



FIG. 1 Sanford Wurmfeld.  
E-Cyclorama, 2006-08, Acrylic  
on canvas, 8 ½ x 30 ½ x 26  
½ ft. (259.1 x 929.6 x 807.7  
cm). Collection of the artist.  
Installation at Edinburgh  
College of Art, Edinburgh,  
Scotland, 2008.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE: SANFORD WURMFELD, THE CYCLORAMAS, AND THE ART OF COLOR PAINTING

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Almost fifteen years ago, I had the honor of writing the catalogue essay for Sandy Wurmfeld's first museum exhibition, the unveiling of his ambitious Cyclorama 2000, a project that took color field painting to new levels. The show was held at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany (formerly the Folkwang Collection and now referred to as just the Osthaus Museum). At that time, I could say that Wurmfeld was regrettably underknown, particularly in New York—the city where he was born and has spent his entire life. I can now happily report that since the Hagen show, Wurmfeld has become nationally and internationally recognized and with this long overdue exhibition, his first full retrospective in the United States, his stature in New York will be assured. It will be a revelation, even for those who know his art.

After Hagen, the Cyclorama 2000 was shown near Munich, Germany, and then in Budapest, Hungary [Fig. 4]. Subsequently, in 2004, it was exhibited in Edinburgh, fittingly enough, as the city had been a primary site of the Enlightenment, a place of important scientific discoveries in color and perception [Fig. 5]. The later version, the E-Cyclorama, was also exhibited in Edinburgh in 2008 [Fig. 1] and then the following year at the Neuberger Museum at SUNY, Purchase, and most recently, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, in July 2011. For those who thought that after this kind of monumental effort, Wurmfeld might have eased up, if only temporarily, the Hunter College exhibition reaffirms his unstinting search for new means of color expression. It will also demonstrate the continuities in his practice, especially his long search for painting related to architecture, that could even be

combined with architecture.

Hagen is the thirty-ninth largest town in Germany. It is located in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, on the eastern edge of the Ruhr Valley, 15 km south of Dortmund. It is not a tourist destination for the casual traveler or for the art specialist. Yet, Hagen has a history, one that came full circle with the exhibition there of the Cyclorama 2000 in November. The Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, under the direction of the energetic Michael Fehr, who arranged for it to be shown there, is a lively center for contemporary art. That the glorious Cyclorama was on view in Hagen was only fitting, as it tuned out. The museum had once housed the famous collection of modern art gathered by Karl Ernst Osthaus [1874-1921], one of the early and important patrons and collectors of modern art. Among other gems, now at the Museum in Essen, (the collection was transferred there, and merged, in 1922 to better safeguard it) was a masterpiece by Paul Cézanne, the famous *La carrière de Bibémus*, ca. 1895 [Fig. 2]. Here, the rocks and ledges are transformed into airy planes of color; in paintings such as this we can trace the beginning of the modern tradition of forming structure through color alone. We will remember that it was Cézanne who insisted that when color was its richest, form was at its fullest, thus making form and color coeval.

Many have surely been affected by Cézanne's painting, but none more so than a young German artist named Josef Albers [1888- 1976] who visited the museum in 1908. To this painting, in both its color and planar structure, we can trace a crucial source of Albers' early and ongoing fascination with color that culminated in his famous *Homage to the Square* series, begun in 1950 [Fig. 2]. Indeed,

his distilled squares seem to have their ancestors within the ledges of the Cézanne's quarry that face us as frontally, and as directly, as an Albers' "homage" does. How fitting then, that Wurmfeld's first sustained immersion in color and its workings came from nothing less than Albers' monumental album of studies published in 1963, the iconic *Interaction of Color*. So, too, Wurmfeld's knowledge of color and color science now ranks with that of Albers', and much of that expertise in turn must be traced to German investigations, of which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous treatise of 1810, *Farbenlehr*, is only one. Among those other German studies was the work and ideas of Hans Hofmann, who had excited the young artist when he spoke while Wurmfeld was still a student at Dartmouth College. So yes, upon reflection, Hagen was the perfect place to exhibit the Cyclorama.

In that first essay, I wrote confidently of the qualities and impact of *Cyclorama 2000*. But the fact is I really didn't know since neither Wurmfeld nor I had ever seen it fully realized, but only in studies and models. The piece was only constructed for the first time at Hagen. Remember, in art as in life, the by word is: you never know! Thus it was with some trepidation, as well as anticipation, that I approached the structure and began my ascent up and into the platform of the structure itself. It was instantaneously a transformative experience, pure magic, for it was as if one had been lifted into a higher order of life and the spirit. At last, painting fused with architecture, and one could only think that the whole thing should be transferred to Rome, and onto the ceiling of a Bernini church, or onto the painted ceiling of Andrea Pozzo at Sant' Ignazio, where all merges into one experience, a kind of modern *gesamkunstwerk*. *Cyclorama 2000* was that good, and subsequent exhibitions have verified and expanded one's understanding of both its immediate power and its intricate subtleties. One last visit in Hagen, in March 2001, and it was then that I realized the full circle of these walls of color as a visual metaphor for the cycle of life itself, of life and nature experienced one day at a time, for eternity. We start at the dark before the dawn, move into first light, then full sunlight at high noon and the afternoon, then move into the evening and soon enough into night again. It is a cycle we see in nineteenth-century American Luminism, in the intensity of Vincent van Gogh's

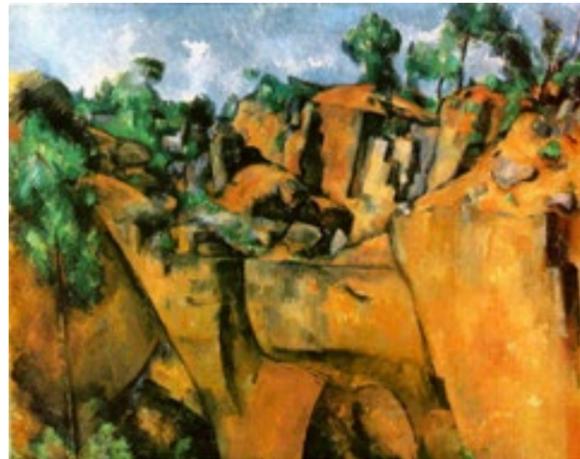


FIG. 2 Paul Cézanne. *La carrière de Bibémus* (The Quarry at Bibémus), c. 1885. Oil on canvas, 25.6 x 31.9 in (65 x 81 cm). Collection of the Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany.



