

Josh SPERLING

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November 2019

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Interview by Frédéric Caillard – October 2019

[Interview made on the occasion of Josh Sperling's solo exhibitions "Nevertheless" at Sorry We're Closed in Brussels and "So it goes" at Perrotin in Paris – Fall 2019]



How did your wall compositions originate?

The first shape I did was a simple bull's eye. I had the idea of the stacked pieces, and a bull's eye had no corners, it seemed to be the easiest shape to stack. Then I realized that it was also a way to stretch canvas without any seams or folds and to create a perfect craftsmanship. The materials dictate the shapes... After I created the bull's eye, I thought "what if I just extend it?". The squiggles – as we call them now – originated from extending the circle: they are lines with curved ends. Aesthetically, the curves are also in line with how I like to present myself...

What is your process when working on those wall compositions?

I first draw on a very large computer drawing tablet. I draw very gestural lines, throughout the piece. Then I try to figure out the shapes that can fill the negative space between those very squiggly lines. From there the drawings are exported and arranged on sheets of plywood and cut by a computer on a CNC machine. I then receive the base layer and the top layers and I assemble them. Everything is stretched by hand, and the canvas is painted with acrylic paint. The final step is the varnishing. The sheen is very important to show the layers properly. Too mat the layers disappear but too glossy you get this very harsh white line for the edges. So I figure out the right sheen to get a subtle line.

Why did you go black for the big wall work in your current show at *Perrotin* in Paris?

It was a response to my show in *Perrotin* a year and a half ago and to my current show at Sorry we're Closed. They were both "maximum" shows, with lots of colors, many things going on. I wanted to make a show that was extremely minimal, to highlight the full spectrum of what I can do... Also, I always design my wall works in black. Every time I start a new work, I see it in black. I have had this idea for a very long time...



Typically, artists who work with shaped canvases are freed from the rectangle frame to compose their works. In the case of your wall compositions, you fill up the whole wall, so you reach the limitation of the rectangle again. You have both the freedom of the open wall and the limitation of the rectangle. How do you deal with that?

The fact that it is a contradiction is a proof that it is a good idea. That's how art works: you think of an idea that challenges a prior conception, and if you succeed in that, it becomes interesting.



Why do your squiggles have the structure of an Aztec pyramid with stepped levels?

The concentric lines comes from the early work of Frank Stella. It was a way to create those concentric lines in a subtle and original way... Illusion is also very important to me: the underlying structure gives the illusion of something, it is mysterious... When the squiggles are skinnier they have one central layer, in the middle they have two and when they are very large they have three. That is a result of wanting to give the work an organic life-like feel, like the rings of a tree that grows with layers.

The stretched 3D canvas recall the practice of 1960s artists such as Agostino Bonalumi and Enrico Castellani in Italy or Charles Hinman in the US. Does your work come from there?

I had known about their work. They were definitely influences, but not as much as Stella's concentric lines. I just wanted to build a faceted structure. I love the way the light will affect it in different parts of the day, or when you are walking by it. It gives that reflection, I like the way it changes.

It is rare to be able to find references of so many different types in single works. Even though your wall composition are non-figurative, the urban lines of Keith Haring and the anthropological lines of A.R. Penck come to mind when looking at your squiggles...

...Keith Haring was definitely an influence. I grew up in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Because I grew up in the country I was not exposed to museums as much when I was little. My Dad is from New York and I did go visit museums when I was visiting my grandparents in New York, but I think the early 1990s took Memphis Design and Keith Haring and stole them in all the advertising, on MTV... It was just ever present and it burned into my subconscious.



The last reference I would like to discuss is Jackson Pollock. Your wall composition can be seen as a simplified version of his big all-overs?

I never thought of it like that. I have always liked Pollock's work and we share the same gestural movement and lines. I have a very mathematical brain so often I just like to simplify things down and down... What I have to do is stop myself from simplifying it until it is a circle. I have to say stop, because I would just keep on simplifying until it is nothing...



You have a new type of works that appeared in your show last month at Sorry We're Closed in Brussels, and that is developed in your current exhibition in Paris: the weaved works. Can you tell us about this weaving idea?

I always wanted the lines to overlap, but it took me a while to figure out how to get the lines to overlap. Now I can and it has opened up many new possibilities for my designs and compositions.

Other artists have woven canvas, like François Rouan or Tauba Auerbach. What is formally interesting in your approach is that you weave the whole work, including the stretcher, which is – as far as I know – unprecedented... Another specificity of your work is that your elements are not soft. With weaving, you expect the “threads” to be soft and to perfectly come in contact with each other, which is not the case of your work. I like that contradiction, the visual outcome is a little bit awkward, the weaving is not tight, it gives your work some attitude...

