

ArtSeen

# Sanford Wurmfeld: *Variations*

by Robert C. Morgan



Installation view: *Sanford Wurmfeld: Variations*, Minus Space, Brooklyn, 2019. Photo: Yao Zu Lu.

It is curious that with all the critical verbiage given to color in the recent past —Color Field painting, for example—relatively little attention has been given to the function of hue, value, and saturation by painters working within the chromatic spectrum. For several years now, Sanford Wurmfeld has been recognized as an artist and eloquent advocate of color theory who wants to remove color from the exclusivity of scientific research and bring it back into art. To achieve this, the artist has consistently pursued experimentation whereby attention is given to grid-related forms through various methods of systemic application. The current exhibition of seven recent paintings on view at Minus Space gives a new clarity to his focus as a colorist and to the depth of his work as it has evolved over five decades.

ON VIEW

**Minus Space**

March 2 – April 20, 2019

New York



The seven paintings by Wurmfeld mounted on three walls in the main gallery include two horizontal rectangular paintings on the left (both measuring 42 × 85 inches), four irregular quadrangles on the opposite right (each measuring 30 × 31 inches), and one large vertical rectangular painting on the central wall dividing the other two (measuring 90 × 47 3/8 inches). They were all painted within the previous year. The installation appears amenable to the content of the paintings, meaning that the elevation of the paintings maintains an aura of optical objectivity that invites viewers to relax and "be with the work." They are paintings that need to be studied as well as enjoyed. From the artist's point of view, this requires close attention to the act of seeing, rather than dependence on a text. In order for this to be done successfully, time and patience play an important role.

Given the precise specificity of language needed to clarify what the artist is doing (on par with the complexity of Sol LeWitt's "conceptual" wall drawings from 1973), the gallery press release offers an acute explanation: "Wurmfeld organizes his new paintings around a twelve-part color circle, which includes each of the twelve colors at full saturation, ten of those same colors at half saturation (with the exception of yellow and violet), and seven grays."



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In compiling the triadic breakdown, the total number of colors comes to 29. In each painting, the artist has layered the colors over grids of shifting alignment. In most cases, the vertical stripes of color at either end of each painting signifies the contrasting colors that result from the systemic increments of color painted in-between.

A similar method has been employed in the smaller irregular quadrangles, which includes a single stripe of color placed on the left side, which signifies the full saturation of the half saturated colors and grays aligned within the grid. Although smaller in scale than the large rectilinear paintings, the quadrangles are exceedingly beautiful works of art that suggest the focus and concentration of a Vermeer, a painter that Wurmfeld comprehends as having taken color to a considerable depth.

Such an exhibition as *Variations* (the title chosen by the artist) offers viewers a challenge to come to terms with a classical approach to painting presumably uncommon in the socially mediated art world of the present. At the same time, there is much to be gained in decoding the fundamental constructs employed by the artist. I would concur that the paintings in the current show are truly magnificent, comparable to neo-classical works from more than a century ago when "the science of beauty" (Benedetto Croce) carried more importance than it does today. While the politics may have changed, there are still recesses from the past that continue to be uncovered as new avenues of exploration, outside the realm of avant-garde provocation.

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## **Contributor**

### **Robert C. Morgan**

Robert C. Morgan is a writer, international art critic, curator, poet, lecturer, and artist. His most recent book is *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings* (2003). He holds both an MFA in Sculpture and a Ph.D. in Art History. He is currently Adjunct Professor of Fine Art at Pratt Institute.