

KENNETH NOLAND Color, Format, and Abstract Art:

Interview by Diane Waldman (1977)

DIANE WALDMAN: Both you and Morris Louis were beginning to develop your own styles in the 1950s. You saw some of the values of Abstract Expressionism but also reacted against its self-conscious mannerisms.

KENNETH NOLAND: I think we realized that you didn't have to assert yourself as a personality in order to be personally expressive. We felt that we could deal solely with esthetic issues, with the meaning of abstraction, without sacrificing individuality--or quality.

But there was something else that the Abstract Expressionists taught us: they began to use something besides the conventional means of art; to want other kinds of paint, or kinds of canvas, or ways of making pictures that weren't the usual ways. Some of the next generation, the Pop artists, picked up this attitude and began to put actual things into art.

We were making abstract art, but we wanted to simplify the selection of materials, and to use them in a very economical way. To get to raw canvas, to use the canvas unstretched--to use it in more basic or fundamental ways, to use it as fabric rather than as a stretched surface.

To rise paint, thinner and more economically, to find new paints, from the industrial system, like plastics. This is something that artists have always done. They've always used a minimum of the means of technology in any period. Art has never used the maximum of technology, only the least. Paint and canvas, or paint and wood, or clay, or stone, or waste steel, or paper. We've all of us had an instinct to use a minimum means.

DW: Is that how you got to a plastic-based paint, like Magna, because it afforded a way to thin the paint?

KN: Thin it, use it in the same way as dye. Thinness reveals color. There are two things that go on in art. There's getting to the essential material and a design that's inherent in the use of the material, and also an essential level of expressiveness, a precise way of saying something rather than a complicated way. Hemmingway said about writing that a writer who has to go on and on and on and on about something

wasn't sure of what he was writing about. That if he really knew his subject, he could say it concisely. And that's something you have to work at, you have to search and work and practice.

DW: We've talked about things like tactility and the nap of the canvas and color opacity. When you worked on the first paintings, the first major statement--the circles of the 50s --were you concerned with these qualities at that time, or was that something that you grew more and more sensitive to as the paintings took you in that direction?

KN: I became more sensitive to it by practice. You *knew* these things, but as a student you didn't have a sense of how to get hold of these various qualities to make abstract paintings. That's true of all young artists, or young writers, or young anybody. You can see the results of how somebody else has achieved something and you think you can understand it because you can recognize what's been done. But when you begin to handle the stuff, you stumble and fumble. Art is a practice, it is an art. It takes a long time.

We talk about art with quotation marks, but we also use the word art to mean artfulness. If you say somebody's artful you mean that they're skilled or that they have finesse. Or we say "arty" to mean somebody who can manipulate things, that they're artful, or in a way almost sly. We're suspicious of skilled people. It can have a negative connotation, being artful or arty.

DW: Do you consider it negative?

KN: No, I don't, not in its true sense. I like artfulness, I like it in athletes, in musicians. Or just grace. Like most everyone, I like people who are graceful, people who are wellspoken. But often we are still suspicious of artful, skillful people.

DW: Because we confuse it with something that seems facile?

KN: Too facile.

DW: But, in effect, isn't that skillfulness or that artfulness just a learning process that one can build on? Isn't it true that the more you learned about the possibilities of manipulating paint and texture and color and canvas, the more the possibilities grew? You kept building. For example, in the new paintings you've changed--you've changed shape, you've changed color.

KN: I've found this necessary, to avoid repeating a learned skill in a manipulative way. I've had to watch that, but not so much now as I did when I was younger. I'm sure all artists know that they must change in order not to rely just on skill or finesse.

DW: Aren't you taking a certain risk in your new paintings in working with a form that appears to be something that isn't as precise as the forms that you've used before? The circle has a platonic implication, the chevron has symmetry, the stripes and plaids are uniform rectangular fields. Even though the offset chevrons suggest the new pictures, aren't the new paintings a departure in that you are not overtly referring to a "set" form?

