



Opposite: Watercolors: Series A-2 (detail), 2010–11. Acrylic (transparent) on paper, 9 x 12 1/8 in. (22.9 x 30.8 cm).

FROM GRAVITY TO LEVITY: SANFORD WURMFELD'S RECENT WATERCOLOR PAINTINGS

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Over the past four years, Sanford Wurmfeld has painted myriad small watercolor paintings, which together he calls his CMYK Series. Concomitantly, he has been at work creating a new, third, Cyclorama. In their modest scale, the watercolors offer a delicate pendant to the expansive cyclorama installations that have been Wurmfeld's major focus for years.

There is a gravity about Wurmfeld's Cycloramas, especially the E-Cyclorama, his 90-foot in circumference by 8 1/2-foot high, elliptically shaped, acrylic-on-canvas painting completed in 2008. Upon entering the E-Cyclorama installation, the viewer is surrounded by shifting spans of chromatic and achromatic color. Being immersed in color is a striking experience, and Wurmfeld's composition of 184 thousand small rectangles¹ heightens the intensity by creating vibrating chromatic fields, which seem to detach from the surface and dematerialize before the viewer.² Because of their stark contrast to adjacent achromatic colors, the brilliant yellow and deep violet at the longer axes of the E-Cyclorama seem to come forward toward the viewer and bend the ellipse into a circle, altering the apparent shape of the architectural space itself. All these effects, and others, transpire because Wurmfeld orchestrates the capacities of color to affect the viewer psychophysically. Wurmfeld's E-Cyclorama painting is certainly not a traditional frame through which an illusion of the real world can be viewed, nor is it an independent object "as real as a chair or a table," but rather, it was created "primarily for its impact on perception."³ In his catalogue essay for the 1965 canonical Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, William C. Seitz could very well have been describing Wurmfeld's interest in the effect of color as sensation when he writes:

Ideological focus has moved from the outside world, passed through the work as object and entered the incompletely explored region ... between the cornea and the brain.⁴

In this vein, noted critics of contemporary painting and color agree on the impact of Wurmfeld's E-Cyclorama, referring to it as "exhilarating," and "disturbing,"⁵ as well as "dazzling."⁶

In contrast to the dramatic impression of his Cycloramas, Wurmfeld's small CMYK Series watercolor paintings create a more lyrical experience for the viewer. The choice of watercolor as a medium lends from the start a lightness to this body of work. This traditionally most delicate and transparent of mediums is the more so, as Wurmfeld uses contemporary airbrush colors, whose chemical composition breaks down the surface tension and weight of water, and allows the color to penetrate the surface quickly with pure pigment. As a support, he uses the crisp white of Arches watercolor paper. He reduces the quantity of colors from 109 in the E-Cyclorama to a four-color palette of Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, and K-black. With elegant economy of means, all colors experienced in the CMYK Series are made by layering one or more of these four primary hues.⁷ Wurmfeld experimented for an extended period to find specific colors with the particular spectrum distributions to enable a good mixing quality, important for vibrancy and clarity.⁸ All of these choices contribute to an aesthetic of levity in these paintings—a sense of lightness, grace, and transparency.

The watercolors also position the viewer differently with regard to the work. No longer immersed physically in the space of the Cyclorama's elliptical installation, we initially assume a more sovereign stance. We are the subject again, outside, look-

ing at the work of art that is an object, separate from us. But we do not stay at a distance from the watercolors for long. Their small scale invites close inspection, and they pull us in. Experiences of luminosity begin to transpire for the viewer, which relate in kind, if not in magnitude, to those of the Cycloramas. Each watercolor painting in each series—the small squares, from the Series F, and triangles, from the Series A—stands on its own to delight the eye, as Wurmfeld explores the idea of making “all the color possibilities”⁹ by layering the CMYK colors as transparent washes.

