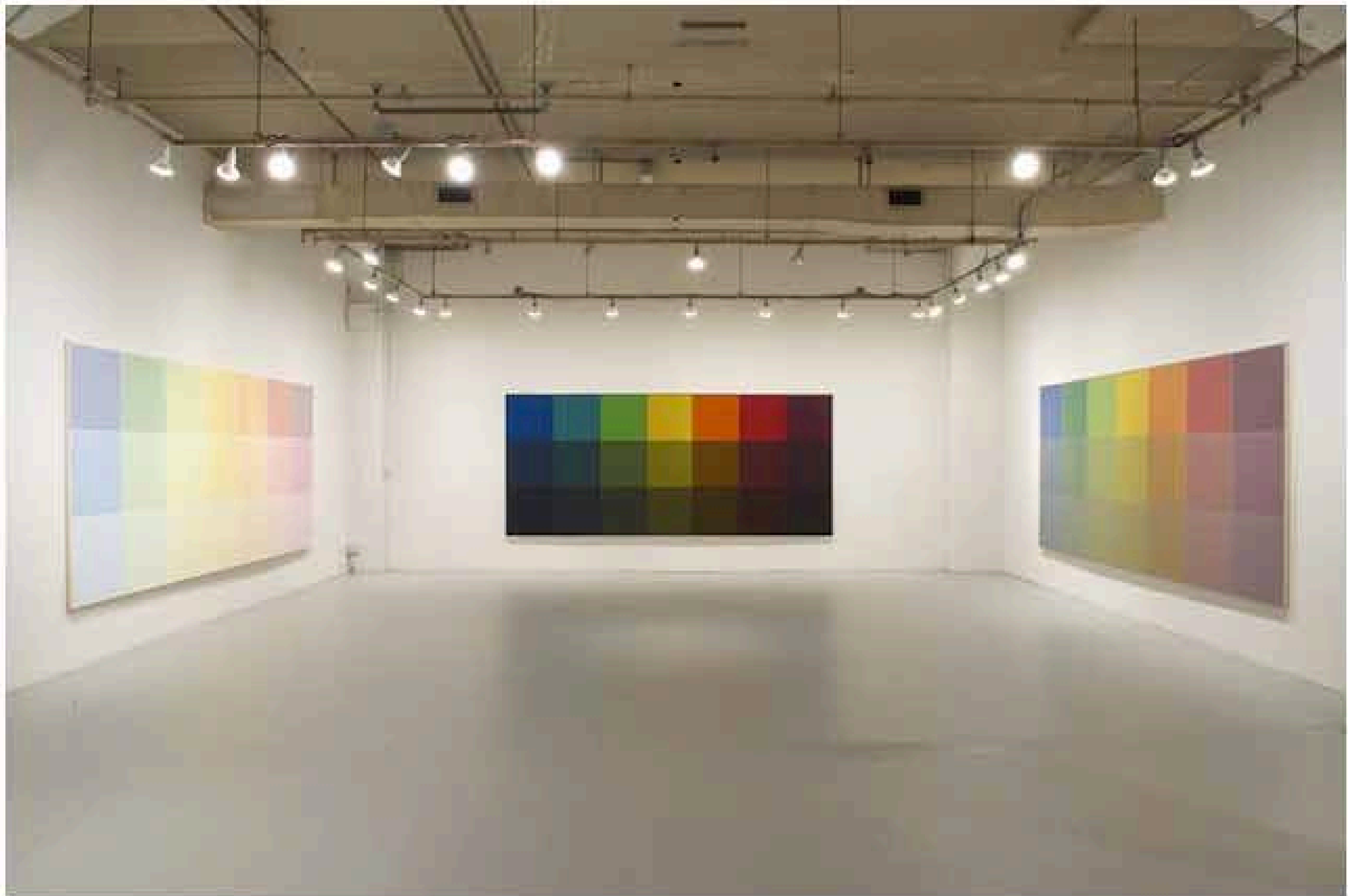


Color Visions: The Sanford Wurmfeld Experience



John Yau April 14, 2013



Installation view, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013" at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery (all photos courtesy Louis Chan)

1.

For many, *Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013* at the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery (February 15–April 20, 2013) will be an introduction to an artist, who, according to the art historian William C. Agee, “may well be the best little-known painter in New York today.” There are many reasons for this oversight, but I want to single out three.

The first and most important is that Wurmfeld’s deep historical research in the field of color theory is unrivaled. He is, in that regard, both a painter and a scholar, a combination the art world distrusts. Formalist academics and critics have spent years cleaving thinking from craft, believing the latter to be obsolete and unnecessary, rather than a matter of necessity and urgency.