KN: Yes. It occurred to me early that symmetry was not a closed issue--nor was asymmetry. I've known about that ever since I worked on symmetrical pictures or used symmetry as a "given." It's been on my mind--what would something be like if it were unbalanced? It's been a vexing question for a long time. But it took the experience of working with radical kinds of symmetry, not just a rectangle, but a diamond shape, as well as extreme extensions of shapes, before I finally came to the idea of everything being unbalanced, nothing vertical, nothing horizontal, nothing parallel. I came to the fact that unbalancing has its own order. In a peculiar way, it can still end up feeling symmetrical. I don't know but what the very nature of our response to art is experienced symmetrically.

DW: You've mentioned that the more recent of your new shaped canvases begin to have a sense of the circle again.

KN: Yes. There's a rotary movement, no longer the sense of a field. I've had to bear down on the activity of the shapes, therefore the color is more structural than before. As the shape assumed more emphasis in my recent work, and I began to use fewer colors, I began to increase the density of the colors, so that the alignment of color was replaced by the volume and intensity of color.

DW: Your most recent paintings are not huge; has your concept of scale changed?

KN: No, I think part of the individual's right to be creative and expressive, for our generation, was to declare large spaces for art. Abstract art in particular began to spread and occupy more space as entities, and that demand for space went along with the instinct to make the art as "bright" as possible, which still exists. Once the battle for

space was won, we felt we could begin to paint smaller, more compactly. Hans Hofmann was significant in this respect because he didn't paint huge pictures. He painted compact pictures, used more tactility and substance than spread or field. Subsequently Olitski extended this.

I think that sculpture recently has been involved with that same impulse. Sculpture doesn't necessarily have to be so big; it can get dense and carry expressive force in terms of compactness.

DW: Has your friendship with a number of prominent sculptors influenced you to make sculpture?

KN: The artists that I have been related to have been working friends and personal friends such as Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Tony Caro, David Smith. Because of a long relationship with David Smith and then because Tony Caro lived and worked in Bennington for several years, I began to try my hand at sculpture.

DW: How did that affect the recent shaped paintings? They seem to me to have more volume, more weight, more density, more texture, more cuts, than your first group of shaped works (1975).

KN: Actually they are more compact.

DW: But I still don't think of your paintings as so-called shaped canvases. They're not built out, they don't become quasi-reliefs, half-sculpture, half-painting, or use the rectangle of the wall as a field to contain the shapes of the canvas.

KN: Yes, I want my pictures to stay intact, included in their own boundaries. Paintings have their own boundaries, their own zones, their own limits. The wall could become an issue if it were allowed to shape the space of a painting.

DW: Unless I'm mistaken, I don't see you painting a sculpture. That is, taking qualities in your painting and adding them to sculpture.

KN: I've tried, but it doesn't work. Tony Caro and I tried to collaborate at several points and it hasn't been successful. As a matter of fact, recently Tony has made sculpture that I have painted. He has to make the sculpture before I can paint it. That means that the form is taking precedence--that the material takes precedence as a form, rather than color establishing the form. It's not going too well but I'm working on it.

There's something about color that is so abstract that it is difficult for it to function in conjunction with solid form. Because if color really worked three-dimensionally as color, it would have worked three-dimensionally as art. It would have worked better in billboards or machinery that we see outside. But it hasn't really worked successfully in an artistic or expressive sense. Color has properties of weight, density, transparency, and so forth. And when it also has to be compatible with things that have an actual density, a given form, it's very difficult. It's difficult enough to get color to work with the form that's necessary to make paintings, let alone something that is three-dimensional, with those other added factors.

DW: A lot of polychrome sculpture that I've seen has been unsuccessful because the color has worked against the material.

KN: Caro's painted sculpture works because it's painted one color. And the color *does* help enhance the abstract, expressive qualities of the form. Tim Scott is the only sculptor so far who has used color three-dimensionally in, I think, a successful way.

DW: But you see it as a real problem.

KN: It's such a problem I'm not even interested in it! If you get involved with color, the factors can become just as actual as those of weight and density. It's just as real. The slight difference of transparency in colors can be the difference of a thousand pounds of actual material.

DW: In terms of that change in density or change in texture, when you apply a color to canvas, when you buff it down with a buffing machine, when you build up another surface with gels or with varnishes or whatever, do you do that to alter the relationship of the colors?

