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Pure Clear Word

Philip Van Keuren

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2010

Pure Clear Word

The kind of poetry I want to write is
The poetry of a grown man.
The young poets of New York come to me with
Their mangled figures of speech,
But they have little pity
For the pure clear word.

I know something about the pure clear word
Though I am not yet a grown man.

—James Wright, "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child"

The phrase "exquisitely calibrated," used in the title of the exhibition of paintings that accompanies this publication, comes from Robert Storr's beautiful essay on Mark Williams' works on paper. Storr is referring to Williams' uncanny ability to tinker with color and form in "ways that a fundamentalist first generation abstract artist would have found difficult to achieve and might even have thought suspect had it been possible to do so."[1] As Storr says, Williams' "intimate confrontations [in paint] do not symbolize cosmic dynamism or coming revolutions."[2] Storr acutely observes, "It is sufficient—and difficult enough—to make images that squarely locate us in the present and reawaken the senses dulled by quotidian hurry and inattention."[3] But why is it "sufficient and difficult enough"? As is often the case (in my writing at least), making comparisons between one thing and another often proves helpful in gaining a deeper understanding. In thinking about the work of Mark Williams, the esteemed American poet James Wright (1927–1980) kept coming to mind.

In the first chapter of Kevin Stein's intelligent and insightful scholarly study *James Wright, The Poetry of a Grown Man*, he mentions Berkeley professor Charles Altieri's assertion that the conflict between the "ideals of lucidity" and the "ideals of lyricism" is the "longest-running play in our cultural history."[4] Stein writes, "To claim a lyrical sense of transcendental knowledge not supported or provable by the laws of nature left the poet to be viewed as merely odd or eccentric, or as Altieri indicates, as standing 'against the march of history.' Today in [Altieri's] view, American poets still face these choices, or what he defines as the tension between the lucid poets, maintaining intellectual control

while trying to reason their way to self-knowledge, and the lyric poets, maintaining a rhetoric of sincerity or naturalness as they emote their way to intensely epiphanic moments of transcendence."[5] The problem with this "either-or" approach is that artists (or at least the very best artists), writers, and poets refuse to be classified, or work through the limitations they face during their lifetime, making work that is decidedly more spacious, inclusive, and dynamic and less static than much of the critical discourse surrounding it suggests.

Still, polarizations exist as in the past, and taking one side or the other serves a function for a large number of artists, critics, and writers to this day. To be fair, not every artist or critic has regarded the dichotomy (when it exists) as necessarily corrosive. The ebb and flow of the dominant mode of the day is to be expected when one takes the long view of history. Stein says, "With the emergence of the Middle Generation of American poets in the 1950s, the formula—a controlled use of irony, paradox, and tension between opposites—became a form in itself."[6] This is a way of thinking and making that to a very large extent still dominates much art making today. Still, it is useful to remember that this formula in turn gave way to a new wave of romanticism in the 60s from poets and artists (Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop, among others), welcoming emotion and intuition back into their work. Why all this matters in a discussion of the painting of Mark Williams is that Williams, like James Wright, found a path away from a way of thinking and making that is perhaps best described by W. H. Auden in his statement that the primary purpose of poetry is to "disenchant and disintoxicate."[7]