The second reason is that Wurmfeld’s study of color aligns him with Josef Albers and the European avant-garde, which has long been interested in color theory and issues of perception, going back to Georges Seurat. However, the connection between the field of scientific inquiry and artistic practice is one that Americans have failed to embrace. It is also why Op Art continues to fly beneath the radar.

The third reason is what David Batchelor examines in his book *Chromophobia* (2000) — the fear that one might be contaminated by color, that it isn't serious enough. According to Batchelor:

Color is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. (It is typical of prejudices to conflate the sinister and the superficial.) Either way, color is routinely excluded from the higher concerns of the Mind. It is other to the values of Western culture. Or perhaps culture is other to the higher values of color. Or color is the corruption of culture.

2.

The layout of the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery is maze-like, which — contrary to expectations — I ended up thinking was the perfect place for a survey of Wurmfeld's work. I always had a choice about what room I could walk into at any point, so I just wandered about, and periodically doubling back to try to establish a chronology in my head. At some point, I realized that it didn't matter.

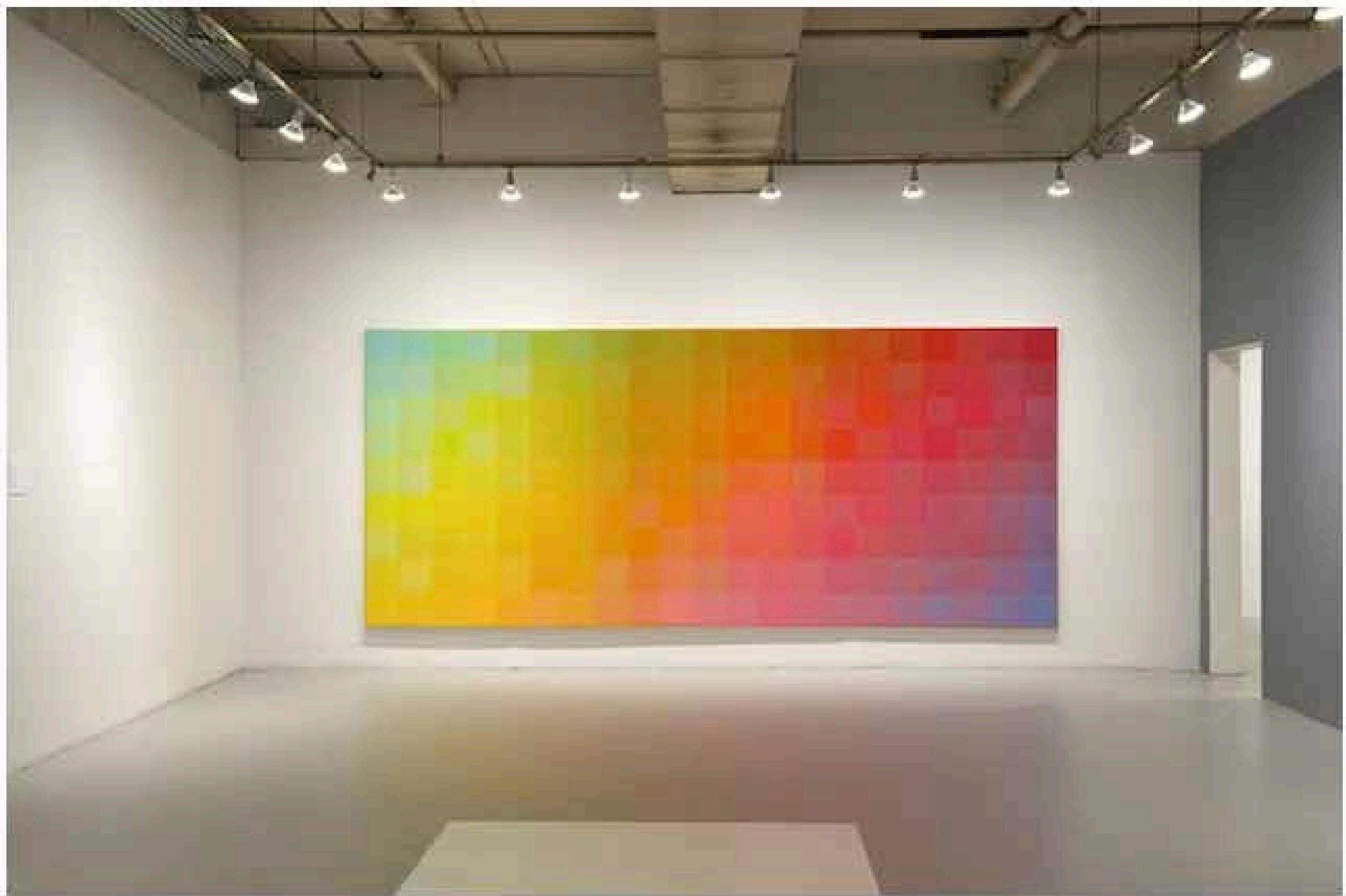


Installation view, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 - 2013" at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery

The reason it didn't matter is because the art took over, which is the way it should be. I stopped caring about exactly when Wurmfeld made a particular group of paintings or sculptures, or when he began using colored sheets of Plexiglas to make an installation that was as disorienting as anything made by Richard Serra. Wurmfeld's installations, however, in contrast to Serra's, are on a human scale in a way that underscores their transience.

