Art Alive

After mass murders and horrors during WW2, New York based abstract expressionists (who were aware of the works of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud) understood that shapes, lines and colors provoke feeling, and by making art objects from their subconscious, other humans, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, educational level, might share similar feelings though subconscious perception. Their wish to unite with other humans through subconscious feeling produced superb art. The abstract expressionists rejected clever, show off art, for it might not be serious, but facile and commercial.

My friend and teacher, Stuart Davis, told us and Stuart wrote, that paintings are not commodities; they are sensate objects.

 Rejecting commercial gallery, art/commodity scene, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and others brought forth feelings that others could share by making art works set into nature. Foundations like the Dia gave them significant support.

In the early and mid nineteenth century J.M. W. Turner turned his awe of storms sunrises, and great fires into sensate objects that were paintings. French Impressionists produced emotionally involving paintings. Cezanne emphasized the painted rectangle, the choreography and our reaction to its reading. The life-filled structure of a painting, its and its truth to human perception mattered. Because human heads move and turn to see classical perspective was replaced by other visual truths in paintings by Paul Cezanne, something that became important to Picasso.

Abstract expressionist sculptor Philip Pavia circulated IT IS, which implied that art was a significant thing, not an echo.

Mark Rothko said to us that when he did a painting, he had hoped that some day a person would look at it and feel what he, Mark, had felt when he painted it.

Rejecting the commercial art/commodity scene, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and others brought forth emotional feelings that others could share from art works set into nature. Foundations like the Dia gave them significant support. Richard Serra sculptures interact with us, as do contemporary works with light.

As a result of my experiences as an instructor at the School of Architecture of Columbia University, I learned the positive nature of shaped space. I began to question the nature of wall, its security, as a provider of privacy and wall as a visual barrier that separates us
from nature. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe opened interior space to outside space by glass walls, and he was followed by Phillip Johnson with a Glass House. The problems in Johnson’s Glass House of privacy, comfort and security are discussed in an article in his book, CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS by Selden Rodman. Early peoples sought shelter, privacy and the security of the solid walls of caves. In early cave dwellings people drew and painted on the walls. Perhaps, among other reasons, art broke the oppressive barrier of the cave wall, and pierced it with a welcome visual space, as traditional framed paintings do. Mark Rothko, in the spirit of “IT IS,” took the frames, or pants off his paintings to let them sit naked on the wall by a painting structure that he called “self framed.” His painting was not a window through the wall to an imagined space behind a frame; color shapes moved out from the wall, and they moved toward us. His paintings were live objects, Important to his use of colors in his emotion provoking early paintings of the late 1950’s, was the human size of the dominant shapes of bright colors that were applied with feeling by brush or cloth. Rothko said his paintings were not large, but of human size. Because of the nature our reaction to color, we feel the shapes before thought. After my friendship with Mark, my paintings became to me, live creatures who lived well on walls.

Because of scientific studies, I envision the universe as nothing but endlessly transforming energy in space. Perhaps “Dyne” would be an appropriate name for God. In 1963, I had become excited by the visual expression of human energy that I saw in newspaper photographs of athletes engaged in sports. In the resulting paintings wanted to blow up large areas of light reflecting bright color light energy on human sized canvases. I showed near human sized silhouettes of athletes at play in white or raw canvas surrounded by color at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1964 and 1965.

