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Andrew Forge's light of the canvas

by Andrew L. Shea

As a young painter in high school I became interested in Josef Albers, the Bauhaus artist and educator whose seminal color course, outlined in his 1963 book *Interaction of Color*, transformed the pedagogy of modern design in the second half of the twentieth century. Albers's basic hypothesis, which he aimed to prove to his students and readers through one perceptual experiment after another, is that a color has no independent value, but rather is relative in the way that a musical tone is. What gives a B-flat its power is not its specific frequency but its harmonic, intervallic relationship to the other notes in a chord or melody. When it comes to making a picture, this slippery relativity can be maddening at times—try and mix up that tree trunk's brownish-gray on your palette and watch it mutate into some ungodly splotch once it's placed on the canvas—but it's also a primary source of painting's magic. Albers once likened his tinkering to alchemy: "I like to take a weak color and make it rich and beautiful by working on its neighbors. . . . Turning sand into gold, that's my work and aim."

But as I began to study Albers's art and ideas, my teacher issued what seemed to me a provocation: Albers was a painter not of *color*, but of *light*.

An optical physicist might see this as moot. All color *is* light; it's the same thing, all just photons of different wavelengths landing on the retina. But in painting, a functional distinction is often made: "color" meaning "hue"—red, blue, orange, gray, brown, and so on; "light" meaning "tonal value"—bright and dark; highlights, mid-tones, and shadows. In traditional Western painting, the distinction is also a hierarchy, with tonal value being the more essential of these two characteristics, because modeling light and dark allows for the mimetic representation of form. For this reason, painters have traditionally made a monochromatic "underpainting" or *grisaille* in order to pin down the scene's tonal value structure, before adding local color on top of that light-dark drawing. Breaking down color in this nuts-and-bolts fashion is an attempt, at heart, to get a firmer grasp on the fugitive experience of seeing.

Albers's paintings, however, make no attempt at representation. He seems instead to be probing the perceptual possibilities of color *qua* color: What might happen if a light gray is placed next to a pale yellow? How do the two colors relate? What if we then surround both with another light gray, but one that's ever-so-slightly more purplish? Of course, like all paintings, Albers's have tonal structures of light and dark. But are these their main source of interest, as my teacher's comment would seem to suggest?

What I think he was getting at was instead a very different conception of light, one that's difficult to verbalize. An Albers painting doesn't *represent* light—sunshine over a leafy meadow, say—but rather seems to *generate* its own light from within the painting, as if by some sort of self-sustaining force

created through the unity and intermingling of the colors. Among modernist painters, Matisse and Bonnard were able sometimes to achieve a sense of light that transcends that of the picture's tonal structure.

It happens in the paintings of Andrew Forge (1923–2002), too, fifteen of which, along with six watercolors on paper, can now be seen at Betty Cuningham Gallery through July 30.[1] The exhibition, curated by Karen Wilkin and titled "Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight," was originally on view in expanded form at the Fairfield University Art Museum during the lockdown of late 2020.

Forge's paintings are composed of atmospheric fields of innumerable small, colored dots and dashes. He was a longtime colleague of Albers at Yale University, and though their paintings are obviously different, both artists were engaged in probing the interactive relativity of color in order to reclaim a more perceptual, less conceptual, experience of light. Consider this statement by Forge on his own working process, reproduced by Wilkin in her catalogue essay: "As the white field of the canvas is covered dot by dot, color reveals itself; the *light of the canvas* must be *rediscovered* and *reconstructed* out of the *interaction of the dots*." [Emphasis mine.]

