CREATE MORE DYNAMIC ART THROUGH BETTER DESIGN - TURN TO P. 6

NOVEMBER 2011

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the business magazine for visual artists

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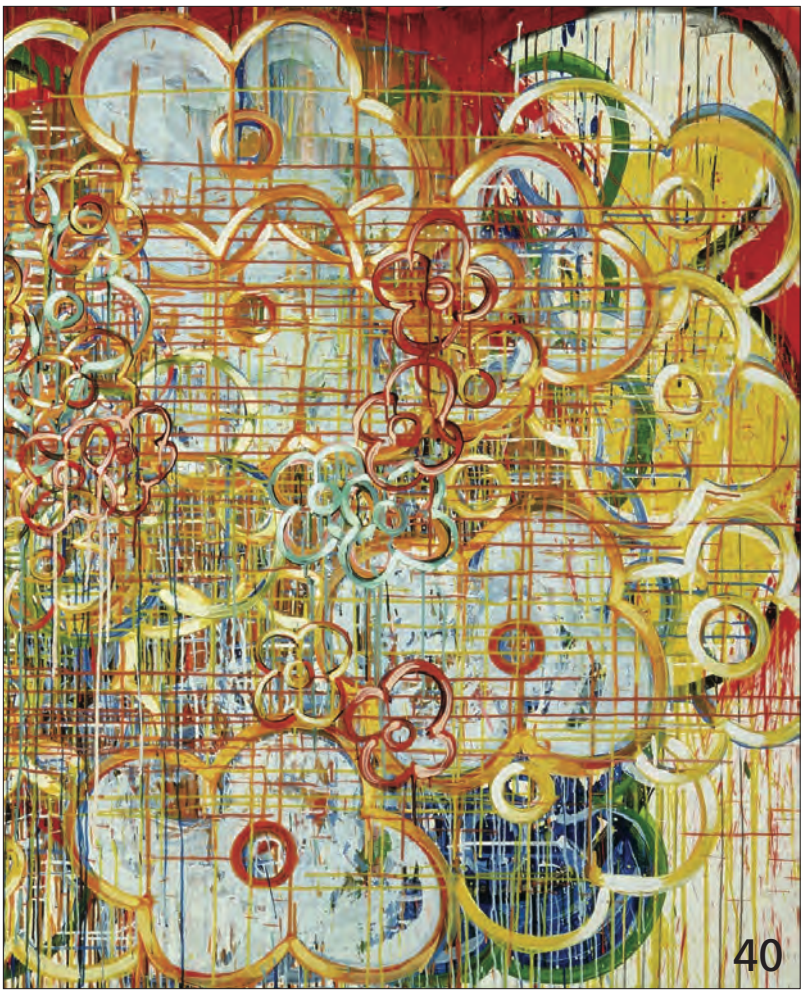
FADING LIGHT by Susan Swartz



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NOVEMBER 2011 • VOLUME 25 • NUMBER 9

