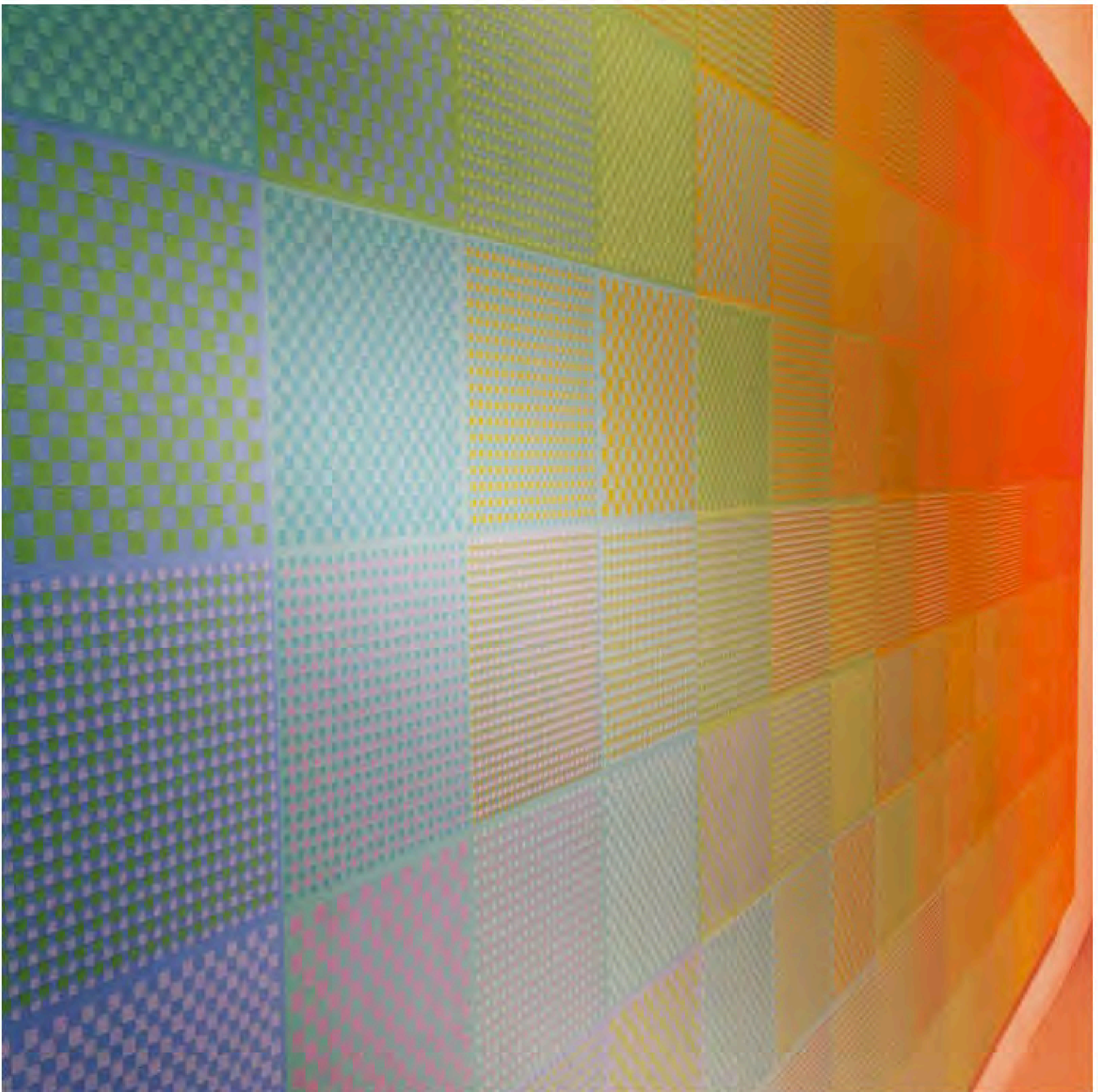
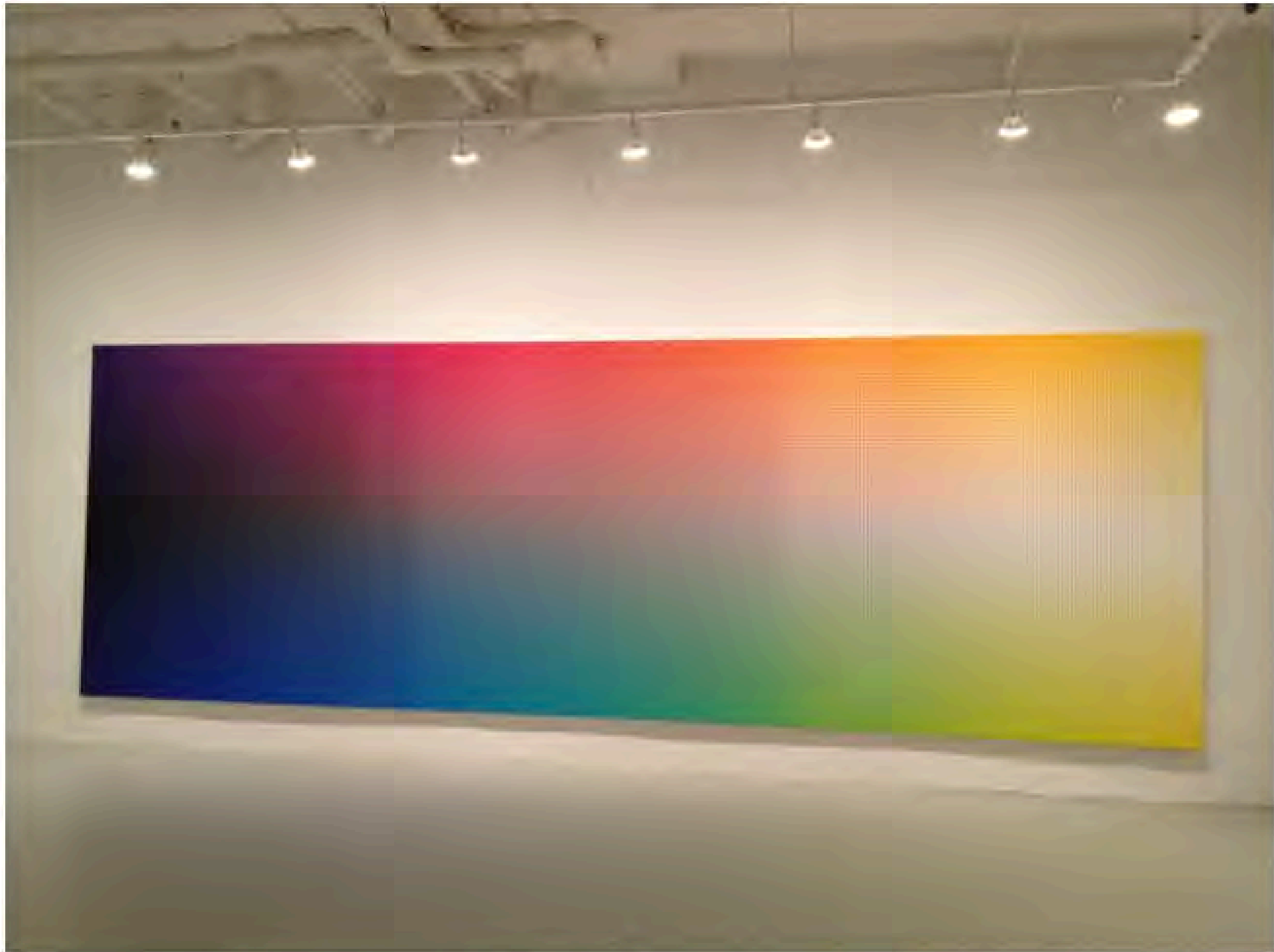