November (1980–81) greets us at the entrance of the gallery. It's a large painting, and its size tells us we need to back up to really see it. As we do, the dots that cover most (but not all) of the white canvas dissolve into flickering masses that look a bit like what you see in the daze of a head rush after standing up too quickly. Given the work's title, it's hard not to read the painting's colors—manifold browns, yellows, and reds, accented by blues, lilacs, and grays—as suggestive of autumnal foliage. The horizontal aspect of

the eighty-inch-wide canvas enhances the landscape association. On a stylistic level, Forge's dots recall neo-Impressionist ("pointillist") canvases by Seurat, Signac, and others, but Wilkin is right to say in her essay that "the dotting is an end in itself, not a means of description." Indeed, the forms of this painting, which begin to emerge only after sustained engagement, are wholly abstract, relating not to any external source—a tree, a pond; a horizon line or sky—but rather, it seems, to each other, in almost musical arrangements within the canvas itself.

Forge rarely constructs these forms and spaces through linework, but rather evokes them by subtly varying the densities of dots of a certain color. With *Monreale* (1985–86), for instance, one first sees a burnt orange field, at the center of which is a blue form that looks something like a pole topped by a ball. But closer looking reveals that the painting is composed of an infinite variety of oranges, beiges, greens, grays, and more, and that the clearly defined shape at the center actually bleeds blue out along most of its "edges." What was once solid becomes gradually immaterial. At the same time, other forms, colors, and structures, initially overlooked, begin to emerge. Seafoam greens cluster and disperse as they curve up and to the left. A handful of bright cadmium yellow dots, perhaps almost straight from the tube, scatter along the canvas as if in a constellation of stars.

Certain artists I've talked to, ones who hold Forge's career as a critic and teacher in high esteem, have suggested that they find his paintings to be overly polite, too clever and subtle, or even pedantic. Forge's paintings indeed carry the appearance of placidity. His colors, which usually seem to be

derived from nature, are often quite pleasant. His tendency towards atmospheric, narrowly toned fields can result in compositions that look calm, even sedative, at first glance.

Yet at the same time there is a remarkable complexity underlying these dot-filled compositions. It's difficult to square the above complaints with the way that Forge's arrangements constantly frustrate our attempts to pin them down and "understand" them on a conceptual level. They resist easy, passive viewing. *Heavy Hemlocks II* (2000) is only the most obvious example. A wide canvas of forty by sixty inches, the painting consists primarily of dark blues, blacks, purples, but these are bracketed on either side by strips of incandescent lemon yellows, lime greens, and pale oranges that don't quite reach the bottom corners. Adjusting our eyes to the scotopic "void" in the center (which is actually filled with luminous browns and oranges that seem to shoot up and out of the canvas like rays of subdued light), we feel in our periphery the brilliant yellows without understanding them. Somehow, this intensifies their visual power. But far from being a mere trick or optical illusion having to do with extreme oppositions of color and tone, the painting retains a fragile sense of mystery, even after an extended period of looking.

The surfaces are prosaic but never mechanical. One gets a sense of the artist's deadpan touch as he applied the paint, dot by dot. For all the wizardry that goes on with the interplay among the colors, there's a forthright acknowledgement of the material surface: patches of oil applied to a canvas substrate. (This matter-of-factness is one of the things that separates Forge's work from ethereal Color Field painting and from the shenanigans of Op Art.) Yet it's also possible to see minute changes in the pressure with which

Forge lays down his pigmented dots, causing them to overlap and intersect in lively and unpredictable ways. It's interesting to look at the paintings from the side and then from the front—up close and then far away.

Forge understood that a painting, though seen by the eyes as an immaterial image, also relates physically to the body in space. The elusive nature of his paintings—the openness of his compositions, and their receptivity to our own experience of looking at them—communicates a quiet sense of transience and uncertainty that contradicts their status as inert, static objects. It's also what makes seeing these paintings *in person*—standing in front of them, from varying distances and angles, and for a long period of time—essential. If we have any hope of rediscovering the "light of the canvas" as Forge described it, it won't be done through the printed page or LCD screen, but in the presence of the real thing.

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1. "Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight" opened at Betty Cuningham Gallery, New York, on June 1 and remains on view through July 30.

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