www.professionalartistmag.com

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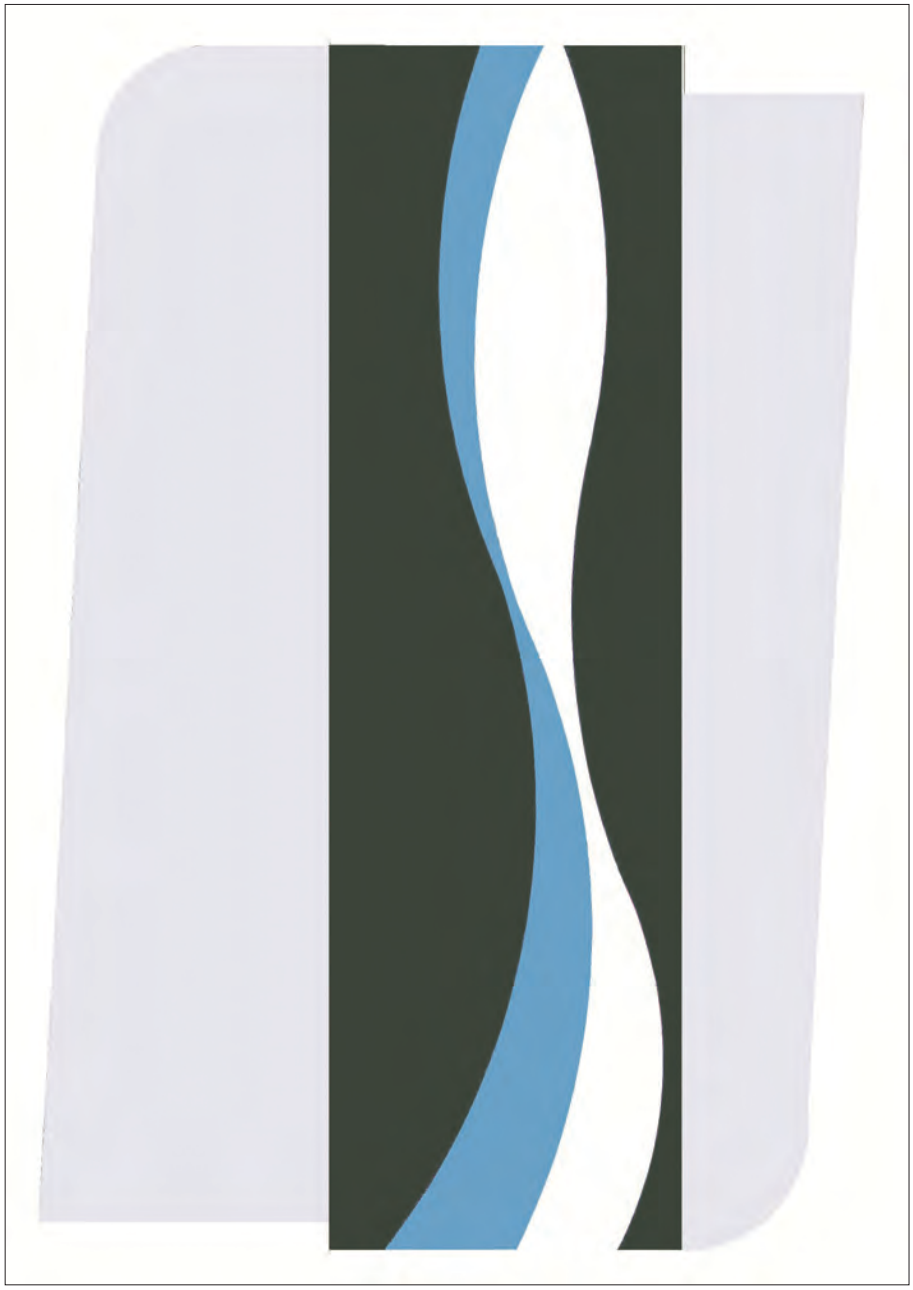
Understanding
The Aesthetic Power of Geometric Abstraction

BY STEPHEN KNUDSEN

THE RENOWNED ART CRITIC Henry Geldzahler often used aesthetic intuition as a guiding principle when curating exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. A good work, he believed, will "call itself to memory without asking it.... like a melody."

Artists succeed in making effective and memorable work, not through a magic formula, but by successfully synthesizing several factors — combining many aspects to create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. In this article, we will examine how the work of artist Jason Hoelscher embodies these principles through simple, elegant design. Through this analysis, you should gain a greater understanding of how Hoelscher combined 1960s Minimalist ideals with a contemporary approach, resulting in art that eschews the limitations of Minimalism and communicates on a deeper level with the contemporary audience.