FIG. 3 Joseph Albers. *Homage to the Square: Joy*, 1964. Oil on board, 48 x 48 in (121.9 x 121.9 cm). Collection of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. Photo: Dwight Primiano.

sun paintings, in Arthur Dove, and even in Henri Matisse himself. It is nothing less than a spiritual journey of the most profound sort.

Sanford Wurmfeld, living and working in New York for fifty years now, has produced a large and significant body of abstract painting based on principles of color usage and organization with a long history in modern art. He has worked quietly and steadily, leading a private life mostly away from the public spotlight, concentrating on his art and his position as a teacher and Chairman of the

Department of Art at Hunter College. His painting, formed in the 1960s, now goes against the grain of recent art, but he has remained true to his belief in color and abstract painting as a powerful visual and expressive medium. His work has an unmistakable consistency and continuity, and his constant challenge has been "to figure out what comes next."

Wurmfeld's achievements are considerable. His paintings, composed of clear and luminous color grids, will surprise many viewers, especially those who have accepted the belief that color painting cannot yield convincing art. Wurmfeld's art, all of it, tells us otherwise. Any doubt was dispelled by the completion and installation of his *Cyclorama 2000*. An abstract panorama that fully encircles the spectator, it is a vast field of intense color and light, reaching a height of 8 ½ feet off the floor and spanning a diameter of 29 ½ feet with a circumference of 90 feet. It is a stunning accomplishment, a vastly ambitious and truly original contribution to the history of abstract painting. Even those who have known and admired Wurmfeld's work will feel that nothing quite like it has ever been seen, for it is unique in the history of modern art. A fully abstract painting of 360 degrees, it surrounds the viewer with pure color without beginning and without end. As the color moves through the spectrum and its gradated variants, so we will move, and we will be caught up in a world of color complete unto itself. The sense of the unexpected, of total surprise, presented by *Cyclorama 2000* is all the greater, for no one, not even the artist himself, can know exactly what the effect will be until the installation is completed.

The surprise is sudden and real, but it has been a long time in the making. Wurmfeld had been developing the idea of a full-scale panorama for at least twenty years, and the seeds of the idea have been implicit in his work from the beginning. Indeed, from the start of his career, his primary concern has been to explore and to expand the totality of the full visual field, to engulf and surround the viewer with color—this is the generating idea from which the *Cycloramas* have evolved.

Wurmfeld was born in the Bronx in 1942, the younger of two children, into a lively and culturally involved family who always encouraged and supported his interest in art. His older brother Michael, with whom he was exceptionally close,

was an accomplished and respected architect who died after a long battle with cancer. It was a grievous loss, for his brother was an important force in his life, and his death in July 2000 while Wurmfeld was painting *Cyclorama 2000*, made its completion all the more a signal accomplishment.

Wurmfeld visited museums and studied art from an early age. In 1958, he traveled to Europe with his family and two years later, before entering Dartmouth College, made another trip there with his brother, then studying architecture at Princeton University. For three months, under Michael's guidance, they visited most of the major monuments on the continent, and Wurmfeld himself considered studying architecture. This early interest is now readily apparent in the conception and structure of his *Cycloramas*. Once in college, he learned to draw by sketching the buildings on the campus, a standard architectural practice suggested by his brother. He majored in art history, and began to paint, working in an Abstract-Expressionist manner, the art held in the highest esteem by students and emerging artists of Wurmfeld's generation. Abstract Expressionism, then and later, became a virtual sourcebook for him from which he developed many of the ideas of color and structure that have shaped his art. His interest in contemporary art was furthered by contact with artists such as Hans Hofmann, Friedel Dzubas, James Rosati, and Robert Rauschenberg who visited Dartmouth as part of the college's artist-in-residence program. By the time he graduated in 1964, like many artists of his generation who were also college-educated, he had a wide knowledge of modern painting and art history. At that point in time, Wurmfeld decided to forego the formal study of architecture, and become a painter.

He subsequently spent two years painting in Rome, while continuing to study the city's countless architectural monuments. Gian Lorenzo Bernini at Sant'Andrea al Quirinale and Francesco Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro were important, but his primary focus returned to his favorite murals, those of Pozzo in Sant' Ignazio, done in the eighteenth century. There, the murals seemed to float—the effect so dear to him—in front of the actual barrel vault of the ceiling. Pozzo's murals created their own space, a continuing and enveloping space that makes itself felt in the *Cycloramas*. It also may be that the clear and sure structure

of the grid, the pictorial foundation of his painting, owes something to his continuing interest in architecture.

Wormfeld continued to explore Abstract Expressionism, particularly the paintings of Franz Kline. He liked the scale and the boldness, and the expansiveness of the work, but he was especially drawn to the way Kline placed limits on his art by restricting himself to black and white, then developing their inherent possibilities. This has been the essence of Wormfeld's working method ever since; he begins with a single, set, formal proposition, then defines and develops it before expanding the idea into new formal and emotive modes of increasing complexity. His method of working has stemmed from his exceptional analytic and visual acuity—for Wormfeld the visual is all-important—by which he has developed an extensive and incisive view of painting and the history of modern art. In his work, he is concerned solely with what he calls aesthetic information, that is, with exactly how paintings are made and how they actually work to form the viewer's experience of them. He also defines what he calls semantic information, ideas about paintings and the context in which they were made, but information not actually in them.

