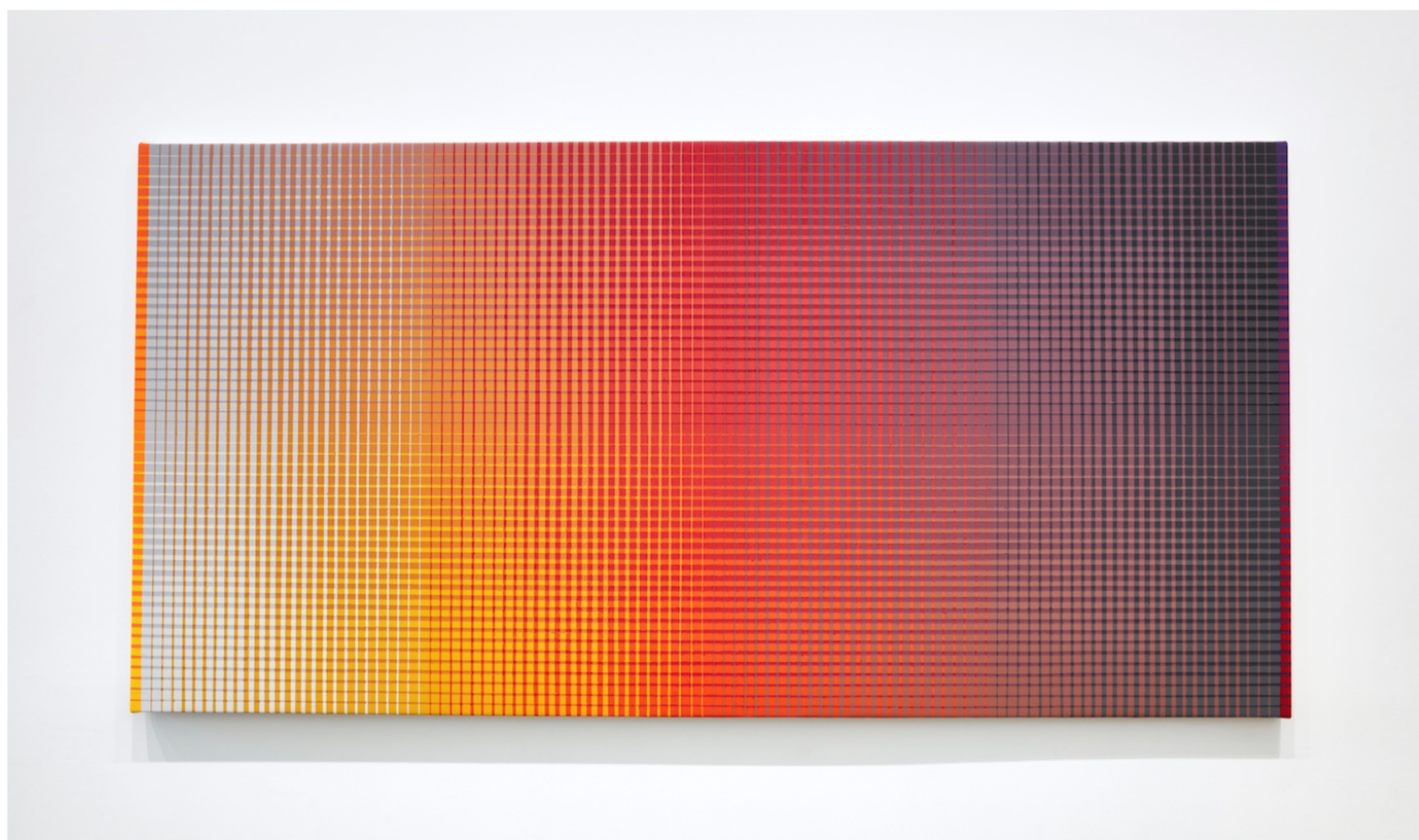


Paintings About Change, Not Perfection

Sanford Wurmfeld's magic is partially the result of a mistake he made in 1985.



John Yau April 7, 2019



Sanford Wurmfeld, "II-18 + B/2 (Lt-RO-Dk)" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 42 x 85 inches (all images courtesy Minus Space)

George Seurat was influenced by the color theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul, a French chemist who restored tapestries, and of Charles Blanc, who cites Chevreul in his book, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867). Chevreul's great contribution was to produce a color wheel of primary and intermediary hues.