A Chorus of Color: Sanford Wurmfeld Retrospective at Hunter College and Minus Space



“There should be soul in every painting, no matter what you do.” — Sanford Wurmfeld

Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013 celebrated the fifty-year career of Sanford Wurmfeld, the Phyllis and Joseph Caroff Professor of Fine Arts Emeritus at the City University of New York’s Hunter College. It should also be noted that he served as Art Department Chair from 1978-2006 and was instrumental in helping to lead Hunter’s MFA Program to the top-ranked national status it maintains to this day. As an American painter, Wurmfeld has tirelessly created abstract works that engage the affect of color on mood and perception. By aligning his practices with colorists such as Georges Seurat, Joseph Albers, Franz Kline, Claude Monet, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, he deftly taps into our psyches through carefully constructed color grids. The recent retrospective surveyed the expansive, yet focused scope of Wurmfeld’s oeuvre, ranging from paintings, sculpture, watercolors and film, to many canvases never before seen by a public audience. The exhibition also included an architectural scale-mockup for one of Wurmfeld’s monumental elliptical paintings, **E-Cyclorama II (2009)**, a unique installation that fuses architecture and painting.



Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Installation View

I confess to being unfamiliar with Wurmfeld's work while attending his opening last February. I further admit to initially having feelings of **chromophobia** (what professor David Batchelor defines in his book as a literal "fear of color"), quite possibly from living in the sleek, monochromatic environs of New York City for too long.