Wormfeld first worked through the figure-ground relationships, and how they could be reversed, created by Kline's black-and-white forms. Kline gave him a way to find out how we might understand paintings, how we might read them, and how an artist might presume to know what the spectator can intuit from a painting. This was part of a long and continuing process by which Wormfeld came to understand how abstract art had created a sense of spatial organization on a two-dimensional surface, without resorting to the old Renaissance system of vanishing-point perspective. Soon he moved beyond black and white, to investigate the more complex figure-ground relationships created by a wider range of hues he found in Willem de Kooning's abstract landscapes from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The work he did then was his first real exploration of color, and it marked Wormfeld as perhaps the only artist who seriously considered color in gestural abstraction. He became increasingly interested in the properties of color and how color filled and created the space that defined the surface of the two-dimensional field. A trip to Paris in 1965 rekindled his love

of Claude Monet, whom he has always considered one of the greatest artists of the Western tradition. The luminescence of Monet's color and the way it fills the entire picture plane has guided Wormfeld throughout his life-long search for a similar fullness of color rendered through abstract structures. During a trip to Venice for the 1964 Biennale he saw work by Frank Stella, Ken Noland, and Morris Louis, all artists who pointed to new ways of using color. Then, later on in his career, they offered examples of how the artist might move beyond a simple figure-ground relationship to a larger, broader, and more unified visual field. Wormfeld's mastery of this aim is evident, from his first mature paintings of 1966 to the Cyclorama 2000.

By the time Wormfeld returned to New York at the end of 1965, color had become his primary concern. He spent a week in the library of The Museum of Modern Art reading Albers' famous treatise *Interaction of Color* (1963). It was a decisive event for Wormfeld and marked the start of his full immersion in the technical and expressive means of color that have since formed his art. From Albers he learned not only about figure-ground relationships but also about ambiguous spatial presentation through apparent transparency, by which adjacent colors can be read as both on top or below in the field. Through Albers, he also came to understand the element of time, of duration, in the experience of color in its relationship to painting, which is vital to the experience of Wormfeld's own painting and is the idea at the heart of his Cycloramas. One must engage a painting for an extended period of time to let the colors work, and through their interaction, cause color to change at the edges. Above all, a Cyclorama demands time, our time, in a continual sequence, to experience fully the complex of color interaction it embodies. Wormfeld's knowledge of color now rivals Albers'. Like the earlier master, he has passed on this knowledge, achieved through careful, thorough study of the history of color theory and abstract art, to countless students. His precise, specific understanding of the technical, as well as the visual, development of modern art further enriches his own art and teaching.

He understands Kazimir Malevich as the father of abstract art; Malevich replaced the Renaissance system of one-point perspective with a model of painting as an organization of a few elements

on a two-dimensional surface in a simple figure-ground relationship. Malevich, he saw, worked with geometric elements to form new and complex spatial relationships on the picture plane. In the 1970s, Wormfeld came to know the art of the Polish Constructivist Wladyslaw Strzeminski, who worked in the 1920s and 1930s, and who raised the complexity of the figure-ground relationship so that it could be reversed with an element being seen as either figure or ground. In the art of these early masters of abstraction, Wormfeld also discovered and studied the principle of overlap or the continuity of form to create space; and the use of transparency, by which one is not sure what is on the top and what is on the bottom—this also created additional spatial ambiguity and complexity. Subsequently, he came to view Piet Mondrian's late work as the true beginning of the Color-Field painting of the 1960s by virtue of its fusion of multiple figure-ground elements into a single, unified field of color. He also came to understand the three-dimensional organization of abstract art, its spatial arrangements, and how depth is perceived.

For Wormfeld, the fusion of figure and field

was radically, and crucially, extended by Jackson Pollock, whose poured forms multiply on a continuous field so that the painting is seen as an all-field experience. Wormfeld's experience of Pollock's mural-sized canvases, most especially *Autumn Rhythm* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) of 1950, in particular, is one of the primary sources for the development of his art and for his Cycloramas. In his understanding of Pollock, he confirmed the possibility of pushing his own art into an expanding field, beyond the limits of the standard rectangular canvas. In this, Wormfeld shared a common reading with other younger artists of his own generation who also grasped the environmental possibilities of Pollock, or as in the examples of Allan Kaprow and Donald Judd, saw Pollock as dictating a move into the three dimensions of real space. After he understood this history, Wormfeld was able to draw on the luminous, the floating color of Mark Rothko, and the infinite subtleties of color interplay in Ad Reinhardt, whose retrospective he saw in 1966 at the Jewish Museum; they were the solutions to the development of a full and expanding visual field.