Toward the end of the first chapter, Stein describes Wright's path out of the lucidity lyricism conundrum. Wright rejects "duplicitous rhetoric [and the] 'manipulation of words with the purpose of drawing unqualified attention to themselves and to the dubious charms of the manipulator.' Wright prefers 'a definition of rhetoric that retains its ancient meaning: a way to arrange words to convey a vision and evoke a true response in the feelings of the reader.'"[8] He then suggests, "Wright's late poetry continually asserts the importance of things outside of the mind. A modern version of Thoreau's fully awake person, he remains 'forever on the alert' to the world that surrounds him and to the other beings that share it."[9] Stein writes of Wright's escape from the "rhetorical and stylistic prescriptions proposed by the disparate models of lyricism and lucidity, discovering in the process a personal and individual relationship to literary tradition, what [Wright] calls 'the poetry of a grown man.'"[10] This "definition" makes a lot of sense to me when I am sitting in Williams' Mercer Street studio in lower Manhattan. Warner Berthoff, Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English and American Literature Emeritus at Harvard University, argues that Wright's poetry is invaluable for its "patient continuation of a stubbornly developed integrity which is the more admirable for everything in contemporary life that conspires against it."[11] The same argument can be made for the painting of Mark Williams as he arranges not words, as in Stein's definition of Wright's rhetoric, but color and form "to convey a vision and evoke a true response in the feelings"[12] of the observer. And by doing so he, as Stein suggests Wright's late poetry does, "continually asserts the importance of things outside of the mind."[13]

As suggested by the large troves of "study photographs" of things and places Williams finds of interest, he is deeply engaged with the physical world and insists the paintings and drawings themselves be grounded in observation and the physical evidence that occurs in the act of observing or working in the studio rather than relying on any critical authority or current "ism." Stein's observation that Wright "imagines a world in which human and natural interaction seems not only possible but ultimately rewarding [with] feelings of elation at brief harmony with natural elements appear[ing] undisguised and unprotected by . . . irony"[14] can easily be attached to Williams. The scientist Freeman Dyson wrote, "I gazed at the stars as a young boy. . . . That's what science means to me. It's not theories about stars, it's the actual stars that count."[15] Of course such a way of looking, thinking, and working undoubtedly leaves Williams vulnerable to observations that the work is unaware of the current streams of thinking that now dominate. But for Williams it will always be the things one looks at and the ensuing personal response that count. Williams' paintings are characterized by sensitivity to the actual appearance of things on the panel and, more precisely, to color-form relationship combinations. He calibrates these combinations tirelessly, realizing there can only be solutions, never conclusions. The works make a visual poetry brought about by the balancing act that occurs between maker and object, and the more open Williams is to the outcome, the more the elements of his work (line, color, shape, speed, proportion) create a deeper and more profound visual language.

Indeed Williams' painting would seem to be what noted teacher and scholar Meyer Schapiro suggested was possible in his 1960 publication *On the Humanity of Abstract Painting.* He later expanded upon this subject in his 1978 companion publication *Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting.* Schapiro was uncomfortable with the prevalent thinking of the time that proclaimed abstraction more a product of theory than feeling. He analyzed several of Mondrian's seminal works, finding again and again a deep understanding and affection for the formal compositional framework of Degas, Monet, Seurat, and other notable nineteenth-century artists of a more romantic inclination.[16]

Williams would agree that he inherits the formal strategies and innate lyricism of a number of artists he admires, as did Mondrian. Schapiro's suggestion in 1978 that "[a]bstraction by its audacities also confirms and makes more evident to us the most daring and still unassimilated discoveries of older art"[17] is no less compelling an insight now when viewing Williams' paintings. Schapiro's observation that "criticism of abstract art . . . arises in part from a tendency to underestimate inner life and the resources of the imagination"[18] sounds a lot like Altieri's assertion that the conflict between the "ideals of lucidity" and the "ideals of lyricism" is the "longest-running play in our cultural history."

If the risk taking of the early abstractionists is no longer present in a work where utopian ideals no longer drive creative acts, the vulnerability of the artist working alone in the studio still remains. The ability and desire to make paintings without preconceived outcomes that come into being slowly, even lovingly, is an achievement and an enrichment of our lives. In Schapiro's *Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting,* he writes of Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie,* 1942–43, "His were not just the moves of an intellectual game or tour de force of painterly construction. Through the rhythm of differences and contrasts of a few colors and lines, with an appearance of both freedom and control in the opposition of the regular and the random, he effects a stirring expression of his delight in sensation and movement."[19] As Schapiro observes, the late Mondrian paintings have no "obvious scheme or rule," "only a perpetual permutation."[20] As in many of the late Mondrian works, Williams' "perpetual permutation" comes from edges and blocks of color that seem blurred with movement. Unsettled, these elements seem to continually reinvent the picture plane, lending the works a temporal sense missing in much of the early abstraction of the twentieth century.