“Green Luminosity” [See Plate 62, Series F-3, p. 130], for instance, could be the title for one of Wurmfeld’s square watercolors in his Series F. The painting is divided horizontally between an upper, darker half and a lower, lighter half. While looking closely at the lower portion of the painting, warm and cool variations of green keep the eye oscillating from right to left, between what appears to be a large, light area of cool green made brilliant by the visibility of white paper under transparent color, to a graduated warmer green area to its left. These two light areas, sparring for the viewer’s attention, are close in value and thus their border almost disappears, creating the illusion that these colors are in the same space, and equally near to us. This rectangular area seems even brighter when we move a bit further away and note its contrast with the adjacent darker blue-greens above. The graduated darker horizontal bands increase in value in equal visual steps toward the top of the square, giving them the appearance of recession, and the painting an appearance of volume in space. Compounding this, each transition between the stepped tones exhibits an illusory peak, a volumetric shape referred to as “fluting,”¹⁰ caused by the effect of simultaneous contrast in the eye of the viewer where the darker and lighter bands meet. These three-dimensional illusions create a tension with the obvious flat two-dimensionality of the support. In these compositions, Wurmfeld manipulates various aspects of color—hue, value, and chroma—to create sensations of luminosity and spatial ambiguity for the viewer.

Wurmfeld describes this Series F as an “invented format that combines a geometrical progression of form with the geometric progression of color layering in the division of a square.”¹¹ This means that the geometric progression observed in the

variation of shape noted above also determines the layering technique, which progresses from one to two to four to eight to sixteen layers of paint. Wurmfeld became aware in his early years of the “Weber-Fechner Law” through one of his favorite artists—painter, theorist, and educator Josef Albers.¹² According to this law, to achieve the appearance of a visual progression of equal steps in tone when using transparent color, a painter must in fact apply the paint in a geometric progression of layers: one to two to four to eight layers of transparent paint make the impression of steps increasing in darkness from one to two to three to four. Albers called this distinction an example of the “surprising discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.”¹³ For Albers, the “Weber-Fechner Law” was one of myriad examples of how the eye is deceived by color appearances, leading us to admit humbly the unreliability of our perceptions of color phenomena, the relativity of color, its instability and mystery.

Another Wurmfeld square format painting in Series F this viewer will call “White Box.” [See Plate 62, Series F-1, p. 130] It is composed of all the CMYK colors, and it creates even more visual complexity for the observer. An additional device seems to have been added to the grid structure here: small vertical and horizontal stripes of watercolor paper are prominent in the composition. The irregular pencil marks visible beneath the surface, along with the slightly uneven brushed edges, indicate the presence of the artist’s hand, which Wurmfeld wanted to bring into play again after the more mechanized process of the Cyclorama painting.¹⁴ This presence of facture stands in some tension to the mathematical regularity we observe from the proportions of the progression itself and know of the layering technique. Most important, the effect of the light-colored bands creates the luminosity of this painting in a unique way. These centrally located bands are allowed to function as the division between areas of paint as the artist layers the color in ninety-degree intervals around the square, with the result that a lone brilliant square of white paper remains untouched at its center. In the middle of the four colors in their different value iterations and in contrast to them, the brightness of the white square appears as the apex of a volumetric structure, again, destabilizing our awareness that the support is flat. One also

feels here the effect of the differences and impact of color extension: the narrow near-white vertical and horizontal bars glow in the midst of all the broader areas of color surrounding them, as does the white center. This is especially apparent when one moves away and sees the composition at some distance. In this painting, again, various capacities of color as sensation have animated the eye and the mind of the observer, whose experience changes depending upon his/her proximity to the painting, and the attentiveness he/she brings to the color relationships presented.