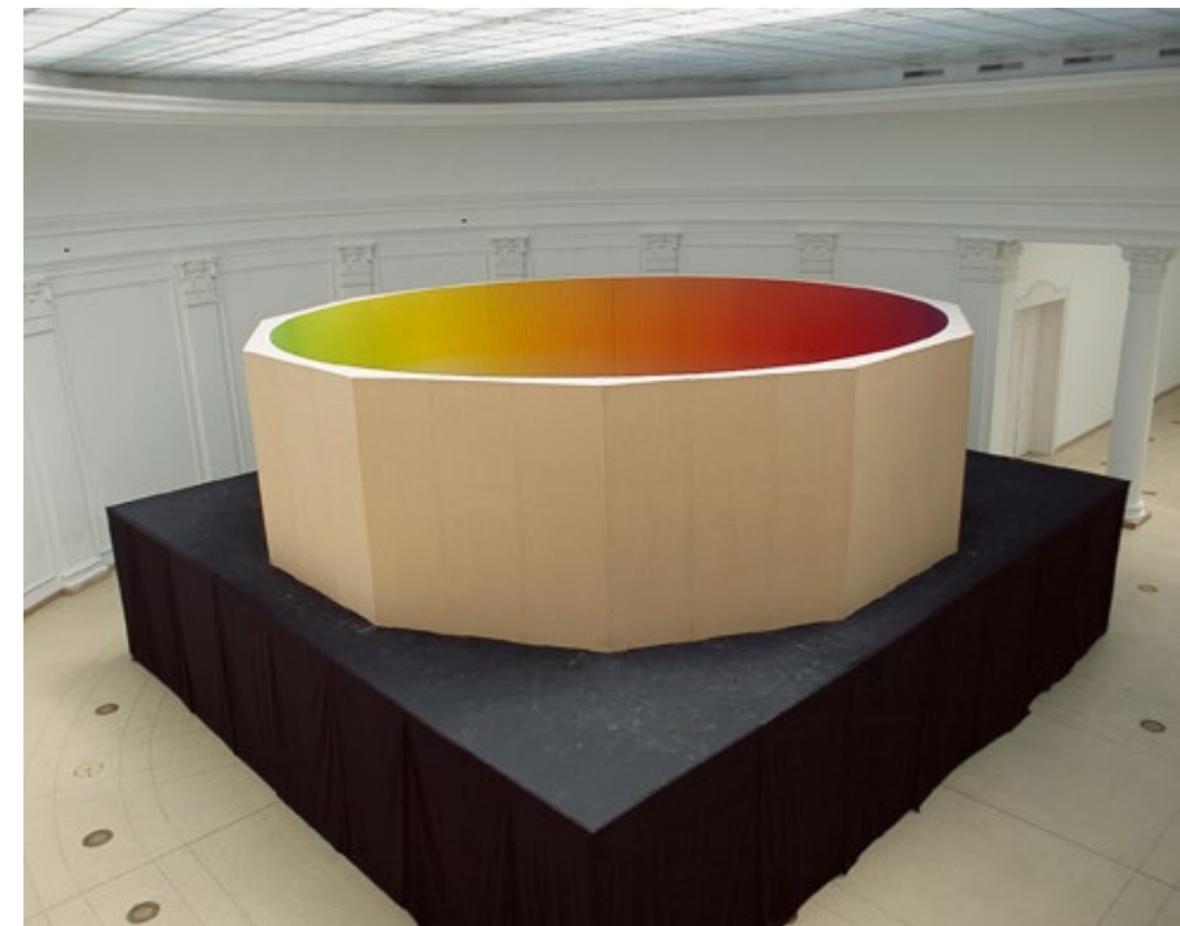


FIG. 4 Sanford Wormfeld.  
Cyclorama 2000, 2000,  
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ½ x diameter  
29 ½ ft. (259.1 x 899.2 cm).  
Collection of the Osthaus  
Museum, Hagen, Germany.  
Installation at Mücsarnok Museum,  
Budapest, Hungary, 2002.

Wormfeld also continued to look at the work of Ellsworth Kelly, Ken Noland, and Frank Stella, as well as the 1964 dot paintings of Larry Poons, all of whom were to affect the artist's early painting. In the fall of 1966, he enrolled in graduate courses in the Master of Arts program at Hunter College. There he met and was deeply influenced by the sculptor Tony Smith and the noted critic and art historian, E.C. Goossen, who was then the chairman of the Department of Art. These two towering figures took a special liking to Wormfeld and introduced him to the vibrant atmosphere of the art department and to the New York art world. With their efforts and encouragement, his work began to be exhibited and recognized as an integral part of Color-Field painting, one of the most important art movements in the 1960s in the United States. Goossen's article, "The Big Canvas"<sup>1</sup> encouraged Wormfeld to continue to push toward an expanded field, as did Smith's spectacular environmental piece *Smoke*, which filled an atrium on the ground floor at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1967. Through Goossen, who earlier had written on Stuart Davis, the great American modernist, Wormfeld—fast becoming an encyclopedia of modern color practice and theory—took note of the powerful and original color in Davis' late work. Goossen's 1973 retrospective exhibition of Ellsworth Kelly, included

large-scale spectrum paintings of a broad expanse of sequential color that had an impact to the development of Wormfeld's art. Goossen had included Wormfeld in his landmark exhibition *Art of the Real: U.S.A. 1948-1968* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1968. The exhibition demonstrated an important theme in much of the contemporary art of that time, namely, that art is not a flight away from reality, but is a concerted drive to a known and concrete reality—a physical, palpable, sensual, and irreducible reality—that pervades the tactile awareness and comprehension of the world. It is in this context that Wormfeld's use of color should be understood. In keeping, Wormfeld will achieve an even greater reality through the continuous wall of color in which the Cyclorama envelops the viewer. Goossen thought so highly of the precocious Wormfeld that he appointed him as an instructor in the art department at the age of twenty-four, and he has been at Hunter ever since, continuing to work in the same energetic atmosphere established in the 1960s. Indeed, Wormfeld's presence has fostered the development within the faculty at Hunter of a group of artists, including Ray Parker, Vincent Longo, Ralph Humphrey, Lyman Kipp, Ron Gorchov, Mac Wells, Doug Ohlson, George Hofmann, Robert Swain, Emily Mason, and Gabriele Evertz, who have used color in an abstract, purely visual mode—what he

calls "presentational painting." All of these artists work in individual styles, but through the collective force of their color, we can term this group as the "Hunter College School," and identify it as a vanguard in contemporary American abstraction.

Wormfeld's first mature paintings, carried solely by color and its organization, date from 1966. Their diamond shape, perhaps suggested in part by Mondrian's and Noland's use of the format, is divided into three sections of flat, strong, unmodulated color. These sections create a partial illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane flattened by the intersections of the color planes. The diamond format indicates Wormfeld's desire, from the start, to break from a rectilinear format, to move toward a more expansive visual field. These early works are also part of his drive to clarify Abstract Expressionism, to make the color and fields of Kline, de Kooning, and Pollock more precise and definite. Artists as diverse as Stella, Noland, and Judd also pursued a similar goal, which can be said to have defined much of the art of the 1960s. It is part of a process that began with Georges Seurat and Cézanne, artists who built on Impressionism, but sought a more monumental, solid, and clarified art. Wormfeld's use, since 1971, of small gridded squares as fundamental units, rendered in variable size and sequence, is a modern extension of Seurat's Pointillism and the color patches of Mondrian's last painting, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942-1944 (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague).

