

Projects : Michael Young : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 23-September 7, 1987

Author

Young, Michael, 1952-

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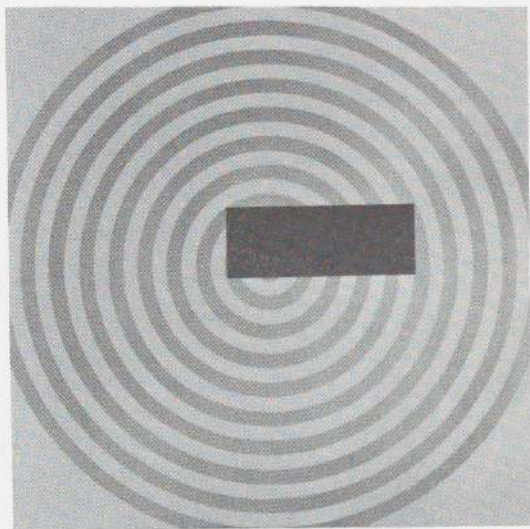
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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
July 23–September 7, 1987

projects: michael young

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***Atopia.* 1987. Polymer emulsion, sand, synthetic polymer paint, and polyester resin on canvas, 27 x 27" (68.6 x 68.6 cm). Collection Rebecca Donelson, Chicago**

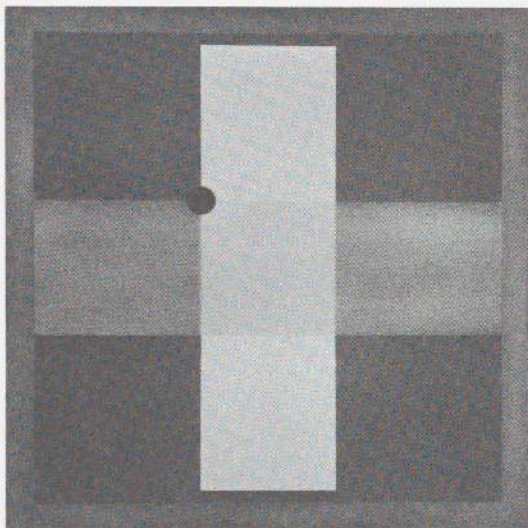
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projects

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Lannan Foundation, and J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.

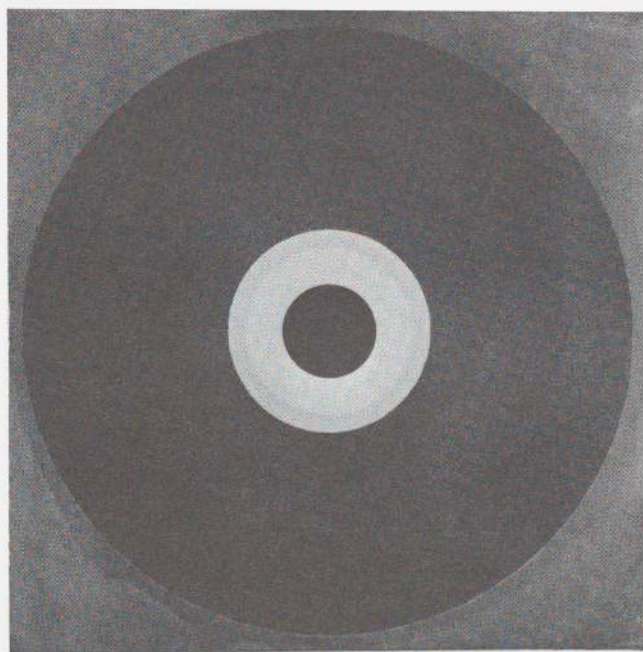


Drifting Habitation. 1987. Polymer emulsion, sand, synthetic polymer paint, and polyester resin on canvas, 27 x 27" (68.6 x 68.6 cm). Collection S. Ronald and Andrée Stone, Chicago

Michael Young

The seventy-five-year history of geometric abstract painting can be divided into two periods, separated by the advent of Abstract Expressionism. In the earlier, relational period, the focus was on the ways in which geometric forms related to one another within the picture plane. In the later, nonrelational period, the issue became one of holistic unity in a picture. Michael Young's small, square paintings with cross or circle forms fall within the second category. We perceive each painting's design and construction as one unified whole. In this work, the picture plane does not contain the shapes; if anything, the shapes seem to generate the picture plane.

The forms in these paintings, either concentric circles or cross shapes, occupy nearly the entire canvas. The rationality of their design and their small size cause these works to be perceived as perfect geometric units. The totality of each work is readily apparent; we note the painting's center and that equidistant from it on four sides the object stops and the world begins. The paintings' square format adds to this effect. Unlike rectangular pictures, which tend to relate comfortably to the rectangular walls on which they are hung, these small squares maintain a separation from their support. The construction of these works further reinforces our perception of them as worlds unto themselves. Their projection from the wall is accentuated by the absence of picture frames; their final, polyester-resin glazing homogenizes and unifies their surfaces.