The formal rigor and experimental logic evident in Wurmfeld’s watercolors were aesthetic priorities at that incubator of modernism which was the Bauhaus, founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, by Walter Gropius.¹⁵ At the Bauhaus, instructors for the most part were more interested in the “physical properties and perceptual effects of color, as opposed to its potential for subjective or symbolic expression.”¹⁶ Instructors Johannes Itten, and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, as well as the artists

Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, encouraged experimentation with basic colors and fundamental forms.¹⁷ Klee’s Notebook sketch Unequal Weight at Unequal Dimension¹⁸ and his watercolor painting Submersion and Separation¹⁹ both exhibit explorations which anticipate Wurmfeld’s.

Klee’s Bauhaus colleague Kandinsky observes: “The effect of a painting is of an optical nature,” and “... absolute means do not exist in painting, its means are relative only. It is from interrelation that the unlimited means and inexhaustible richness of painting arise.”²⁰ Émigré Bauhaus artist Josef Albers built a life of art and theory around such premises in the United States, first at Black Mountain College and then at Yale University.

In the compendium of his ideas and color experiments presented in the portfolio publication *Interaction of Color*, Albers includes the vivid plate of an equilateral triangle. [Fig. 2] He describes it as “probably the most condensed and clear system of presentation of an essential order in the vast world of color.”²¹

In the written text explicating this triangle, Albers refers back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s color investigations.²² Other artists and theorists, including Moses Harris and James Clerk Maxwell, also explored the nuances of color through the color triangle, so it is not surprising to see Wurmfeld join their visual deliberations.²³

Wurmfeld’s Series A, comprising the triangle paintings, share the jewel-like qualities of the squares from the Series F. In one triangle composition, an intense yellow at the left corner is modulated toward its complement on the right side and the two colors combine to a warm neutral at the apex. [See Plate 61, Series A-6, p. 129] The variety of transitional color is enchanting to the eye, as is the number of iterations of the triangle. This multiplicity and extensive variety lend the watercolors their own magnitude through sheer number.

Wurmfeld’s layering method in the triangle series often leaves the lightest shapes beneath the more densely layered, higher-chroma ones. It feels like the lighter areas are pushing forward to come to the surface, held back by the shapes composed of heavier paint. The effect is a kind of twinkling. This spatial tension, the back and forward in space, is another capacity of color highlighted in these paintings. These oscillations among the colors are often augmented by tensions between the shapes:

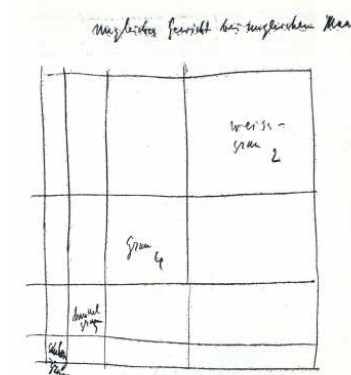


Fig. 1 Above: Paul Klee, Unequal Weight at Unequal Dimension, 41/1a 141. From Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, Vol. 2: *The Nature of Nature*, Juerg Spiller, ed., translated by Heinz Norden, published by George Wittenborn, New York, 1970, p. 141.

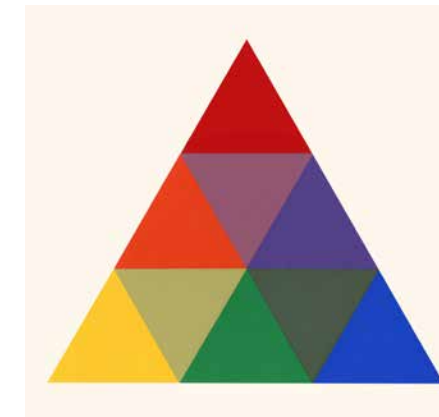


Fig. 2 Right: Josef Albers, Equilateral Triangle in *The Interaction of Color*, XXIV-1.

inverted triangle shapes appear to point down, in the opposite direction of the series as a whole. The play of up and down creates an ambiguity in directional force. But here again, Wurmfeld uses the format mainly as an armature to explore colors: the transitions between hues, tertiaries, and neutrals, are too complex to have descriptive color designations, but are nevertheless intensely experienced by the viewer. The simultaneous impression of precision and magic, an intrinsic quality of Wurmfeld's work, is evident again in the Series A triangle paintings.²⁴