Josef Albers, who assiduously listed the manufacturer of the color and varnish he used on the back of each of his canvases, was a longtime teacher both in Germany and the US. His book *The Interaction of Color* (1963) continues to be used by art students throughout the world, and his series, *Homage to the Square*, which he started in 1950 and worked on until 1975, is an indisputable part of art history. Throughout this series, Albers stuck to one pictorial formula, the square, in which each shape (color) within was also a square.

I mention these two figures because Sanford Wurmfeld, a painter, a longtime teacher at Hunter College (now retired), and an amateur historian of color theory, belongs in this company. What joins these artists together is their refusal to develop a treatise, a final say on how we see color. For them, understanding how the individual sees color is a kind of magic.



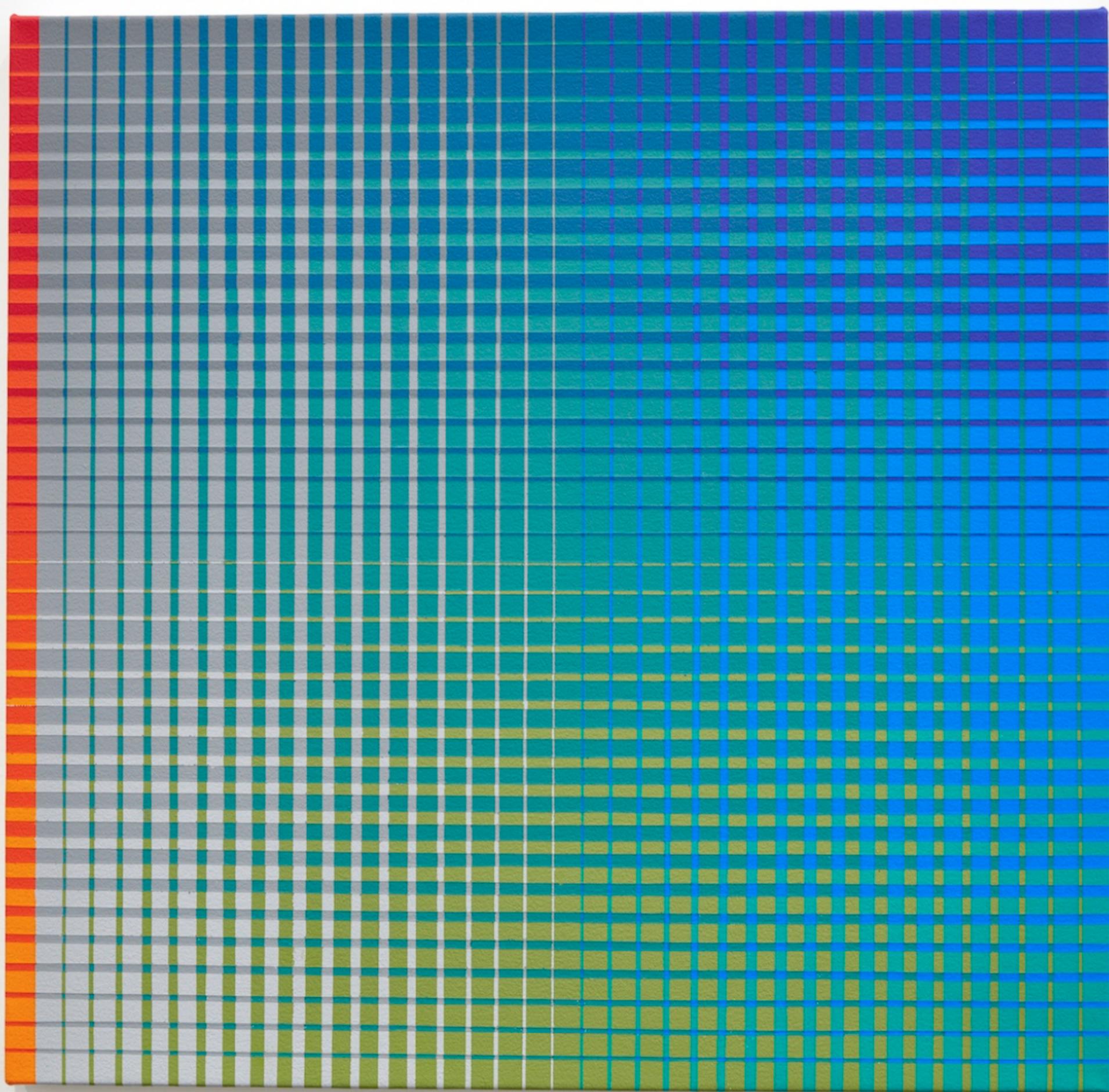
Sanford Wurmfeld: Variations at Minus Space, Brooklyn, New York: installation view

For Wurmfeld, part of the magic was the result of a mistake he made in 1985, when, during the preparation of a large painting, he overdrew a grid by adding one more square than necessary. According to the art historian William Agee, who has written brilliantly about Wurmfeld:

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.