Eclipse. 1987. Polymer emulsion, sand, synthetic polymer paint, and polyester resin on canvas, 20 x 20" (50.8 x 50.8 cm). Collection Dr. Stan Cohen, Atlanta

The use of color in these paintings is as clear, deliberate, and easily perceptible as is their general design. In each work, the ground and largest portion of the central figure are painted in neutral earth colors. In fact, to achieve the exact colors and tonalities desired, the artist sifts sand and baked soil of varying hues and coarseness onto canvas coated with polymer emulsion. Young chooses the other extreme in color for certain linear elements, such as the vertical bars in the cross paintings and some of the rings in the circle paintings. The bright, fluorescent colors used here resemble those of flashy, mass-produced consumer products, such as plastic recreational goods and costume jewelry. The combination of these two kinds of color, which have very different associations and are optically at odds, is jarring: neutral, light-absorbent browns are pierced by zones of brilliant, extremely light-reflective color. Clearly, though, color is not used in an illusionary way. To the contrary, the use of color defeats an attempt to read the forms as references to things that exist in the world we know.

These single-form painting types—the concentric-circle and cross paintings—have very different effects. The forms in the circle paintings seem to inch toward us. They separate completely from the ground, causing it to read as a neutral backboard in front of which the circles are suspended. This thrust forward results from the combination of the perspectival effect of concentric circles and the advancing effect of fluorescent colors. The cross forms, by contrast, hang back and seem partially in contact with the ground zones. The vertical bars, because of their advancing, strong color in neutral surroundings, seem to bend toward us around the restraining, neutral-tone horizontal bars, which hold the form "back" in close proximity to the ground. The circle paintings' edges seem to push outward from the pressure exerted by the expanding rings. The cross paintings' sides, on the other hand, seem to be pulled toward the square areas at the centers of the crosses. There is a tendency to see the cross forms as cartons whose four sides have dropped. The "reconstruction" of the cartons pulls the sides of the paintings in.

Even as we perceive limited depth in these paintings—in a shallow area between two laterally oriented planes—flatness is our central impression. The graphic quality of the surfaces of this work and the evenness of color both speak of flatness. With great deliberation these pictures confront us in what we are assured through the regularity and similarity of their parts is their entirety. The final layers of polyester resin act as a lens to clarify this perception.

The moods of these two painting types differ as well. Associations with targets or staring eyes may contribute to the unsettling effect of the circle paintings. The greater source of unease in this work, however, is the palpable design tension: the circles are not visually anchored to the sides of the square canvases and seem to be trying to free themselves from their support, traveling forward and moving laterally. The cross forms, however, relate directly to the geometry of their canvas support, and the pictorial dynamics of these paintings are both more typical and more complex than those of the circle pictures. The horizontal, neutral-color bars extend to the edges of the paintings, but the vertical, fluorescent bars float free of the paintings' tops and bottoms. The effect of the cross paintings is in general more comfortable than that of the circles, partly as a result of our greater familiarity with this sort of pictorial activity and partly as a result of the way all the elements correspond so beautifully to the canvas shape.

In discussion Michael Young is very concerned with linking his painting to examinations of nature. Scientific photographs of such natural phenomena as solar eclipses, and of such primary physical structures as cells, are scattered throughout his studio. Early attempts at diagramming the mysteries of life are of great interest to him. He relates the structure of certain of his paintings to scientific diagrams of rhizomes, or root systems, and speaks of an important component of his paintings, sand, as being the smallest particle of nature visible to the naked eye. Young's explorations, with his art, in the territory of the physical scientist, link him intellectually to the earlier, relational version of geometric abstract art, particularly that of the Russian Constructivists.

When these paintings succeed as aesthetic objects, however, the fragments of rational detail—the symmetry and geometry, the earth colors, and the allusions to perspective—move our attention across the objects, allowing us to enjoy the sensual beauty of this art, but do not elicit extended intellectual involvement. In 1948, Herbert Read addressed this issue in his *Gabo and Pevsner*, the catalog for an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art:

The particular vision of reality common to the constructivism of Pevsner and Gabo and the neo-plasticism of Mondrian is derived not from the superficial aspects of a mechanized civilization, nor from a reduction of visual data to their "cubic planes" or "plastic volumes" (all these activities being merely variations of a naturalistic art), but from the structure of the physical universe as revealed by modern science. . . . Though the intellectual vision of the artist is derived from modern physics, the creative construction which the artist then presents to the world is not scientific, but poetic. It is the poetry of space, the poetry of time, of universal harmony, of physical unity. Art—it is its main function—accepts this universal manifold which science investigates and reveals and reduces it to the concreteness of a plastic symbol.

Bob McDaniel, Assistant Curator
Department of Drawings

biography

Born Houston, Texas,
October 1, 1952

education

Yale University, New Haven,
Connecticut. MFA, 1977

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York. Independent Study Program, 1975

University of Texas, Austin. BFA, 1975

selected individual exhibitions

1986

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York

Madeleine Carter Gallery, Boston

1984

Madeleine Carter Gallery, Boston

1982

Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York

1987

selected group exhibitions

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York
Artists Against AIDS

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Equitable Center, New York
*Generations of Geometry: Abstract
Painting in America since 1930*

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham, Massachusetts
Two Painters at Brandeis

1986

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York
*Nancy Haynes, Joseph Marioni,
Gordon Moore, Günter Umberg, and
Michael Young*

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York
Painting the Object

Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
Post-Pop

1983

CDS, New York
Artists Choose Artists

selected bibliography

Cohrs, Timothy. "Michael Young,"
Arts Magazine (New York), vol. 61,
no. 5 (January 1987), p. 123

Liebmann, Lisa. "M.B.A. Abstrac-
tionism," *Flash Art* (Milan), no. 132
(February/March 1987), pp. 86-89

New York, Whitney Museum of
American Art at Equitable Center.
*Generations of Geometry: Abstract
Painting in America since 1930*
(exhibition catalog), 1987