Of particular interest is Schapiro's observation of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* that "at certain crossings of the grid, [Mondrian] extended the color of the square unit to a neighboring unit of one or the other band. Distinguished by this accent, one band seems to come forward in crossing its perpendicular. The grid appears then as a network of interlaced bands that follows no regular scheme; it is an arbitrary, occasional entwining like the elusive intersection of planes in Cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque in 1911 and 1912."[21] Schapiro suggests, "It appears that in his old age a warmer side of his nature, emotion suppressed in his search for an intellectual absolute, was released with a new freedom through his experience of a welcoming American milieu."[22] These "crossings of the grid" that Schapiro so acutely observes could be considered the birthplace of much of Williams' artistic thinking.

Schapiro suggests that the idea for intertwining grids in Mondrian's *New York City,* 1943, was perhaps suggested by the artist's use of tapes in planning and making a composition.[23] This working procedure is common to almost all of Williams' work; rolls of tape in every size, color, and material can be seen wherever one looks in his studio. Many works on paper, singularly and in the sketchbooks, consist wholly of various colored tapes crisscrossing the picture plane at right angles. In my last visit to Williams' studio, he had constructed a small work directly on the wall made only of fragments of tape he had used in the panel works. It stood as a playful reminder of his openness to hearing his processes speak back and to responding to the gifts that keen observation offers.

If there is a timeless, hieratic sense in the paintings of Mark Williams it is due in large part to his "faithfulness to purpose," as put forth in a didactic label in the Josef and Anni Albers exhibition *Designs for Living* at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York in 2004–2005. The author of the label wrote, "Their work reflects their shared aesthetic and faithfulness to purpose as well as to the components of all objects, a respect for process, and a balanced rhythmic space. They disdained designer labels, implications of status, and the allure of shock." The writer went on to say, "The visual poetry, practicality, and playfulness of the Albers' inventions [works] demonstrate how effective and moral design [decisions] can give spiritual life to material objects."