Technically, this means that Wurmfeld superimposed a grid that was thirty-one squares across over a grid that was thirty squares across, so that the cells abutting each other all the way around the interior. With this deviation, the artist achieves a constant, gradated shift, which he further enhances through chromatic and tonal variations, as well as a continuous flipping of the figure-ground relationship. By bringing two colors together along the gradating shift, the colors interact with slight but incremental differences all across the painting's surface. By changing the hues of the cells sequentially, the artist enhances the feeling of movement. A state of change is incorporated into the viewer's experience of a Wurmfeld painting, which is significantly different from that of Op Art, which often exploits optical illusions for dramatic effect.

In his current exhibition, *Sanford Wurmfeld: Variations*, at Minus Space (March 2–April 20, 2019), the artist uses the color theories of Arthur Pope, who taught at Harvard for 43 years (1906–1949), as a starting point, exploring its basic tenets through his own deliberately misaligned grids.



Sanford Wurmfeld, "II-12 (LN-BG/N-B) + B/1(O)" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 31 inches

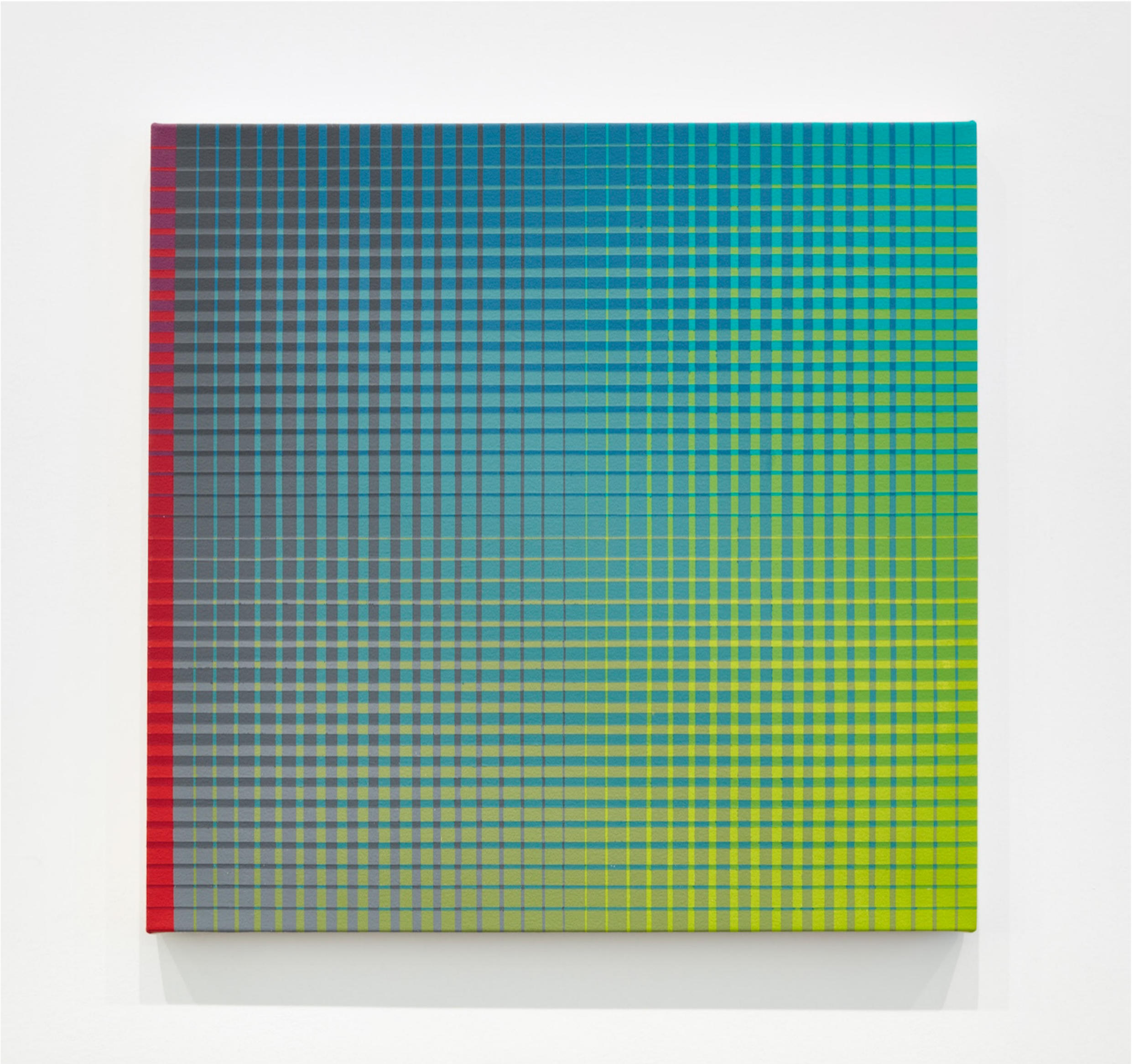
The term color theory seems wrong, however, as it is really color relationships that lie at the heart of all these studies and bodies of work, from Seurat to Albers to Wurmfeld. In trying to understand the interaction of color — to cite Albers’s title — Pope developed a way of evaluating how color operates in a work of art by focusing on hue, intensity, and value, using a “color cylinder” (rather than a color wheel) as the organizing structure.