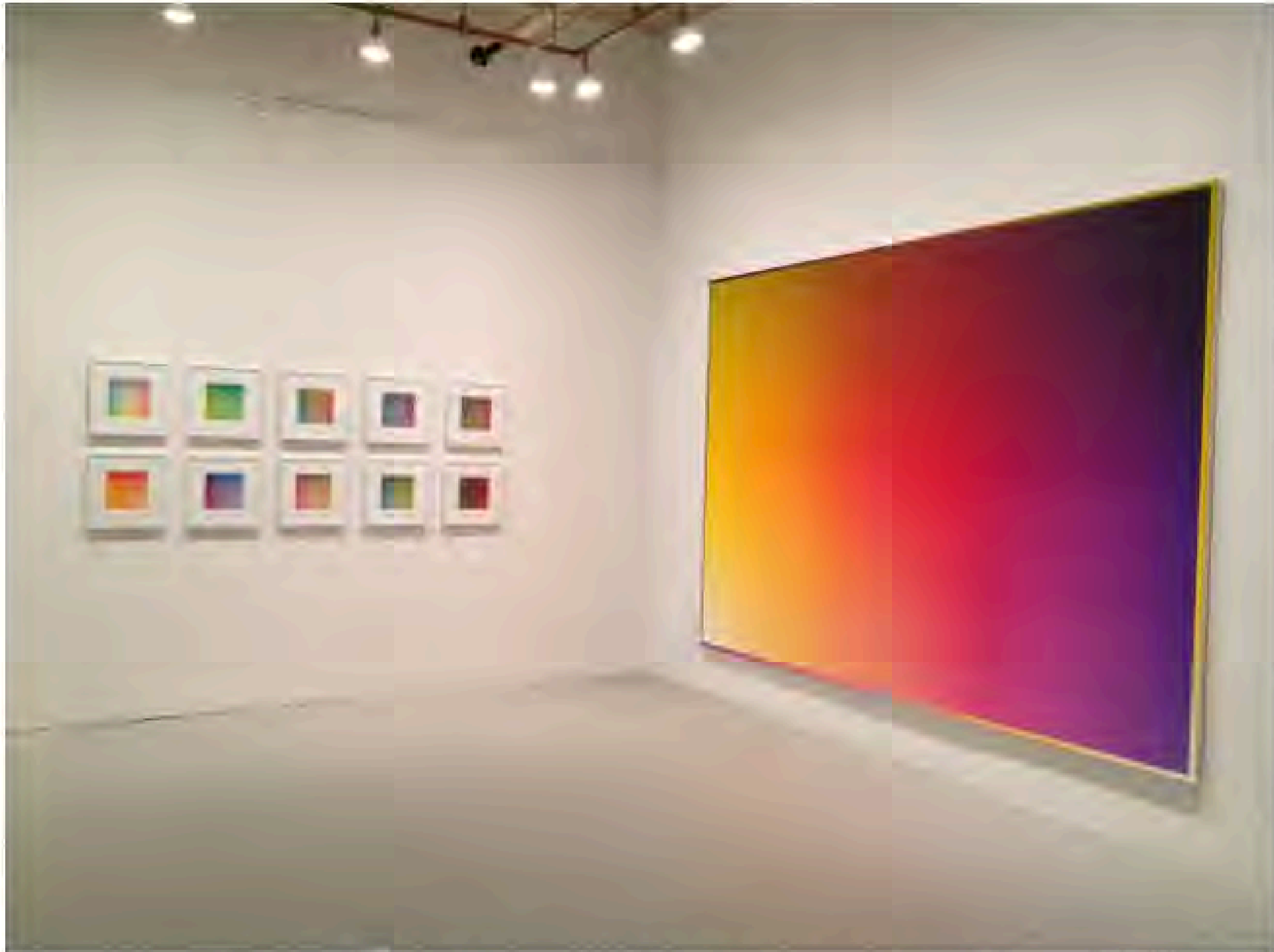
Nonetheless, I became intrigued to learn more about the esteemed "color field painter from Hunter College" whose Color Theory Seminar has "become the stuff of legend." Subsequently, over the past three months I have attempted to gleam the cube by enriching my chromatic appreciation *à la* Wurmfeld. In hopes of developing kaleidoscopic vision, I made several visits to the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery, plus an additional visit to the concurrent exhibition, **Sanford Wurmfeld: Light & Dark** at Minus Space in DUMBO. Furthermore, I augmented my color quest by attending two dynamic curatorial talks led by Wurmfeld, exhibition curator William C. Agee, and his prismatic curatorial team.



Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Installation View of Walk Through

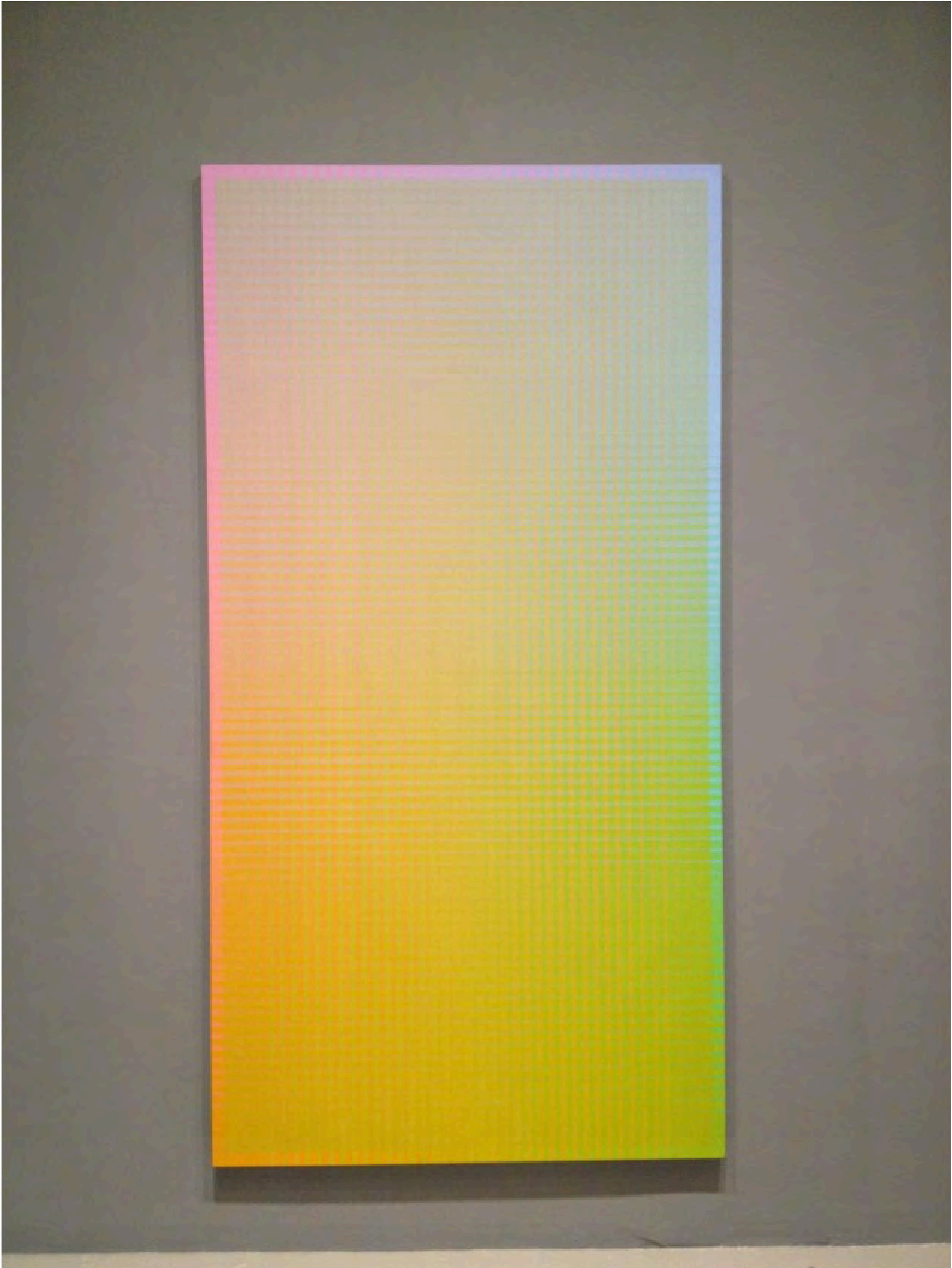
Visiting Wurmfeld's show at Hunter College/Times Square Galleries was like entering The Great Color Hall of the Justice League. The sprawling layout presented the vastness of the artist's banquet of color, tonality, luminosity, and form. Many of Wurmfeld's picture planes are undeniably mouthwatering, bursting with succulent colors. Other paintings boast surfaces that shimmer with a vibrating chromatic tenor. Not to be overlooked, the deceptively stark "black and white" compositions reward the patient viewer with an exquisite range of chromatic values: their tonalities are magnificently subtle like a sotto voce. Several galleries were devoted to Wurmfeld's early sculptural works. Reductive yet vivid crops of large, hexagonal wooden columns made in the late 1960s appear like limbless trees in a forest. Their geometric trunks twist in an architectural manner so the viewer can always see three colors from any standpoint. A separate gallery houses a maze-like installation named "Walk Through" which is fabricated out of cast acrylic sheets. The configuration is comprised of a dizzying array of translucent panels rendered in three primary colors of red, yellow and blue. Depending upon

panels rendered in three primary colors of red, yellow and blue. Depending upon your vantage point, the primary colored panels overlap and mix with one another to form shards of secondary colors like green or orange. Even though each structure is transparent, the shifting hues make it easy to become pleasantly disoriented when navigating the configuration. There are moments when I felt like I had tumbled into a rabbit hole with a kaleidoscope as my only navigational lens!

