

# SANFORD WURMFELD *Light & Dark*

by Margaret Graham

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I had imagined that by now the world would have seen the best of black-and-white, that antithesis of all antitheses. In subway tiles and zebra stripes, in piano keys and the elegant configurations of “Go,” in Franz Kline’s calligraphic forms and Keith Haring’s hieroglyphs—between nature and culture, it seemed that no iteration of this epic dichotomy was left unturned. But standing before Sanford Wurmfeld’s recent *Light & Dark* paintings, now on view at MINUS SPACE in Dumbo, I found I was mistaken. In actuality, all we have known of these two familiar non-colors has been their heavily patinaed husks. The quintessence, the *meat* of “black” and “white” lies not in their true values, but rather in the broad spectrum of rich yet delicate chroma that reach out to touch them.

Stationed squarely at the intersection of Color Field painting, hard-edge abstraction, Op art, and minimalism, Wurmfeld’s work has investigated and palpated color to its extremes and back for nearly 50 years. During that time, Wurmfeld’s oeuvre has followed a vibrant and often breathtaking trajectory, moving from the polygonal color-blocked canvases, twisted hexagonal columns, and multi-colored walk-through installations of his early career (in which one can certainly see connections to the likes of Larry Zox and Tony Smith) to the colossal and meticulous close-range color grids that have characterized his work since the 1970s. The copious color relationships Wurmfeld has explored within his canvases—all, impressively, mixed by eye without reliance on any scientific or mathematical system—are at turns abrasive, engulfing, discomfiting, and radiant, yet none are quite so challenging or so mesmerizing as those that address the subjects of black and white.

The initial impression of the five paintings on view in *Sanford Wurmfeld: Light & Dark*—two “white” and three “black”—is that they are monochromatic but discernibly textured. Though two-dimensional, the canvases appear to be woven into a waffled moiré, an effect created by painted matrices of intersecting vertical and horizontal bands that vary gradually in thickness. One immediately recalls Albers, Kline, Reinhardt, and Martin; but then, by necessity, one steps away from these recollections, just as each carefully differentiated segment of the painting slowly steps away from white, or black, and back toward color.



Sanford Wurmfeld, “II-16 + B (Light),” 2013, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72”.

These irregular visual undulations reveal themselves to be a result of the careful arrangement of various subtle hues across the picture plane. “II-16 + B (Light)” (2013), for example, is literally opalescent, each individual band tinted with just the slightest hint of apricot or citron or aquamarine, standing on the very precipice of hue while reaching out into the blinding void of colorless air. It brings to mind a line Rilke once wrote in reference to Cézanne: “In this hither and back of mutual and manifold influence, the interior of the picture vibrates, rises and falls back into itself, and does not have a single unmoving part.”\* Similarly, Wurmfeld has here created a visual, visceral hum. The work shivers with candid phosphorescence, a luminosity that hints at what we might find if we cut to the core of white. It is nothing short of a revelation.

The dark paintings have a comparable surprising brilliance, though of a kind less euphoric, more sedate—reflective, tangible, and vague, like an image glimpsed in a mirror in a dark room. In “II-16 + B (Dark)” (2013), the aspects of an interior, rippling square alternate between a miry green-black and hard blue-black, a brittle red-black and tender violet-black, in such a way as to evoke the desire to taste or to touch—as though if one did, the true hue would ooze like the juice of a cut blackberry and stain the outstretched finger.

The art of Sanford Wurmfeld—as seen in *Light & Dark* and in the 47-year retrospective exhibition, *Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966-2013*, recently on view at the Hunter College Times Square Gallery—is, above all, a pleasurable test of human perception. Every inch as much a teacher as an artist (he taught color theory at Hunter from 1967 – 2012 and was chair of the art department from 1978 – 2006), Wurmfeld continues to share his unwavering commitment to color by challenging us to see the ways in which color can be more than mere pretense, can in fact be a whole world, a transcendental, immersive environment. With his recent light and dark series, in particular, he helps us to understand that it’s not all black-and-white; the paintings are stern but kind, slow-talking but quick-witted, not so much misleading as simply slow, panoramic, and deliberate, requiring time and careful attention to appreciate their unfolding.

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