...Yes, it feels more like a snake moving over something as opposed to the tension of weaving. One goal of my work is to create an organic feeling. I want the object to feel like it could be a living. Also, the curves coming off the wall are very similar to the curves in my work in general: they are very gradual and smooth. If the weaving was tight it would give harsher angles, which is not a feeling I like.



Did you try different ways to intertwine your pieces?

No, it was my first attempt and I was satisfied with it.

In your show in Paris, *So it goes*, the weaved works take the shape of frieze-like patterns joined in huge circles in a beautiful room. How did you choose those round shapes?

It was a response to the architecture of that room, a white box with cathedral ceilings and skylights. It is like a church. I generally design the pieces after securing the show. A ring in general suggests infinity and that was a good match for the contemplative nature of the room.

Another series of yours are made of straight bubbly shapes that you geometrically

assemble like bricks. You build some types of totems, even some pyramids. Can you tell us about this series?

Those were the results of, again, taking that first shape – the bull’s eye – and have some of them morph into each other almost like two water droplets on the table, when they start to connect. And then I based the way they assemble on a triangle. That’s why they naturally make a pyramid form. When I first made that shape I did not know that it would be so interesting to me. It has become an elemental brick and now I can keep on using that same shape and realize all these different overall shapes from it.



You use less colors with this series. Works are monochrome...

...The reason is that I want to show off the composition or the geometrical idea behind it. Multiple colors can distract from that.



Another major aspect of your work are the “composites”, which I view as your “continuous” works. They feel like a Frank Stella shaped canvas delocalized in a candy shop or in a toy store...

...The work we just talked about has more to do with form and geometry, the squiggle walls are more gestural, they bring color in. The composites come from the desire to combine colors right next to each other, whereas the squiggles have a white space between colors. The colors react extremely differently when they are butted up next to each other... The composites are like a collages, they do not revolve around strict geometric ideas.

In the composites you use textured surfaces...

...That was a response to the linoleums used in Memphis design and also to Roy

Lichtenstein compositional book. Later in the 1980s he would also use that patterning in his abstract paintings. I wanted to figure out how to recreate that through technique, not to actually paint it. I roll a very thick acrylic paint onto the canvas, it creates a very heavily texture like stucco. Then I paint the second color over it and then I sand it smooth to reveal the color underneath.

Pop culture is widespread today, and pop culture references are very frequent in contemporary art. Those references typically talk to a nostalgia for teen or university years, sometimes for middle childhood. In the composites, you seem to be talking to little childhood, to kindergarten. You wouldn't be surprised to see Mr. Potato Head pop in between two of your paintings...

...My father was an art teacher in a very small rural school, he taught 5 years old all the way to 18 years old. He always provided me with art activities when I was little. I think that had a heavy influence, it was something I thoroughly enjoyed, it followed me through my whole life. I think there is nostalgia involved... Joy and happiness is also something I like to communicate through the art. Little kids are good at that!

One of the recurrent motif in your work is the spiral. What does this motif mean to you? Is it a licorice wheel?

It is more about infinity and time. You see the spiral throughout history, you see a lot in Mexican pottery or Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is a shape that has been around since the dawn of humanity, it represents time. It is extremely interesting to me, I would like to further that shape in art history. I make some of them through geometry and math, and others are made by my hand. I like both of these.



Do you spirals rather represent creation or collapsing?

It is hard to say...

Are you currently working in new directions?

I had five solo shows in the last year, it was an extremely busy year. My next solo is over a year from now, so this is the perfect time to experiment some more. I am going to continue the weaving pieces, I started in a very geometric way, so I will continue the weaving pieces in a more organic hand-drawn way. I am also always looking for new textures and painting techniques to add to the composites. I am going to try to add some actual fabrics to the composites, with hearing bones or these types of patterns...

For which reason are you interested in fabrics?

I have always been interested in design a lot, especially furniture. The composites are made of many shapes interacting with each other. Adding fabric is a way to distinguish one shape from the one next to it and to give them each their own character, to have something else than color distinguish them... I also want to keep myself interested in my own work. I am always extremely curious, always trying something new...

Illustration pictures, from top to Bottom:

View of the exhibition "**So It Goes**" at Perrotin, Paris, October 12 - December 21, 2019
Photo: Claire Dorn, © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

Hocus Pocus, 2018. Acrylic on canvas (84 elements), 4.5 × 5.5 m | 15 × 17.5 ft
Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli, © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

View of the exhibition "**So It Goes**" at Perrotin, Paris, October 12 - December 21, 2019
Photo: Claire Dorn, © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

View of the exhibition "**So It Goes**" at Perrotin, Paris, October 12 - December 21, 2019
Photo by Abstract Room

View of the exhibition "**Chasing Rainbows**", Perrotin Paris (France), 2018
Photo: Claire Dorn, © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

"Nevertheless" - Installation view - Sorry We're Closed, Brussels - September 5 - October 21, 2019
Courtesy Sorry We're Closed, Josh Sperling. Photographs by: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

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