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***Torque*, 2011, by Jason Hoelscher. Acrylic latex on canvas, 66" x 48". Private collection.**

Less is More

In the 1960s, artists like Frank Stella and Donald Judd sought to create art founded on the principles of universal accessibility. They wanted to strip art down to its most fundamental components — namely form, color, flatness and composition. Leaving behind illusionist space as well as complex readings of inner meaning, these artists succeeded in transcending cultural and social boundaries.

While Minimalism (even in the decades of its prominence) attracts its fair share of detractors, the movement's aim to streamline the parts of an image continues to be useful to artists. Artists can strengthen their work, regardless of style, by understanding the basic components of design, and how they interact with one another to create a successful image.

A Hoelscher painting, for example, feels immediately familiar to the viewer because it does clearly harken back to the Minimalist principles established nearly five decades ago. Hoelscher's works feature a limited number of simple geometric shapes in balanced color combinations as

FRANK STELLA IN 1972

For a short and elegant discussion of Minimalism and its intentions (and its differences from Abstract Expressionism), watch this YouTube video featuring William Rubin, curator at Museum of Modern Art, and Frank Stella giving a memorable talk about some of his best reductive work, the Saskatchewan series. For convenience, use this redirect: http://www.professionalartistmag.com/frankstella.

outlines or forms, arranged with a sensitivity for design unity. Yet Hoelscher has gone beyond Minimalist imitation and infused his work with a contemporary sensibility. By eschewing perspective and dimensionality along with other concerns of realism and purging his work of metaphor, Hoeslcher has freedom to consider instead the balance of forms, equality of parts, repetition, neutral surfaces and negative space. This enables him to create work that forges a give-and-take relationship with the viewer, rather than limiting himself to the self-contained artwork of Minimalism.

Hoelscher states, "Maximal impact with minimum input is my way of trying to combine the *gestalt* read of uninflected, non-relational minimal art with the quick-read semiotics of corporate logos. As our culture sped up, via faster cars (in the 1950s-60s) and faster processing speeds (both microchip and mental, via the Internet), design was stripped down to visual sound bites. My work combines the minimalist *gestalt* reading (based on psychology) with the commercial quick-read (based on marketing)."

What We Can Learn from Commercial Design

The essence of Hoelscher's particular brand of geometric abstraction is a type of Minimalism combined with a mash-up of the design inherent to corporate logos and Pop Art that seeks to feel good visually.

Like a logo, a Hoelscher painting's success is derived from the way shapes and space are constructed. *Flatness* is emphasized, although there is a nod to spatial awareness in the contrast between light and dark. (See *Tautolaugicon* on page 26.) The colored shapes read as flat forms, but the configuration of their parts suggests folding and overlap — a mimicry of illusionary space.

> **"I strive to make paintings that work within and contribute to the cultural context of fine art, while also being just plain cool enough to be worth looking at by the average person."**
>
> **— Jason Hoelscher**

These types of visual quips are the hallmark of commercial design. Hoelscher is a firm believer that today's average viewer is a great deal more sophisticated than many artists credit — perhaps not trained in the principles of art history courses, but already fluent in the visual language and mediated imagery of advertising. Society's visual tastes have been altered by constant commercial streaming, resulting in a near universal comprehension of graphics in advertising.

In his artist statement, Hoelscher acknowledges taking advantage of commercial mores, stating, "My paintings result from a determination to make art that can stand up to the rigors of 'official' art-world aesthetic judgment and critique, yet still possess enough visual impact and oomph to engage the vernacular glance of the untrained eye. In other words, I strive to make paintings that work within and contribute to the cultural context of fine art, while also being just plain cool enough to be worth looking at by the average person.

"This is quick-read imagery, designed to be as fast and in-your-face as possible ... There's no attempt to hide from the viewer the fact that s/he is looking at a heavily processed and mediated image."