The exhibition catalogue, *Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013* (2013), which I picked up on one of my return visits to the front desk, features an illuminating essay by William C. Agee, the exhibition's curator, along with insightful contributions by Hunter students in both art history and art: Rotem Linial, Bridget McCarthy, Theresa Anderson Morrison, Joan Reutershan and Nicoline Strøm-Jensen. Robert L. Herbert, who has written and curated exhibitions on Georges Seurat and 19th-century French art, also contributed an essay.

3.



Installation view, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013" at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery

In his essay, Agee pays significant attention to Wurmfeld's *Cyclorama* projects, a small model of which is included in this exhibition. In its ambitious synthesis of architecture and painting, the various *Cyclorama* installations are continuous paintings, an environment in which the viewer is surrounded by color. They offer a strong and convincing challenge to the current state of thinking about painting and the visual. This is how Agee, writing about the *Cyclorama* projects, puts it:

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 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.

I was able to see the “E-Cyclorama” (2008) when it was installed at the Neuberger Museum of Art (May 31–July 21, 2009). The “E-Cyclorama” is a 37-foot-long oval painting that you enter through a hatchway in the floor, a room in which you are immersed inside a sweeping panorama of color. This is what I wrote in the review published in *The Brooklyn Rail* (September 2009), which I think bears repeating:

Its structure is the repetition of a grid consisting of thirty-one squares to a side superimposed over a grid of thirty squares to a side, with these grids abutting each other all the way around the interior. This enables Wurmfeld to achieve a constant gradation along the vertical axis, as well as a continuous flipping of the figure-ground relationship. Meanwhile, starting with the center or horizon line, the artist shifts the upper half towards the darker end of the color (shade) and the lower half towards the lighter values (tint). The color runs across the spectrum, from deep violet to luminous yellow, while, within each gridded square, it is inflected away from a pure hue to a grayscale along the centered dividing line. While all of this might sound dry and methodical—think Josef Albers color studies times 100—the results are deeply engaging.

4.

It is impossible to enumerate all the different things that Wurmfeld does with color, and all the effects he achieves, from an optical buzz to a kind of luminous fog that seems to float in front of the surface — something that J. M. W. Turner and Agnes Martin get in some of their work. At one point, I was joined two other visitors to the exhibition — the painters, Sherman Sam and Melissa Meyer — and we tried to figure out exactly what Wurmfeld was doing in a painting from the mid-1970s.

“II-4 (4H/2V)” (1974) is a square comprised of nine squares. Each of the nine squares consists of two, three or four colors, with the four-color square in the middle of the grid. The longer we looked, the more dazzled we became. We stopped trying to figure out how he did it and let ourselves be mesmerized by the color juxtapositions, the buzz and the shifts. There is something both wildly intoxicating and deeply satisfying about these paintings, even as they set you on edge, making you conscious of how little you might ponder what it means to see.

By the early 1980s, Wurmfeld was working with a rectangular grid of 135 squares, nine high by fifteen across, each consisting of two or more colors arranged in a grid of different sized squares. In “11-35 (Y-V)” (1982), we keep focusing and refocusing, our eyes unable to come to rest in any single area of the painting. Some grids shift into stepped diagonals while others emanate a visual buzz, the colors losing their edges yet remaining separate, as if floating a fraction of an inch in front of the picture plane.

5.

In the late 1960s, Wurmfeld made what Agee describes as “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.” The viewer becomes conscious of moving around the column, registering the color changes. The columns, which are harbingers of the *Cyclorama* projects, reveal an artist at once meticulous and restless, always searching for another way to structure color. Might not these works be paired with Anne Truitt’s columns? In their use of craft and color, don’t they offer an alternative to Minimalism?



Installation view, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 - 2013" at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery

Working with the columns led him to casting acrylic sheets into three-dimensional structures — three transparent sheets of cast acrylic, each a different primary color, extending from a central axis. Arranged in a room, so that the viewer has to negotiate his or her passage through them, the colors overlap to become other colors, throwing into doubt whether the planes we see are solid wonder if the plane or the prismatic effects of light. In this installation, which Wurmfeld called a “walk-through,” as well as with the wood columns, I sensed that he had distilled a perceptual issue to its most economical resolution, but without the desire to elaborate on it or make different variations; he wasn’t interested in production.