EDGECOMB

In addition to these in 1965, I the question to myself as to why most paintings were armored (as Freud might say) or protected from contact with the wall to which they clung. I built several small wooden stretchers, and painted Edgecomb (Edgecomb Avenue, called Sugar Hill, was a few blocks away from my Harlem apartment then). Edgecomb is 28”h x 29”w, of five flatly painted grey panels with wall spaces of widths that match the widths of the panels. It has never been exhibited. The wall spaces become shapes within the painting. Perhaps the painting makes love to the wall, they become one, and unify. In 1968 I showed six 8’ x 14’ Cajun minimal paintings at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in my first of two exhibitions that fall there on the third floor of 29 West 57th Street. I chose intense colors, because if the wall was papered or tinted, the integrity and unity of the painting would remain. The panels were of Charles Jeantrette’s (Le Corbusier’s) adult human module, 8’ x 2’. Some panels were 8’ x1’, as well, to relate to young thin adults as seen from the side, myself when in the WW 2 Navy. Some of my panels are child sized, one half the dimensions of the adult panel paintings, and many were shown and sold from the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. From my
1968 exhibition at that gallery, Seymour Knox purchased an adult sized, large painting, South Hampton, for the Albright Knox Gallery, and in 1970, it and others were exhibited in Robert Murdock’s group exhibition, Modular at the Albright Knox Gallery. A week after that closed I exhibited again at at Tibor de Nagy, three dimensional adult human module canvas pylons with spaces between the pylons, so that a visitor could walk between the pylons. As one moved through the work, color sequences would change as the position of the visitor changed. Art critic, Robert A. Mahoney has written a superb unpublished article about the exhibition of the human module pylons.

COLOR/ALBERS
I had found Joseph Albers’ interaction of color useless for these works, even though I had taught his color methods at Columbia’s School of Architecture. I chose to rely upon my direct feeling and responses as to color combinations, with no previous sketches, as an abstract expressionist might do. Reflected colored light is not about energy; it is reflected energy, Pavia would say, It Is.

Western peoples, who had conquered much of the world wanted harmony and security in art and in their lives, and so nineteenth and early twentieth century artists looked for color harmonies. The peoples of the West had conquered much of the world, and did not want conflict.

My time has not been a time of harmony. I grew up under Southern racial segregation, about which Billie Holiday sang of strange fruit hanging from trees. I volunteered for service in the US Navy during WW 2 against ethnic hating Nazis. There are times now when I think WW 2 has simply continued into strife in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Syria. My art must be of my time and true, therefore, I am not interested in finding harmony to soothe a complacent bourgeois. I want to connect to others through subconscious feeling. The size of color shapes matter; I chose colors by my emotional response to them.

My minimal painter friends used, appropriately, minimal color: tasteful grays and tans. At the time people were reading about Kierkegaard’s concern that Western culture was dying. Perhaps the Nazis killed western spiritual culture. People were also noting Nietzsche's words that God is dead. To me, a Quaker and scientist, who sees that everything about us that is not nature, including the words I write, as something that has been invented by shared human minds. We evolved, but were not given road maps or guidebooks, and I am in awe of what the human mind has accomplished. I accept literary critic Harold Bloom’s statement that God was invented long ago by peoples on the banks of the Mediterranean. I do believe that God CAN be within us, as CAN a devil. If they exist. Neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche trouble me. Like my Creole/Cajun people, I celebrate life, dance with it, and I celebrate our living with color, and in other ways. Because we, and all we see, is energy in space, I value our special perceptions and
awareness of space. Black, white, silver and raw canvas panels can modulate and play against the visual location of a wall. Because space is as important as energy to me, I sometimes eliminate color, to use those non-colors to move or ripple a wall.

I use no sketches, but surrounded in my studio by panels of varying sizes related to human ages, and of many colors, my assistant puts differing panels before us, and we move and change them until we find life. We add spaces to create additional life.

(PAINTING+WALL=1) + SPACE +PEOPLE=1

When I mix adult, child and youngster sized colored panels I think of Creole/Cajun families. If hanging, wall is part of painting, they are one, and through variations of Le Corbusier’s human Module in the panels, wall and space relate to people in a new Baroque manner. At my desk, when surrounded by panels on the wall, I feel their presence at my back as quiet company. Because most of the panels radiate vibrating color energy, when they strike the open eyes of people, who are matter composed of vibrating molecules and electrons, the mood of light vibrations are felt by us. Sound and music vibrations also move us emotionally.

My Cajun minimal paintings are active and alive with energy. They act upon people present. They are not as with most nineteenth century paintings, passive. They play upon a wall to remove one’s sense of being trapped behind an impenetrable barrier.