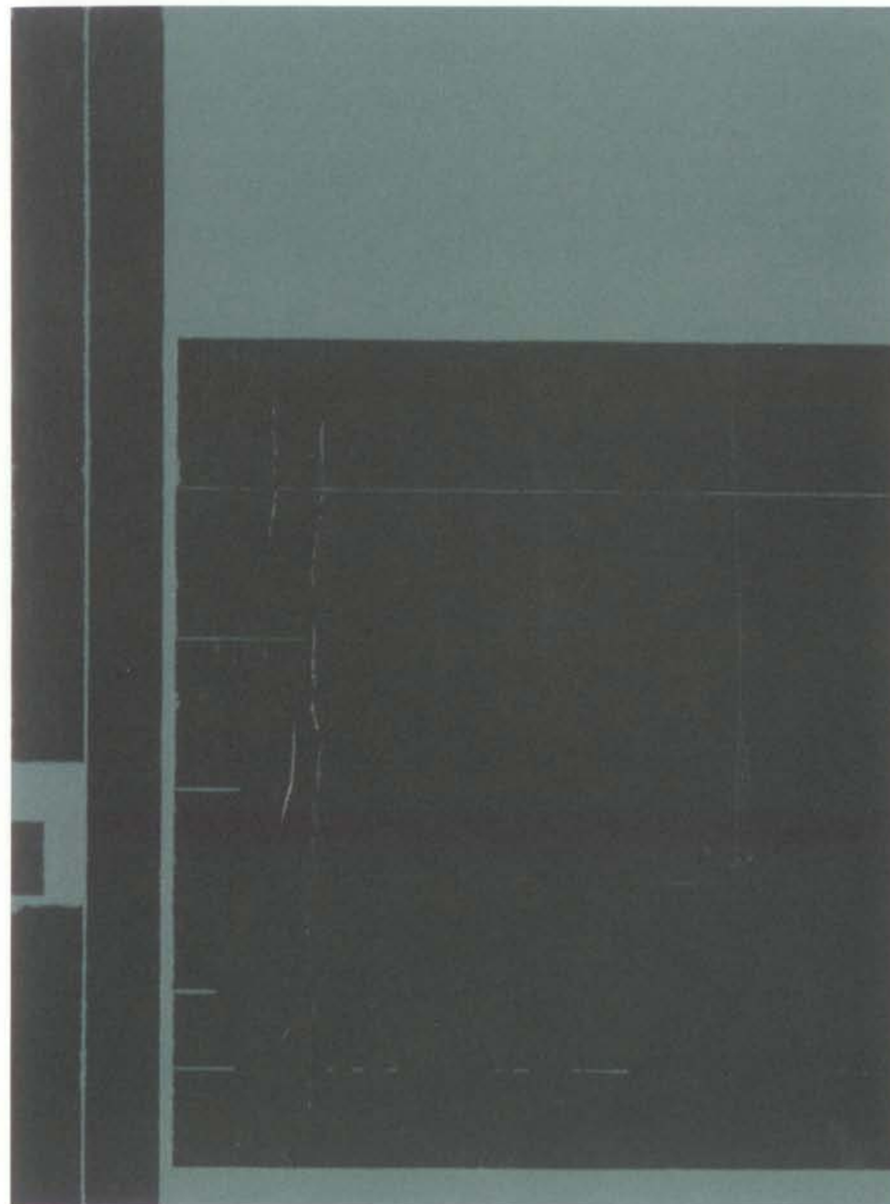
Earlier this summer Williams and I had the occasion to view two Albers exhibitions in New York, one at Peter Blum in SoHo and the other, *Josef Albers/Ken Price,* nearby at Brooke Alexander. The Albers-Price exhibition contained a number of Albers' "study photographs," made during his time in Mexico; they were reminiscent of Williams' own interest in photography as an information-gathering tool. I say "view" but for Mark it was a slow and careful study of each work, as if he were trying to memorize everything he saw. His affection for the work is obvious and authentic and worth a brief digression. Williams is a recipient of a 2009 Josef and Anni Albers Foundation residency, which is a source of pride for him. He speaks almost reverently of sitting in Albers' chair while working alone in the New Haven studio. Although I have never asked him, I am sure he experiences many of the same anxieties that Albers did. Donald Judd alludes to them in his opening essay in *Josef Albers,* a book of essays by Judd, Brenda Danilowitz, and Nicholas Fox Weber produced by the Chinati Foundation in 1991. Judd had strong convictions to be sure. The first page is classic Judd: "The dominant attitude toward all serious artists was reluctant and snide. Then and now if by chance a real criticism must be made, it must be snide."[24] Judd went on to observe, "All painting that was geometric in any way was considered old-fashioned, idealistic, rationalistic, rigid, and therefore

European."[25] The fact that Albers also considered himself a teacher, designer, and poet could not have enhanced his reputation in the art criticism maelstrom in the New York of his time. Ironically such multiple interests had the exact opposite effect for Judd, as attested by Roberta Smith's review of Judd's furniture in a 2004–2005 exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York.[26] Interestingly, this exhibition was scheduled during the same time period as the Albers' exhibition *Designs for Living.*

Judd observes, "Big paintings were the fashion"[27] and "There was and is a bias against geometry."[28] This was another reason why Albers, with his small geometric paintings, was for the most part ignored. Judd finds in Albers' work "a simple, suitable and natural wholeness to the arrangement of squares within squares, which is one of the best ideas in the world, one which provided enormous versatility and complexity. This arrangement is easily at one with the color."[29] Williams' small works, like the Albers' paintings to which Judd refers, are also "easily at one with the color" and provide "enormous versatility and complexity." Judd almost seems to anticipate artists with Williams' color sensibilities when he writes, "Color is a very large matter and it is still insufficiently developed, in thought and in art. In a couple of hundred years, depending on continuance, the color in the art of this century should be seen as a good beginning. There is much more to be done; in fact color is almost brand new in the world. Color is seldom simply flat on a surface, covering it, and even if it is it has a material nature."[30]