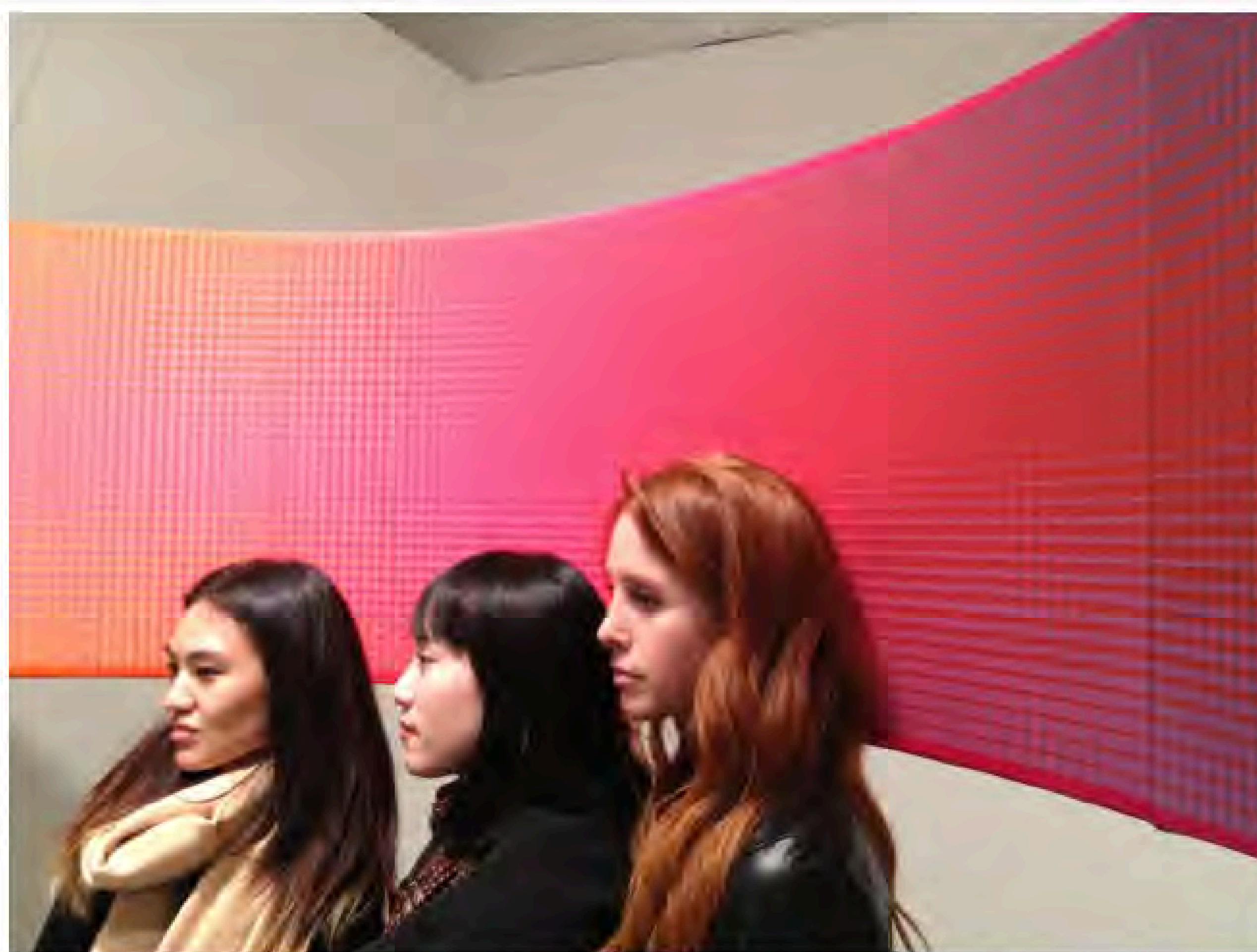


Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Installation View

While absorbing phenomenological shocks of color, I became particularly awed by the polychromatic grids by which I had been consumed. Almost every gallery boasted a meticulously painted matrix that dizzied my retinas with visual vibrations. Candidly put: if you were to enter a staring contest with a Wurmfeld painting, it will always win. The human mind can only withstand an ocular buzz for so long! In the 1970s Wurmfeld began employing grids to explore the visual relationship of form and color. This framework allowed him to investigate the effects of color configurations that would elicit illusions such as “simultaneous contrast”: a psychophysical effect that takes place entirely in the eye-brain system. Additionally, there is the element of assimilation, which involves our perception that colors become less distinguishable when increasing one’s viewing distance from the picture plane. To bolster this effect, each grid is comprised of a series of squares. Some of the grids are uniform throughout, and have equally sized units that span across the picture plane. Other grids have a variegated structure that has been colonized by cubes and rectangles of many different sizes. The more complex the grid, the more intricate the relationship becomes between color intervals.