In his commitment to color, Wormfeld has aligned himself with a tradition of color painting that included not only the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, but also Matisse, Rothko, Louis, and Noland, among others. Color has been as essential to Modernism as the graphic art of Cubism, but it has often been seen as decorative, primarily because of its sensuous appeal and its impact on our emotions, which we distrust, just as in the Renaissance, Florentine *disegno* was thought to be more serious and substantial than Venetian *colore*. The mistrust of color is so pervasive that it has been termed a societal "chromophobia" by David Batchelor.<sup>2</sup> The painterly and expressionistic, based on apparent spontaneity, are valued over the precision of the hard-edge and geometric, presumed to be impersonal and mechanical. Such persistently bad assumptions have caused

the critical fortunes of color painters, including Wormfeld, to suffer. It is all the more ironic, then, that the power of Wormfeld's art, for all its careful organization and structure, lies precisely in the immediacy, in the spontaneous impact that color has on us. So, too, it is only with time that the infinite complexity of the ways in which Wormfeld uses color can be grasped. Indeed, so complex are Wormfeld's methods that a detailed technical scientific analysis is essential to understanding his art. While beyond the scope of this essay, this analysis is readily available in Wormfeld's own writings. While color theory may seem mechanical, it is only an initial guide for the artist's individual sensibilities, and, in fact, Wormfeld works as much from intuition, inspiration, even whim and compulsive searching, as any artist.

By 1967, Wormfeld had increased the complexity of his work. He expanded the size and shape of his paintings so they extended laterally, reading as vectors joined in a format suggested by Stella's paintings of the early 1960s. Wormfeld introduced orthogonals, hinted at but not developed by Stella. This system warped the planes and extended them beyond a conventional rectangle, to make the wall a part of the overall figure-ground relationship. From 1967 to 1968, he first used a 6-foot-square grid that was distorted by orthogonal perspectives and thus offered multiple spatial organizations and transparencies of color. Here, he had begun consciously to introduce the element of time which he further developed by working in three dimensions. He made a series of hexagonal wood columns, in which each side was slightly turned from top to bottom, with the result that one could always see three colors at once. Reversing his working process, instead of exploring paintings that were flat, with apparent three-dimensional organizations, he was now exploring real, three-dimensional objects that appeared to have an ambiguous, two-dimensional design. Again, he built upon the idea by proceeding to make clusters of columns, in square, triangular, or other formats, with the effect of creating an unfolding screen, like a free-standing painting. In this work, he found the first seed of the 360-degree panorama. From there, Wormfeld went to three-dimensional structures made of cast acrylic sheets that offered not an illusion of, but actual transparency, with color and light intermixing in the viewer's space as one walked around the



FIG. 5 Sanford Wormfeld. *Cyclorama 2000* (detail), 2000, Acrylic on canvas, 8 ½ x diameter 29 ½ ft. (259.1 x 899.2 cm). Collection of the Osthaus Museum, Hagen, Germany. Installation at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2004.

pieces and experienced the work in time. Wurmfeld first used columnar formats, then cubes, and even extended the idea to a model for intersecting sheets of Plexiglas that formed a large maze. One would have to walk through and around the piece, in a continuous process—another early seed in the evolution of the Cycloramas.

In moving from two to three dimensions, Wurmfeld had taken a path followed by many artists in the 1960s, notably Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and other Minimalists, all of whom had begun as painters. But Wurmfeld did not continue in this direction—he understood that he was a painter at heart. Other artists of the '60s such as Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman, who also insisted on the primacy of painting, had also come to that conclusion. In an age of accelerated speed, Wurmfeld values the passivity of painting, its meditative and contemplative nature, which forces the viewer into active visual and aesthetic participation with the medium. In the Cycloramas, Wurmfeld has reached a fusion of the three-dimensional and the architectural with painting, but on painting's own terms. It is an inspired resolution of this old dilemma of the 1960s.

In 1971, Wurmfeld once more committed himself to painting, bearing down with a renewed intensity and sense of purpose. He searched for a painting format that could best carry the "presentation of pure color," his essential aim for the last thirty years. To find it, he worked through countless color studies, reviewing and exploring all possible options, all of which were unsatisfactory. He came to a new, more thorough knowledge of color and structure. He realized, for example, that his earlier use of orthogonal perspective in an effort to avoid Renaissance spatial systems, nevertheless, was still perspective and it distorted our direct perception of color on a two-dimensional surface.

His solution was to use a grid, not the distorted grid he had used before, but the unimpeded, neutral structure of the sort employed by Mondrian, whom he had continued to study closely. His first paintings with this format dates from 1971 at a time when the grid was enjoying renewed interest among American artists. As was his habit, he started with a simple structure, with a set of limited means. The painting is a square, a standard size of 6 by 6 feet, divided into ½ inch squares of uniform size over the entire surface. He

used only four psychological primaries, red, blue, yellow, and green. The colors move across the surface from side to side and top to bottom in three bands, a simple enough solution, but the full range of its complex visual effects belies the apparent simplicity and profoundly changes our experience of the painting. For example, although the squares are the same size, some appear smaller, some larger, because of color interaction. While never more than four colors are used in a given area, the full spectrum is seen through the use of transparency overlays, by which colors seem to elide into adjacent colors. There is an overall surface intensity in the painting, but the use of four colors in the center section makes it appear to pop out, an unexpected surprise for both artist and viewer. Our experience of the work changes constantly, depending on how long we look at the painting and from what distance. When seen up close, the color works through simultaneous contrast; from a distance, color is assimilated, fused with adjacent colors, resulting in apparent luminosity, a kind of fog of color. The possibilities and the realities of his art, then and now, are endless.