Williams' manner of handling edges (perhaps more aptly described in his work as the place where two color planes reconcile their adjacency) also finds a parallel in Albers' work as described by Judd, "The application of the paint in Albers' paintings is hardly mechanical. It is instead quiet, enjoyable and matter-of-fact. . . . it keeps the edges from being hard and turning into lines; it does not conceal the original surface."[31] My own hesitation to use the word *line* throughout this essay when referring to design elements in Williams' paintings (less a problem for me in his drawings) finds a parallel in Judd's reluctance to "call the edges between the areas [in Albers' painting] 'lines.' Even the word 'edges' is too definite."[32] He finds that "both words are wildly out of place and show no understanding of the intent and the philosophy of Albers' work, nor the *aspects that were developing in the painting of all of the best artists.*"[33] (my italics)

Judd again, "I've seen a lot of paintings by Albers, often singly, over half the world. They are always amazingly beautiful."[34] Near the end of a truly lovely essay he writes, "There is a certain very nice quality in some art and literature that is calm and friendly, even light and absolutely realistic about the nature of humanity and of life. It's not cold at all or very somber and certainly not nostalgic; it's very much about being alive."[35] Sounds a lot like the "pure clear word" James Wright sought and found. Sounds very much like the paintings of Mark Williams.



Notes

1. Robert Storr, *Mark Williams: Works on Paper* (privately printed, 2006), unpaginated.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kevin Stein, *James Wright, The Poetry of a Grown Man: Constancy and Tradition in the Work of James Wright* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), 3.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Ibid., 5.
7. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 27.
8. Stein, *James Wright*, 11.
9. Ibid., 12.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Warner Berthoff, *A Literature without Qualities: American Writing since 1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 17.
12. Stein, *James Wright*, 11–12.
13. Ibid., 12.
14. Ibid., 9.
15. Freeman Dyson, "The Scientist as Rebel," *New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 2007, 9.
16. Meyer Schapiro, "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting," in *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 34.
17. Meyer Schapiro, "Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," in *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1995) 17.
18. Ibid.
19. Schapiro, *Order and Randomness*, 70.
20. Ibid., 67.
21. Ibid., 70.
22. Ibid., 72.
23. Ibid., 73.
24. Chinati Foundation, *Josef Albers*, Cologne: Distel-Verlag, 1991), 7.
25. Ibid., 8.
26. Roberta Smith, "Designers for a Day: Sculptors Take a Turn," *New York Times*, September 10, 2004.
27. Chinati Foundation, *Josef Albers*, 8.
28. Ibid., 10.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 21–23.
31. Ibid. 14–15.
32. Ibid., 18.
33. Ibid., 21.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.

Paintings in the order of appearance in publication

Field No. 1, 2009
Oil enamel paint on wood panel
8 x 5.25 inches

Split Diptych – Carrier, 2010 (two panels)
Polyurethane enamel and acrylic latex paint on canvas
12 x 19 inches (overall)

Boundary, 2009
Oil and acrylic paint on canvas
12 x 9 inches

All works courtesy of the artist and Barry Whistler Gallery

Mark Williams has exhibited widely throughout the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Sweden, and Brazil. Recent venues include Museum Liner Appenzell, Switzerland; Kunstverein Eislingen, Germany; Musée d'art de Neuchâtel, Switzerland; Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois; and, upcoming, the Katonah Museum of Art, New York. Awards include The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Residency, a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and two National Endowment for the Arts grants. A fellow of the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Williams lives and works in New York City.