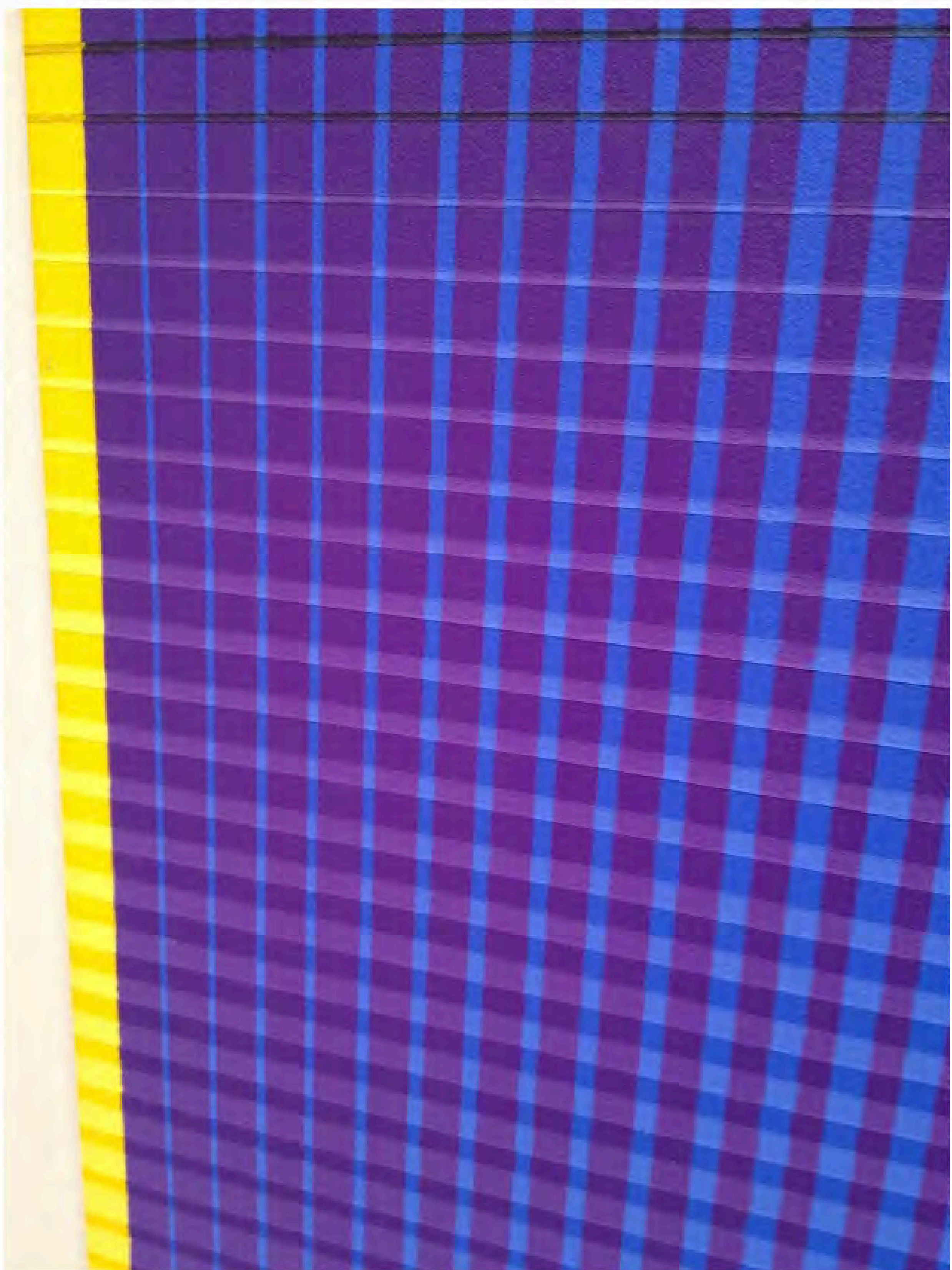
The key to appreciating these works has much to do with the figure-ground relationship of form and color. For each painting, Wurmfeld maps out a set of colors that are distinct in hue, value, and saturation. This combination causes a perpetual figure-ground interchange as one's eye progresses along the width of the canvas, achieving an overall spatial dynamism. Subsequently, each grid becomes a matrix of possibility pushing the absolute limits of color. In 1985, Wurmfeld unexpectedly advanced the intricacy of his grid structures one step further. While laying out a preliminary lattice, he accidentally drew an extra square within a grid section. By overdrawing the correct number in the grid, he achieved a new structural pattern that "phased" from thick to thin, both horizontally and vertically. The perpetually shifting axes within this new scaffold created a constant figure-ground flux, causing individual units within the grid to optically wow and flutter. Wurmfeld continued to refine and incorporate this "mistake" until the subtle geometric progression yielded smoother color transitions across the surface, producing a new harmonious totality. The "shifting grid" quickly became the new standard for Wurmfeld's canvases and proved instrumental in the creation of his Cycloramas.



Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Installation View of E-Cyclorama

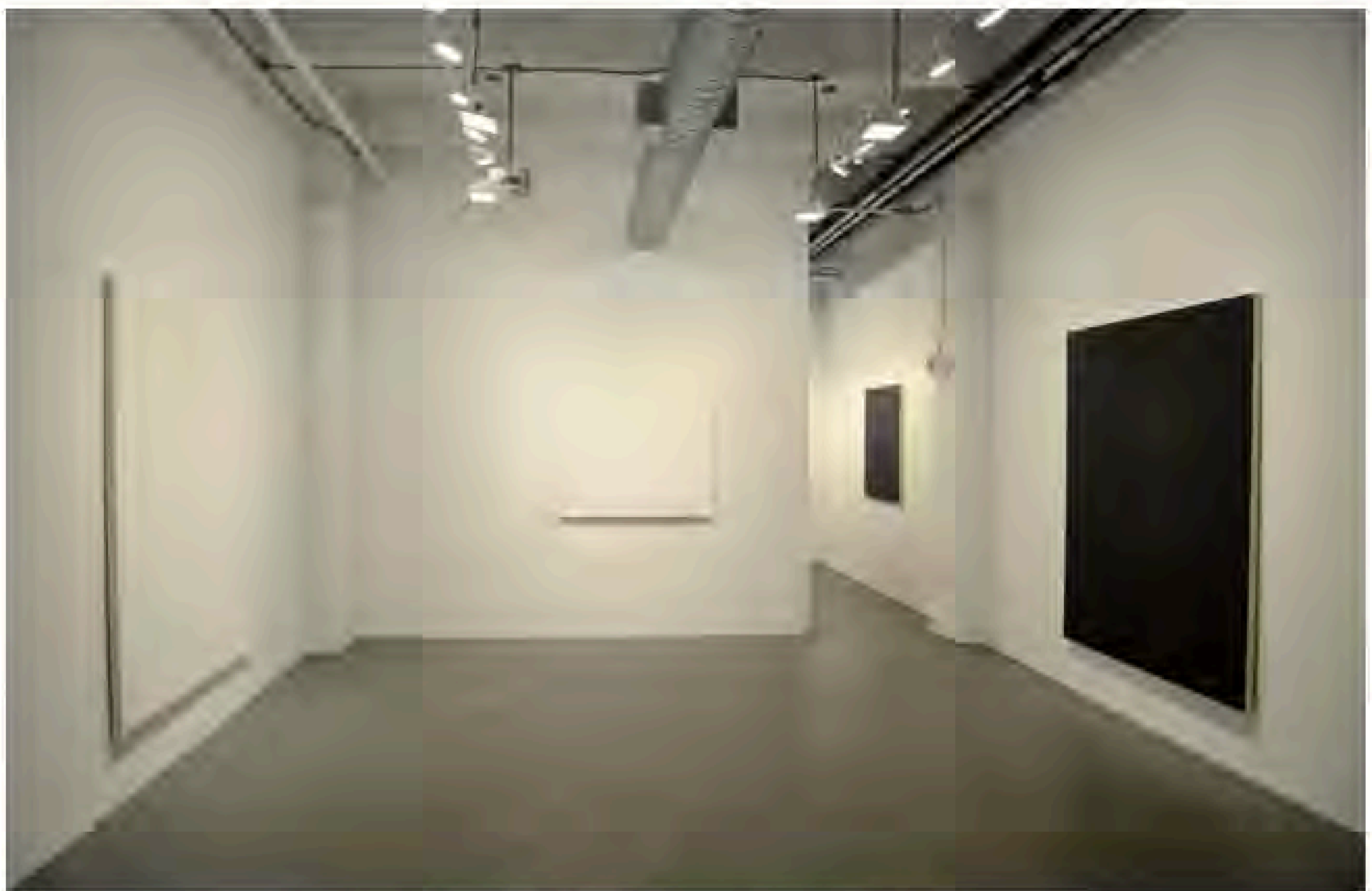
Much of Wurmfeld's inspiration for creating the Cycloramas derives from his personal experiences of standing in front of famous panoramas like the 19th century Panorama Mesdag at The Hague by Dutch painter Hendrick Willem Mesdag and Monet's Waterlilies at Musee de l'Orangerie in Paris. He liked the self-contained feeling that the interior space offered. It was a quiet and contemplative atmosphere that tucked him away from rapid movement and exterior noises from the outside world. The idea of being inside a massive circular painting was intriguing to the artist because it would submerge him in a continuum of color. Wurmfeld first Cyclorama was executed in 72 different colors, and is an exalted paragon of color theory. It is a sanctuary in which a chorus of color serenades and saturates the viewer in surround sound. [Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College E-Cyclorama experience](#)

