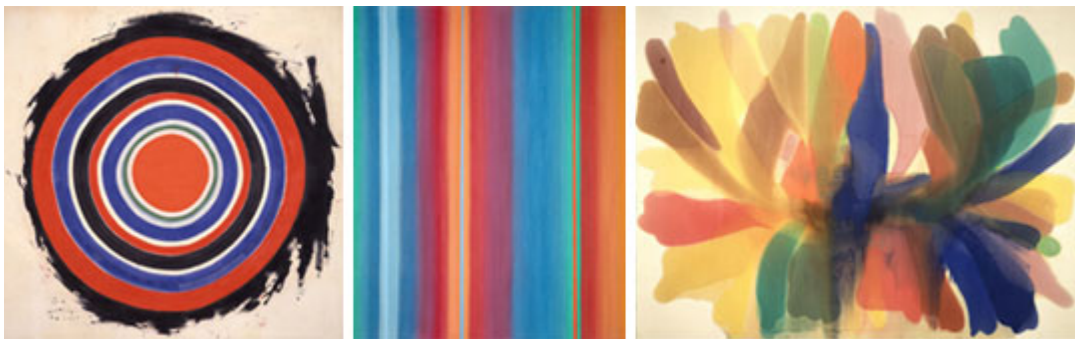


## Still Colorful After All These Years

Posted by *Emily Lyons* Monday October 12, 2009 - 05:33 PM

A lot of people in town get a little, well, *blue* for the Washington Color School, the movement marked by large, untreated canvases saturated with paint in simple, lyrical, or geometric arrangements. For the rest of the art world, Kenneth Noland's orderly circles, Leon Berkowitz' pulsating stripes and color fields, and Morris Louis' articulate splashes have become lasting symbols of Washington art.



*Beginning* by Kenneth Noland, *Cathedral 4* by Leon Berkowitz (courtesy of Hemphill Fine Arts),  
*Point of Tranquility* by Morris Louis

For a time in the 1960s, the art world was abuzz about DC. Gallerist George Hemphill of Hemphill Fine Arts says of the movement, "In some ways [it] represents the blooming tulip, open avenue, blue sky springtime of Washington."

Painter Robin Rose says the movement is what drew him to the city as opposed to, say, New York or Los Angeles. He likens DC's role in modern art to Nashville's role in music: "It's a precise strain ... it became a regional phenomenon. Washington Color School was the art of Camelot," he says.



*Earth Sermon – Beauty, Love and Peace* by Alma Woodsey Thomas and *Elisa* by Jacob Kainen

But it isn't over. A lot of the painters associated with the Color School taught in the area for decades. And a new era of color practitioners is picking up where the movement left off, adding depth, naturalism, and new technology to the old schematics.

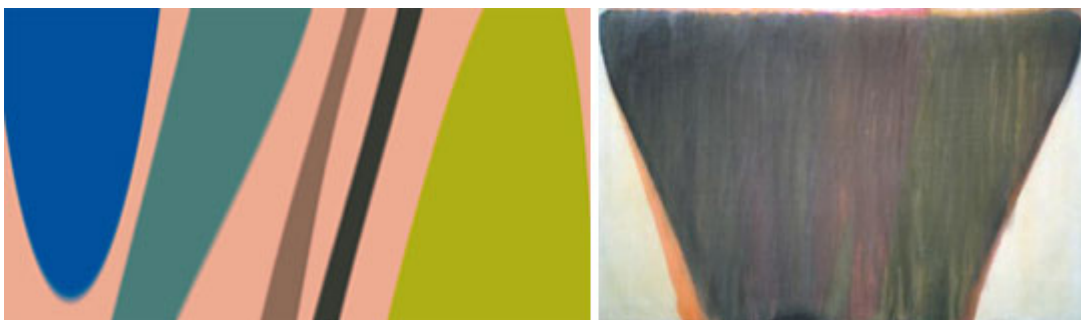
Jason Gubbiotti, a young Corcoran-educated painter who's from DC but now lives in Switzerland, was an assistant for Jacob Kainen, who also taught many Color School artists. Gubbiotti did a series with Magna paint, which was a staple of the movement but is no longer manufactured. His work is often associated with the color painters, but he's quick to distance it – "I got interested in Color School guys from a side angle," he says. "If there's anything I take out of the [movement], it's economy."

Gubbiotti's discipline, the distilled urges and the reverence for line and surface, is hard to distance from what came before. Yet his abstract paintings, which he describes as "candy-coated war plans," could only belong to the present.



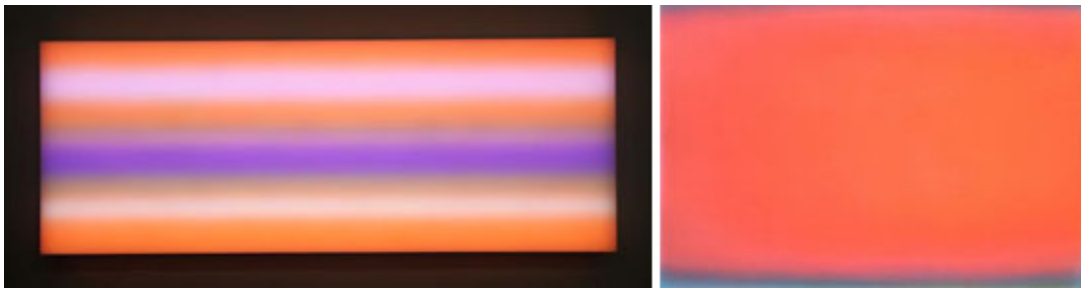
*Traditional Sunset Circumcision* and *Enjoy Insomnia* by Jason Gubbiotti, courtesy of Hemphill Fine Arts

The current show at Conner Contemporary, "Conversations in Lyrical Abstraction," conveys the pervasive influence of the Color School on artists working in new media. In the expansive, cool-white gallery, seminal pieces from the old masters are placed near contemporary works that indirectly reference them.



*Mod Lang*, from a DVD sequence set to music by Jeremy Blake; *Plenitude* by Morris Louis, courtesy Conner Contemporary

"A lot of people who spend time in DC, like Jeremy Blake and Leo Villareal, are painting digitally what these men and women were doing with stained canvas," says Leigh Conner, gallery owner.



*Sky* by Leo Villareal, an LED sculpture, seems to reference the aural nature of Berkowitz' paintings, such as *Unities No. 60*, right.

"One of the things we're demonstrating is a style of painting where when you walk up to it you lose your field of vision," Conner says.

When asked why the movement is still held up as the apex of local art, she says, "Letting the pigment soak into the canvas – that was a revelation at the time. They feel just as fresh now as they did then." The show is up through Oct. 31.

Robin Rose, who fell in love with the Color School decades ago, doesn't like to wistfully look back; he'd rather push to advance the dialogue. "I use a lot of their theories and rigor," Rose says, "but I had to reintroduce texture and luminosity. I wanted to bring humility back to color concepts."



*Characteristic* (diptych), and *Nodes* by Robin Rose

"For a town inundated with history and law," Rose says, "it's interesting this stuff would happen here."