Adding Classical Influence to Composition

In a 1982 seminal essay, "Determining Aesthetic Values," Gehldzaler described the daily experience he had with a Hans Hoffman painting that hung in his bedroom

for 15 years. He said the painting had such power that it was "like getting fresh flowers everyday." How does geometric abstraction, a style which does not furnish rhetoric or narrative of any kind, transcend a shallow interpretation and attain a deeper artistic significance, despite its role as the basis for the ideas of commercial design? To do so, an abstract image must go beyond the scope of a logo — an object that exists only to brand and to boost a bottom line.

Despite all the attention he gives to speed and immediate visual delivery, Hoelscher's paintings, unlike actual logos, call out for extended attention, rewarding engaged viewers. Hoelscher accomplishes this by making most of the work "human size" — usually 66" x 48"— this being, as he says, an average human height and a width that is the minimum space someone needs to be comfortable in a crowd.

At their core, Hoelscher's works strive for the refreshing visual simplicity of the most successful examples of geometric abstraction — the same fluid expression present in a Matisse cutout. The absence of adornment just *feels* good.

In *Tautologicon*, Hoelscher uses a technique Matisse called *simple color sounding* through repetition and progression. Specifically, in *Tautologicon*, there is a repetition of some form of blue in each of the four shapes on white making a handsome consonance. There is a good feeling of progression starting from the small light blue center form radiating shape to shapes to the blue triangle that seems bent on leaving the picture plane (but not quite making it to the edge). Starting at center, one also sees a pleasant pattern of light and dark.

To hit even more pleasure centers in the eye, *Tautologicon*, like much of Hoelscher's work, is encoded with classical ratios. Hoelscher's typical rectangle 66" x 44" is very close to a *root 2 rectangle*, that is where the length (66) divided by the width (44) is nearly square root of 2 (or 1.41.) *Root rectangles* (based on various square roots) and golden section rectangles (length divided by width equals 1.67) are dynamic rectangles found in Classical Greek and Roman artworks and architecture, because they were thought to create pleasing ideals of symmetry and proportion. Dividing armatures were often used on dynamic ratio rectangles, such as golden rectangles and root rectangles to find placement points.

In doing this on *Tautologicon*, an admirable placement of shapes can be recognized. First, the only place where all three of the four inner shapes converge (X_1) is a point just off the center point (A_1). Barely off-centering the primary focal point maintains it as locus of an orbit while giving it a touch of dynamism. The two largest shapes that orbit the smallest shape each contain three of the secondary armature intersections — b, c, d, e, f, and g — which form an ellipse around (X_1). This creates a pleasing unity called enclosure, but it also makes a spin thrusting into the triangular

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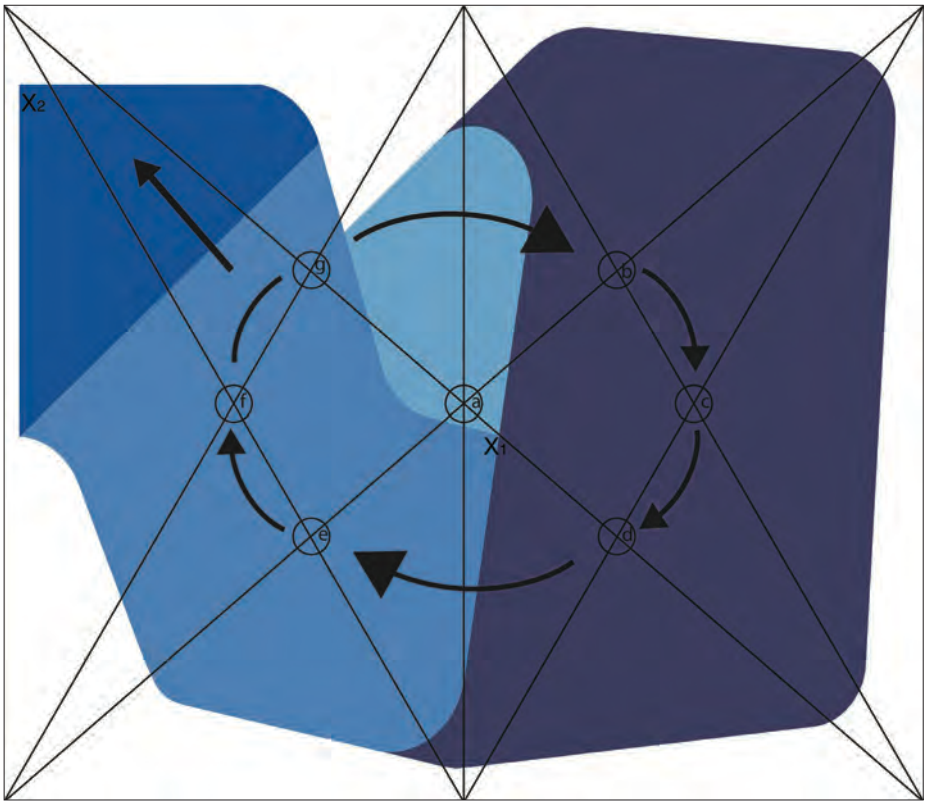
***Tautologicon*, 2010, by Jason Hoelscher. Acrylic latex on canvas, 44" x 66". Private collection.**