Wormfeld's knowledge of color and color science is irrefutably deep and devoted. His recent paintings use anywhere from 35 to 75 colors each (which produce effects that only scientists can glean), and take up to a year to make. Conversely, some of his paintings appear to present a full spectrum of color, yet only use what Wormfeld terms as four "psychological primary colors" which consist of red, yellow, green and blue. From a distance, Wormfeld's paintings appear deceptively monochromatic (high color assimilation) and seem to float in cloud of luminosity. As the viewer approaches the paintings, the eye begins to fixate upon intricate details of meticulously drawn grids while scanning a gorgeous interplay of color. An equally important component to consider is the background color of the gallery walls. For his retrospective, Wormfeld went to great lengths to paint many of the walls at the Times Square Gallery a photo-neutral gray, which succeeded in heightening the luminosity of his large canvases. This detail highlights the fact that gray can be as potent a color as any of the primaries we tend to associate more with luminosity.



Sanford Wormfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Painted Grid Detail

The difference in how the paintings appear in person versus how they appear in a photograph is vast. So much so, that in a recent email exchange with Minus Space regarding Wurmfeld's exhibition (Sanford Wurmfeld: Light & Dark) which featured a suite of new paintings that investigate the extremes of light and dark value in color painting, they issued the following courteous disclaimer: *"The paintings appear to be black and white upon first impression, but after closer examination reveals broader chromatic breadth. Please note: the works are extremely subtle, making them nearly impossible to photograph, and really need to be seen in person."* I appreciated the thoughtful note because it prompted me to slow down and spend quality time taking in the sophisticated tonality and color interplay of light and dark values. Specifically, I found there to be an alluring luminosity within the dark paintings that was not unlike a moonstone that refracts sunlight with hazy effervescence. I even overheard someone in the crowd make a fitting remark that the darker value paintings possessed "a grey luminosity."



Sanford Wurmfeld: Light and Dark, 2013, Minus Space, DUMBO, Installation View

My conscientious pause to remain present in front of a painting made me think about the fact that mediums are particular objects that evoke particular emotions. Just as the right sculpture evokes elements of space and the way we feel in it, the right book will ignite our desire to ruminate upon the past as well as how to live in the future. With this in mind, the right painting will psychologically shift us into a contemplative and meditative state. Wurmfeld's compositions fully realize this notion because they allow the viewer to experience time through color, and color through time. In all of his paintings, there is a constant flux of color, light, and shadow. This impacts the viewer's perceptual experience because as one observes the object, the visual material changes, implicating the viewer as an active participant. In short, we undergo an internal visual shift in order to match the material in flux. This visual recalibration can act as a mental or spiritual gateway into viewing Wurmfeld's paintings. Upon "entering" the picture plane, the gaze becomes unmoored, allowing the eyes to ebb and flow over gentle swells of color, with amplified ease. Wurmfeld likens this visual exercise to getting at an unnamable experience or emotion, which he dubs "boat time." "Boat time" refers to the sublime sense created by being aboard a boat at sea on a foggy day, feeling united with the ocean, and realizing there is no absolute time. This experience of feeling

submerged in an atmospheric veil of color is open to interpretation and can be described as spiritual (in the non-religious sense), meditative, luminous or profound. This sentiment also derives from Wurmfeld's extensive studies of panoramas and 19th century American Luminism whose tenets are center on spiritual journeys.



Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013, Hunter College/Times Square, Installation View

Although I never took Wurmfeld's Color Theory Seminar, which has altered the thinking and practices of countless students, I now feel closer to understanding Wurmfeld's deep affection and knowledge of color by experiencing it vicariously through his work. I am complicit with the expressive power of color through his work. Perhaps it was my acceptance that the element of time is vital in order to experience the full effect of color in painting – I realize one must be patient, which is an increasing challenge in the face of contemporary urban life. Or perhaps it was grasping the elusive concept of **film color** in which color seems to detach itself from its material support. Or maybe it was the optical buzzes I got from looking at carefully constructed figure-ground color combinations that to make the picture plane flutter. Regardless, it has been a stimulating odyssey and sensory awakening to be guided through the paradigm of a true color guru.