Wurmfeld went on to create multiple kinds of color experiences in the early grids, such as using hues with the same value, that is, the same amount of light. Always, the unexpected occurred, especially when he dramatically expanded the size and scale of his work. In 1972, he made the first of a series of paintings that measured 6 by 30 feet, breakthrough works that clearly anticipate the panels in the Cycloramas. Each was painted on a single piece of canvas divided into five panels, each section measuring 6 by 6 feet, and extending the original grid into a broader horizontal field. The sections were composed in five equal chromatic sequences (owing something to the example of Kelly's Spectrum paintings) moving from the left, from dark, dark neutral, neutral, light neutral, to light, each using the same four hues—red, blue, green, yellow—deployed in different value levels. These hues emerge only with time, for at first they may seem to be black moving through gray to white. It is here that time takes on a new meaning. The remarkable sweep of color in these paintings—their vast aura of chromatic luminescence, permeating their immediate environment—establishes them as key works in Wurmfeld's development.

His next series of paintings employ several chromatic variations: the alternation of light and dark values within a grid; the use of the same value throughout; the use of smaller gridded squares; and in a move inspired by Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande* [1884-1886] (The Art Institute of Chicago), the introduction of a gray border—a fifth color. In the last of the series of 30-foot-long paintings, done in 1976, he deemphasized the divisions of the panels so that the transition from one area to another was more fluid and floating, even detached from the surface, achieving a phenomenon known as film color, that truly focuses the presentation of pure color. By 1975, Wurmfeld had clearly established the distinctly different experiences that result when his work is seen at close range, at middle distance, or from far away, each painting requiring a different amount of time during the viewing process. By these means, he dramatically extended the reach and impact of his painting.

In between 1977 and 1978, Wurmfeld broke out of one of his self-imposed formal limitations by changing the size of squares in the grid. This change made possible a whole new set of color variations, for the squares now measured from ¼ inch to more than 1 inch, with lighter hues such as yellow in the smaller areas, darker hues such as black (now given a new prominence) in the larger ones. Each color was set down in equal measure with black, then subsequently in other paintings in equal measure with gray, and finally with white, then with more specific colors—red, blue, and so forth, resulting once more in new and apparently endless color organizations. Always, Wurmfeld has pushed toward new complexities, or new extremes of color possibilities.

Wurmfeld has never settled for a single look or format. By 1985, he was using as many as thirty-five colors, producing effects that only scientists could fully understand. But the viewer reads these paintings as ever more engaging, intense visual experiences that totally destroy the easy assumption that color theory is mechanical and predictable. When we stay with Wurmfeld's art over time, the intuitive, the inventive, and the expressionist makes itself apparent and is given full and equal play. Wurmfeld understands the emotional impact of his color paintings, but unlike Wassily Kandinsky, he scrupulously refuses to assign specific feel-



Sequence of the artist painting one of the four panels of the E-Cyclorama (2006-08), taken by timed camera in the artist's New York studio, 2008.

ings to specific colors.

His artistic reach is so long that he has even incorporated inadvertent mistakes into his work with stunningly good results, almost as if he were one of the Abstract-Expressionist artists he had long admired. In 1985, he was working toward smoother transitions of color across the surface, in part to find a more unified totality of color. The paintings by then were so large and highly detailed that it took a full year to complete each one. He envisioned them as panels for a panorama, but realized he would need ten years to complete them as the technique was so complicated. (He later solved this problem by the use of a drafting machine mounted to the wall.) Indeed, so complex were the multiple-sized grids he was using that he delineated each area by a separately drawn grid. He was carrying out a sequence of grids when he found that he had made a mistake by drawing one more square in a grid than he needed. By over-drawing the correct number in a grid, though, he achieved a new pattern with a continual change in the size and shape of the grid. The result—a whole new format for his color—has since become incorporated into his work to great effect. As the size and sequence of the gridded squares change, an apparent movement within and across the painting results, forming a counterpoint to the viewer's movement toward and away from it.

From 1986 to 1987, as Wurmfeld was changing size, shape, and sequencing, the squares were no longer true, and the perception of color varied continually depending on how many hues were used. These changes in fact allowed him to develop a more expansive color field with fewer actual hues. In addition, Wurmfeld has pushed the limits of dark and light, using greater variations of value. In painting, using an extremely light value,

for example, the film color is more pronounced than ever. It produces an almost atmospheric veil of color that recalls the great atmospheric paintings of J.W. Turner, long admired by Wurmfeld. If the viewer feels as if he/she were on a ship, on a foggy day, it is little wonder, for these paintings reflect Wurmfeld's love of sailing, spending weeks at a time with his family on the open sea in a small boat. In another work of highly saturated yellow, the color is so luminous that it seems to emanate from the very fabric of the canvas. Wurmfeld's skill at painting luminosity even approaches that found in the interiors of the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer. His work in vertical formats dictates a different visual and emotive response in the viewer. Inspired by the great Seurat retrospective of 1991, he has re-explored the use of a border and even a double border, opening his art to still more visual and emotive responses of another order. Recently he asked himself if he could achieve his extraordinary luminosity without changes in value.

The constant exploration of new possibilities for color expression has marked Wurmfeld's art from the start. His overriding concern for the last thirty years has been the realization of the Cycloramas, which he has pursued single-mindedly. The Cycloramas are a summation of his deep love and knowledge of color and his belief in its expressive powers; it is a summation, too, of the entire range of the color methods developed over a lifetime of experience by which he has honed his consummate skills as an artist. So caught up are we in the evocation of color in these vast panoramas that it is easy to overlook the astonishing level of technical control involved in this project.