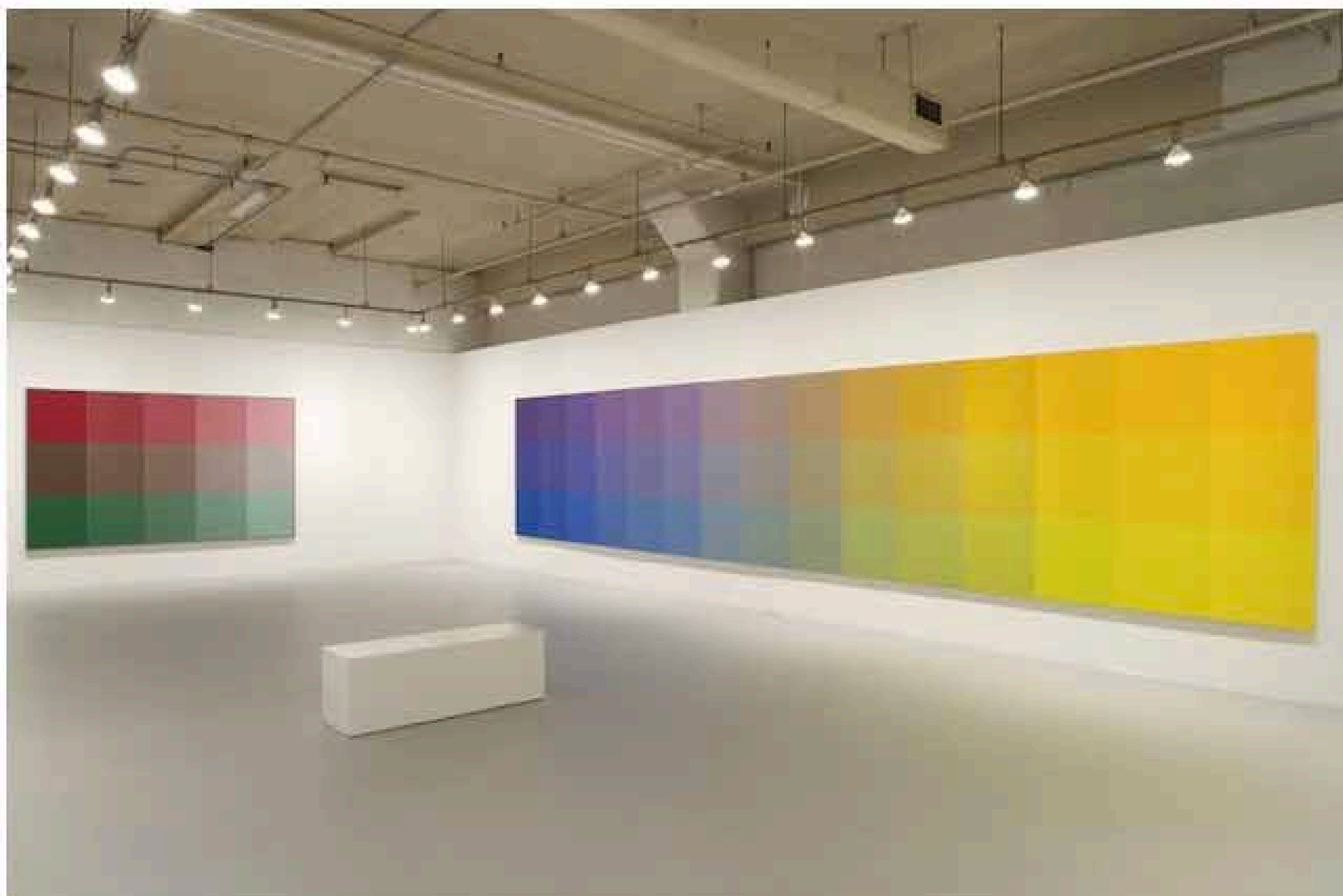
6.

In 1985, while working on a large painting, Wurmfeld made a mistake during the preparation, drawing over a grid and adding one more square than he needed.

According to Agee:

By overdrawing the correct number in a grid, though, he achieved a new pattern with a continual change in the size and format of the grid.

By placing two different hues inside the changing squares, the artist is able to achieve a field of color changing continuously in whatever direction you are moving: right to left, left to right; near to far and far to near.



Installation view, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013" at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery

It is this gradually shifting grid that Wurmfeld incorporated into each of his *Cyclorama* paintings. As we interact with it, its continuously changing field of color becomes an improvised score of visual music whose tempo and change we, in effect, can control. There is something so democratic and generous in that gesture — and isn't the dream of painting to be open and inclusive? (I am not talking about subject matter.) It may have its roots in science and color theory, but Wurmfeld's work is anything but analytical or dry. Its scrupulous adherence to optical principles is matched by its longing, devotion and passion.

Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966 – 2013 is on view at the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery (450 West 41st Street, Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan) through April 20.