLOR AS CONTENT IN PAINTING

“French painters, he would continue, may have seen a rainbow. Nature may have given them some taste for nuance, some sense of color. But I have revealed to you the great and true principles of art. I say of art! of all the arts, gentlemen, and of all the sciences. The analysis of colors, the calculation of prismatic refractions, give you the only exact relations in nature, the rule of all relations. And everything in the universe is nothing but relations. Thus one knows everything when one knows how to paint; one knows everything when one knows how to match colors.”

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from *The Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Color is a form of energy derived from the electromagnetic spectrum that stimulates our perceptual processes and is instrumental in conveying emotions. In some instances, color is culturally encoded, projecting content through symbolism or associations. The origin for such references is found in the way that the energy (wavelengths) from a particular color generates feeling; a physiological change produced by the wavelengths (energy) of a particular color or colors. The energy which emanates from green is distinctly different from the wavelengths that define red. In some cultures, pure red is associated with danger. Feelings and attitudes created by the aggressive, radiate energy, which is unique to the red part of the spectrum. When pure red is altered, its emotional attributes change, as in the stability associated with red earth colors, or the whimsical fluctuation produced by pink. In this sense, color transmits feeling(s) through the perception of energy (wavelengths) from the electromagnetic spectrum. Freed from cultural restraints, red can be experienced by itself as a phenomenon that possesses substantial content. When red is placed next to green, the contrast is heightened, as M. E. Chevreul has observed, and the experience resides in the energy generated by the convergence of these unique spectral wavelengths.

– Robert Swain