The concept of the Cycloramas began with tentative ideas sketched out in his daybook, then developed over the years through innumerable



FIG. 6 Panorama Mesdag, The Hague, the Netherlands, continuous view of Hendrik Willem Mesdag's Panorama of the coast at Scheveningen, 1881, courtesy of BV Panorama Mesdag.

color notes and studies. Its possibilities were first realized in 1987 in a freestanding model. Thirteen years later, Cyclorama 2000 was completed, consisting of four panels, each measuring 7 ½ by 22 ½ feet, done one at a time over the course of nine months, from January to October 2000. Each was made on a single piece of #10 cotton duck canvas stapled to the wall, and prepared with five coats of gesso mixed with matte medium and a touch of water, to make the surface flexible and keep it from becoming too brittle. The priming coats build up the surface slightly, so that the color is just above the weave of the canvas. (The stain painters of the 1960s took an opposite tack, letting the paint soak directly into the fabric.) A smooth, even coating is important for Wurmfeld since he does not want the surface to be an issue; above all, he does not want the eye to be distracted by any irregularities that would disrupt the perception of color. Using a floor-to-ceiling drafting machine, Wurmfeld and his assistant draw in pencil, two separate grids, the practice he has used since the late 1980s. One unit is greater in each direction than in the other grid, and to ensure an equal number of spaces in a given area, diagonal lines are also drawn in—a drafting technique that his brother had taught him and that has helped to carry out a project of this magnitude.

The grids are thus no longer neutral, but add to the flow of color by their own apparent movement, an effect that recalls Mondrian's multiple grids in his late work. The gridding process reminds us that these murals are first and foremost hand-made, hand-painted works of art, as does the long and laborious process of applying seventy-two hues, unit by unit, with touches and corrections after completion. Only then does the full field of color emerge, to fuse with the other panels in a single, continuous environment of color.

While Wurmfeld's mural-sized paintings of the early 1970s prefigure the scale and ambition of Cyclorama 2000, the immediate inspiration may be found in his experience while traveling in Europe in 1981. In The Hague, he saw Hendrik Willem Mesdag's nineteenth-century panorama, which deeply affected him and led to the idea of translating the panoramic view into a modern, abstract format [Fig. 6 & 7]. He also visited the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, designed in 1924 by H. P. Berlage, and was impressed by the quiet, self-contained feeling of the building and the interior spaces, away from the movement of the city that created a contemplative atmosphere, ideal for viewing art. It was the kind of place that Wurmfeld wanted for his art and that he has since



FIG. 7 Panorama Mesdag, The Hague, the Netherlands wide-angle view of Hendrik Willem Mesdag's Panorama of the coast at Scheveningen, 1881, courtesy of BV Panorama Mesdag.

created within the Cyclorama. In Paris, he visited the Musée de l'Orangerie and responded to the self-contained world of color in Monet's later *Nymphéas* (Waterlilies).<sup>3</sup> Wurmfeld had earlier visited the Orangerie, but he now saw the environmental possibilities that the *Nymphéas* offered. For Wurmfeld, they were the bridge between The Hague panorama and his vision of what became the first Cyclorama. The *Nymphéas* verged on abstraction, and enabled Wurmfeld to imagine color on another, grander scale altogether. Later, he discovered that Monet had actually planned a full panorama for his installation but was dissuaded and accepted the configuration of eight panels in two oval rooms. From this the idea, the format of Cyclorama 2000 was born. That Monet played a crucial role for Wurmfeld gives an added dimension to the impact of the revival of the great Impressionist's work, thought to be limited to the 1950s. In fact, it affected later abstract painting as well.

Wurmfeld paid special attention to other site-specific environments that were based on the experience of color. He looked carefully at the triptych of Monet's *Nymphéas* installed at The Museum of Modern Art, in New York, since 1955. At the same museum, Matisse's four-sided mural for a dining room, *The Swimming Pool*, 1952, was also important to Wurmfeld. In 1990, he traveled to Houston to see the Rothko Chapel, but he did not think it was totally successful. In Paris, he also visited La Sainte Chapelle, in whose stained glass windows some viewers may discern a source for the Cyclorama's environment of color and light.

As we enter Cyclorama 2000 from below, the viewer is drawn into a world of radiant color that is nothing less than transforming. It is a work of an artist at the height of his powers, and its intense, even visceral, visual experience is possible only through the medium of painting, rendered on an opaque surface. Only painting can give this kind of continuous, floating body of luminous color, detached from the surface, perceived in a non-fixed space. Other factors coming from a long history of color theory—including optical mixing, simultaneous contrast, and transparency—produce the phenomena we experience. So powerful are the artist's hand and vision, however that the viewer is hardly aware of such matters, surrounded and enclosed by a continuum of color, with no start

and no finish. The experience will change and shift the longer one is in the Cyclorama and according to how one moves and where one stands. We are in the presence of a total color organization, a totality and unity of the perceptual field based on a gradation of color and sizes that offer multiple views and sensations. It is a unity in which nothing is extraneous; structure and color are equal; and the means and the ends are equivalent. The space of the painting and the space of the viewer are one and the same. Everything exists at its fullest limits. Despite the huge scale, Cyclorama 2000 is a private, interior world, recalling Rothko's dictum that he painted large in order to be intimate, as well as Monet's wish to depict in a panorama a wave without horizon or shore. In Wurmfeld's Cyclorama, we are in a world that alternates between flux and stability, in harmony between stasis and movement, a metaphor for the way we might live and experience life.