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Jason Hoelsher's, ***Tautologicon,* (2010),** with superimposed compositional analysis by Stephen Knudsen. A root 2 dividing armature is placed on the color plate of the work.

Hoelscher is a firm believer that today's average viewer is a great deal more sophisticated than many artists credit — perhaps not trained in the principles of art history courses, but already fluent in the visual language and mediated imagery of advertising.

rectangle and its corner (X_2). This classical formalism combined with street-smart commercial formalism is just one more level of the hybridization in Hoelscher's work.

Yet Hoelscher is not simply cramming shapes into armatures and grids, rather working through his compositions in an intuitive fashion. In sketches, he pushes the image around until it reaches a point of seeming, as he says, "inevitable." He feels "the image is ready to be worked up into a final stage once it seems as if there's no other way for it to possibly work: each curve, angle, shape has to be exactly the way it is and wouldn't work any other way."

Working from preliminary sketches on a tiny scale allows Hoelscher to see the image with "oomph," at a smaller size, to give him confidence that once it is big it will have astonishing visual potency.

While he's aware of how classical ratios play a role in his final works, he allows himself to be guided primarily by intuition in his smaller drawings, not methodically plotting them out, but still using the principles of good composition. Armatures might be placed afterward to see just what kind of classical geometry formed (see left).

Saying More with Less

Geometric abstraction follows architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous "less is more" strategy of arranging the components to create an impression of extreme simplicity, yet enlisting every element and detail to serve multiple purposes. This creates simple images full of sophisticated visual complexity.

The challenge inherent to geometric abstraction is to strip an image down to the point of "risking starkness but never going there." Something more than austerity must manifest in an image for it to capture that feeling of rightness. That Hoelscher is capable of skirting around formal severity to get to something more interesting highlights the aesthetic power of geometric abstraction — a combination of seemingly mutually exclusive ideas, being economic and pictorially rich at the same time. **PA**

Jason Hoelscher is currently represented by Mark Humphrey Gallery in Southampton, NY, Rule Gallery in Denver, and Paris CONCRET Gallery in Paris.

Stephen Knudsen (www.steveknudsen.com) is a writer for Professional Artist, *theartstory.org, and other publications on topics of design, critical art theory and analysis. He is a professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design and has exhibited his paintings in New York, London, Cologne, Hong Kong and Shanghai, and many galleries and museums in Eastern Europe. He has published groundbreaking color theory and developed the Knudsen Dual Color Wheel, used in universities across the country. He lectures regularly at professional conferences; his lecture at SECAC 2011 will be on the Fourth Dimension of Color and the Dual Color Wheel. Email: sknudsen@scad.edu.*

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