It is easy to see why Pope’s color theory might have an extra appeal to Wurmfeld, whose immersive painting, *E-Cyclorama* (2008), is “made on canvas stretched onto a 37-foot-long oval cylinder,” as I [wrote](#) in a review.

Hue is the shade (blue, green, red, etc.), value is determined by how close the hue comes to black or white, and intensity, or a saturation, is determined by the purity of the pigment — how free the color is from dilution by black or white.

Wurmfeld restated Pope’s theory by defining a palette of 29 predetermined colors, which he used throughout the series. Using a color wheel of his own devising, Wurmfeld developed a palette that consisted of 12 fully saturated colors; 10 colors at half saturation, with yellow and violet being the exceptions; and 7 shades of gray. He also changed his approach by emphasizing the asymmetry of the paintings, which I don’t remember him doing before.

Thin lines bisect each of the four nearly square paintings, vertically and horizontally, dividing the surface into interrelated quadrants. If the lines — which increase incrementally in width as they advance up or down, right or left — are one color on one side of the bisection, they are a different color on the other side. One could say that there is a wave effect, rigorously maintained vertically and horizontally across the painting’s surface, emanating from the central axes. Finally, in these four paintings, there is a single, vertical, prismatically shifting band along the left side (red and orange, say) that is distinct from, and often the complementary counterpart of, the colors on the opposite side of the painting.



Sanford Wurmfeld, "II-12 (DN-BG/N-G) + B/1(R)" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 31 inches

All sorts of different effects happen in these paintings. At times, the surface shifts from flat to a ridge-like line. We begin to notice the bleed of one color over another, which happens at various interstices. The central, bisecting vertical line is staggered at different points along the grid. These slight imperfections pull us even closer to the painting's surface, until we become lost in the shifting color relationships. We also begin to observe ourselves scrutinizing the painting.

I think the reason that we are not disturbed by the bleeds of color and the imperfect lines is because Wurmfeld's paintings are about change rather than perfection. The constant adjustment of width and the lack of a focal point result in a surface of steady alterations, which is very different from the static nature of Albers's "Squares" or the stillness inhabiting Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" (1884). Wurmfeld's paintings do not let the eye rest; they are constantly pulling our attention across the surface in different directions. Sometimes the surface is luminous; other times it is solid. Color becomes light, surface, and even a physical thing in Wurmfeld's paintings. The surface can be light-filled, tactile, and vibrating with optical buzz, often in the same work.

By carefully weaving together colored bands of different widths, Wurmfeld has attained something original. This is no small thing. With its focus on the entertainment and distraction business, and its offhand dismissal of the visual, the art world fails to recognize that Wurmfeld's devotion to exploring every facet of color is no academic interest, but an expression of passion and curiosity. His body of work contributes to the history of optical art that starts with Seurat, continues with Albers, and passes through Bridget Riley and Richard Anuszkiewicz. It does not just sit comfortably on its precedents, but establishes a dialog with each previous generation and sets the terms of agreement and disagreement. That, I would say, is one definition of being original.

[Sanford Wurmfeld: Variations](#) *continues at Minus Space (16 Main Street, Suite A, DUMBO, Brooklyn) through April 20.*