A generation of art, permeated by conceptualism and theory, has devalued the power of the visual; like color itself, as well as art, painting that provides visual pleasure has been seen as too easy, too simple, lacking in "intellectual" depth. This is wrong, for it fails to understand that the mind and the eye, the intellect and the senses, cannot be separated, and in fact are inextricably joined in one thinking, feeling body. Sensory intelligence and visual intelligence are fundamental to our being. The visual is profound, for it is how we see and thus how we comprehend the world. To fail to understand the power of the visual is the failure to understand the very nature of art itself. Van Gogh noted that color expresses something in itself and could embody something of the eternal. The Cyclorama projects make us understand these truths about the power of color and the visual in ways that we will be defining for years to come. By all rights, it should also force us to reconsider the achievement of Color-Field painting that began in the 1960s, now too long underground and out of favor. In the meantime, Wurmfeld will continue to work, trying to figure out what comes next.

So he did. When Wurmfeld returned to Hagen in March 2001, to help dismantle the Cyclorama, he of course examined it closely for one last time. He also took notes in his daybook, recording his impressions of it and the decisions that went into



FIG. 8 Andrea Pozzo. Apotheosis of St. Ignatius, late 1600s. Chiesa di Sant'Ignazio, Rome, Italy.

it. He was largely pleased. (Why wouldn't he be?) The notes are worth repeating in some detail, for they tell us the workings of his mind and his eye, and how they are conjoined in one, seamless, working process. His first note confirmed for him that his impressions at the opening in November 2000 were correct, that is, his decisions about the making of the painting "proved to work." How he did this, even all this time later, staggers the imagination. The size and scale were just right for him (and the viewers): 29 feet in diameter. Larger would have been too "monumental," smaller would have been too "claustrophobic."

Wurmfeld's notes also revealed potential future concerns for him that were never apparent to most of us. For example, he noted that the mixing of seventy-two colors was successful, with no "problem" colors standing out. The size and number of divisions across the canvas were successful as well, with enough assimilation occurring to make the "film" experience "virtual for the viewer." The black floor worked, and helped the "float" of the color. He was pleased with the decision to leave the top of the Cyclorama off, and seeing it from above was a new and unplanned viewing experience; the distance of the lights, and their angles worked well. Especially

telling was the artist's comment that the visceral intensity of being inside the Cyclorama, "in color," as he put it, could not have been predicted from the model—that, we might add, was the leap of faith that great art entails. So, too, were his notes about the spatial disorientation that occurs, verifiable by anyone who has experienced the piece. Further along, he recorded an apparent surprise, one that he had not anticipated: that the viewer experiences the changes in pure hue so strongly that the total experience overrides the changes in value, even though there are clear changes in value. Further, he said, the Cyclorama can be thought of as a progression from light to dark to light, but for him this is not what one feels [italics mine]—one feels the hue most distinctly, and an apparent luminous hue, at that. How exactly this works—the palpable tension between the progressions of hue and value, if that is the word—is no doubt one of the Cyclorama's mysteries, and one of the sources of its visual power. It is worth an essay in and of itself. To this day, we still have never seen anything like it.

But he was already thinking ahead, for he concluded his notes with a paragraph on "Questions for the next Cyclorama painting." By 2004,

when the Cyclorama was again shown, Wurmfeld was thinking about the next version, and by 2006 he was in full swing with it again. He was looking ahead, but as so often happens, new inspiration came from the past—the deeply formative experience of his study of Roman baroque architecture and ceiling painting, some forty-five years earlier. The ceiling of Sant' Ignazio [Fig. 8] suggested using an elliptical shape for his next project, which he thus called the E-Cyclorama, which was shown in 2008 in Edinburgh and the next year at the Neuberger Museum. Ideas for this piece were also methodically realized in a series of independent paintings, as well as in the idea of using the aforementioned border, famously employed by Seurat. How he worked out the design can now be seen by a drawing with string outlining the ellipse that has recently come to light. It is an old exercise in the study of geometry, which was easy enough for him; the math was another issue, so projecting it to full scale was what he termed a “good guess,” although we can be sure a guess born of long experience, as well as trial and error. In the E-Cyclorama, the artist kept the same size and same basic formal arrangement of the first Cyclorama, but the different shape and the borders on the edges made a distinct difference in our perception of the color, as do the differing axes of the ellipse.<sup>4</sup> We feel we are still in a simple circle, but we are not, adding new elements of uncertainty and surprise to the already powerful impact of being “in color.”

After the showing of the second version E-Cyclorama, Wurmfeld needed to shift gears, and went from 29-foot-scaled work to painting small watercolors. In the last decade he has also made paintings that may seem separate and apart from those connected with the Cycloramas. For any who think color is cold and mechanical one need only look—and feel—the paintings he has made in memory of his beloved brother, Michael, who had done so much to guide his progress into a long life in art. There are four vertical paintings, each more than 7 feet high (larger than life) and thus each suggests a standing, almost anthropomorphic presence, telling us of the living and continuing force that his brother has had on the artist. The works seem to form a cycle, suggesting perhaps the Hindu Four Stages of Life—the last being, Moksa, a spiritual release, a release of the soul, a liberation from worldly concerns, here a loving farewell

to Michael. Later, a series of three 90-inch-square paintings each of equal value—one dark, one neutral, one light—was composed in memory of his mother. On further reflection, though, all these paintings echo what I see as the cycles of night and day, of the four seasons, of life itself, and death, that is at the heart of color progressions in both Cycloramas. (There is, naturally, a third Cyclorama underway). The world moves as an ellipse, thus moves the E-Cyclorama. But no matter how we choose to look and to experience and to feel these paintings, there can be no escaping that ineffable but real quality at the heart of all worthy painting—Soul, as the artist himself has said.

1. E.C. Goossen, “The Big Canvas,” *Art International* 2, no. 8 (November 1958): 45-47.

2. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd.)

3. New attention has been paid to Monet when the Orangerie reopened in 1953, and the old master helped to inspire the color of many American Abstract Expressionists then living in Paris, including Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell.

4. Duncan Macmillan, “Sanford Wurmfeld’s E-Cyclorama,” in *E-Cyclorama: Sanford Wurmfeld, exh.cat.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh College of Art and New York: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, SUNY, 2008): 18-20.