Wurmfeld's transparent watercolor painting—more specifically, his CMYK Series of recent years—is concerned with painterly relationships on a variety of levels. First and foremost, we see in this body of work the exploration of relationships between colors. The watercolors reveal the capacity of colors to interact with one another and create experiences of luminosity, or illusions of volume, or spatial tensions, and to confront us with the conflict between physical fact and psychic effect. In addition, these paintings emphasize the artist's relationship to the viewer: they are constructed so that colors look different in different environments; when seen from near or far; when we view part of a painting, or the whole, or a selected group from the series. The observer becomes aware that he/she is looking at a static object, but is confronting live phenomena, and that ultimately the viewer constructs the color image through his/her personal psycho-physical capacities.²⁵ Finally, in the CMYK Series of watercolor paintings, Wurmfeld's allegiances to artists and scientists with whom he is in conversation shimmer through, adding layers of resonance to his work.

Though the Series A and Series F paintings share the fundamental concerns of his more than forty-year career in painting, Sanford Wurmfeld's recent watercolors are a body of work distinct in his oeuvre. Their sensation of lightness when compared to the gravity of the Cycloramas, provides an indication of the wide range of the artist's interests, from monumental to small, opaque to transparent, extension to reduction of colors from hundreds to just four. These polarities show Wurmfeld's unflagging pursuit of extremes within his chosen realm of exploration—the relativity of color in painting and the individuality and mystery of each viewer's response to it.

1. Duncan Macmillan, *E-Cyclorama: Sanford Wurmfeld*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh College of Art and New York: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, SUNY, 2008): 24.
2. This phenomenon, to which Sanford Wurmfeld frequently refers, is known as film color. See David Katz, *The World of Colour* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner Co. Ltd., 1935): 7.
3. William C. Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965): 9.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Robert L. Herbert, Introduction to William C. Agee, ed., *Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966–2013*, exh. cat. (New York: Hunter College Art Galleries, 2013): 11.
6. Macmillan, 20.
7. Sanford Wurmfeld, *Immersed in Color: E-Cyclorama*, exhibition brochure (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture, September 11–October 27, 2011).
8. Sanford Wurmfeld, interview by the author, October 9, 2012, New York.
9. Wurmfeld, *Immersed*, brochure.
10. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, 2009): 36.
11. Wurmfeld, *Immersed*, brochure.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Albers, 12.
14. Wurmfeld, interview.
15. Clark V. Poling, *Bauhaus Color*, exh. cat. (Atlanta: The High Museum of Art, 1975): 8.
16. *Ibid.*, 9.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Paul Klee, *Unequal Weight at Unequal Dimension*, from Paul Klee, *Notebooks, Vol. 2: The Nature of Nature*, Juerg Spiller, ed., translated by Heinz Norden (New York: George Wittenborn, 1970): 141.
19. Paul Klee, *Submersion and Separation*, in Marianne L. Teuber, *Paul Klee: Paintings and Watercolors from the Bauhaus Years 1921–1931*, exh. cat. (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 1973), plate 18.
20. Wassily Kandinsky, "The Value of a Concrete Work," *XXe Siècle* (English Edition), Nos 5–6, 1939, extra page. Quoted in Poling, *Bauhaus*, 27.
21. Albers, 115.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Sanford Wurmfeld, *Color Documents: A Presentational Theory*, exh. cat. (New York: Hunter College Art Gallery, 1985).
24. Herbert, 11.
25. Seitz, 19.



PLATE 61 Watercolors: Series A, (from left to right, top to bottom, nos. 1–8), 2010–11. Acrylic (transparent) on paper, 8 pieces. 9 x 12 1/8 in. (22.9 x 30.8 cm)