KN: Well, it's a simple fact, when you move from one color space to another color space, that if there's a value contrast you get a strong optical illusion. Strong value contrast can be expressive and dramatic, like the difference between high or low volume or the low keys and the high keys on the piano. But normally a composer doesn't go just from one extreme to the other. There are ranges of things, two notes being hit side by side, for example. Either or both are possible.

Actually, if you're moving from one flat color to another flat color, if there's a difference of texture--if one is matte and the other is shiny--that contrast of tactility can keep them visually in the same dimension. It keeps them adjacent-side by side.

Another reason is that a matte color and a shiny, transparent color are emotionally different. If something is warm and fuzzy and dense we have a kind of emotional response to that. If something is clear and you can see through it, like yellow or green or red can be, we have a different emotional sensation from that. So there's an expressive difference you can get that gives you more expressive range.

DW: I've noticed that the mood of your paintings changes from painting to painting depending on the selection and textures of the colors. And that no two paintings--given the fact that you often use a similar motif--ever look alike. Nor can one ever react identically to those paintings.

KN: It's precisely color that makes it possible to use the same motifs.

DW: Can you be more specific about the mood of the paintings on either an emotional or referential level, with regard to the meaning of color?

KN: We tend to discount a lot of meaning that goes on in life that's non-verbal. Color can convey a total range of mood and expression, of one's experiences in life, without having to give it descriptive or literary qualities.

DW: Color can be mood, can convey human meaning. These color moods can be the essence of abstract art. One other question to do with the shaped canvases: insofar as shaping was one of the last decisions that you always made, cropping when you finished painting, from the time of the circles all the way up to now, could that have influenced your decision to move away from the square or rectangular formats that you used for so long?

KN: Well, it had to do with getting the color to do different things. It turns out that certain picture shapes don't allow you to use different kinds of quantity distributions of color for different expressions. The quantities and configurations of colors are as important as the colors themselves. When I first started painting circles, I went fairly quickly to a 6-foot-square module. I think de Kooning said in an interview or artists' discussion that he only wanted to make gestures as big as his arm could reach. It struck me that he was saying his physical size had to do with the expressive size of the

pictures he wanted to make. And as far as I know, when I got to the 6-foot-square size, it was right in terms of myself and wasn't too much of a field. Or it was a field, yet it was still physical. And that's why I used it for so long. Most all the chevrons and a majority of the circles are 6 feet square. Then, from having chosen that size, I could work in many different scales--I could make the different bands of the circles smaller or larger, or thinner or wider, which would change the internal scale of the works. Later, I varied the size of the shapes themselves: sometimes I would make 3-foot, 4-foot, 7-foot, 8-foot, 9-foot and up to 10-foot sizes. It made it possible to vary all different degrees of size along with differences of scale.

Those decisions began to influence all my later work. The horizontal paintings were the ones where I varied the formats the most--I made them extremely long or fat or square, varying the sizes and scales, to put everything through permutations. That was a very liberating thing. And that, I guess, really has to do with cropping, also.

DW: What about cutting up or subdividing whole fields, as you did with the plaids?

KN: That actually took place in the horizontal stripe pictures, too.

DW: When, in the horizontal stripe paintings, the structure of the painting was generated more by the color than by "layout," it seemed to me that's when you got the freedom to cut the shapes of the pictures however you wanted from the entire field, rather than just cropping the perimeters (as in the circles, for example). So this allowed you to change the basic shape of the painting altogether--just as in the recent work.

KN: The plaids, too, could be shaped out of a field depending on where I wanted a different emphasis to occur for expressive reasons. A color could be on an edge of a picture or inside the space of a picture: the question of top, bottom, left, right became totally flexible as did the question of parallel or vertical or horizontal. Diane, that was more than a good question, that was an insight

DW: So in those paintings, the cutting and shaping was a basic and final decision of how the painting was to look.

KN: These things always happen in strange ways. You can say after the fact what you're doing, but, believe me, you can't project it ahead. It has to be worked through before you can recognize what it was that you were looking for. It's a search; it's not like getting a brainstorm.

DW: You mean it's a real labor.

KN: It's work, yes, it comes out of the practice of painting, the practice of your art.

Diane Waldman, excerpt from "Color, Format and Abstract Art: An Interview with Kenneth Noland by Diane Waldman," *Art in America* 65, no. 3 (May-June 1977): 99-105.