

# Survival Skills: Abstraction and Formalism (for Clement Greenberg)

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From the nineteen-forties through the nineteen-sixties, Clement Greenberg and his equally eloquent protégé Michael Fried created a pared-down language for modern abstraction. That language is what we have for decades called Formalism. At a certain point, it was so ubiquitous we capitalized the word. It was brilliant in its simplicity, but a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it created a fundamental vocabulary to describe the relationship between Abstract Art and the pictorial. One need only focus on a few essential elements: color, surface, and literalness. On the other hand, it was rigid and ascetic. There wasn't a lot of room for an artist to maneuver. The other problem was that Greenberg and Fried became so influential they were allowed to dominate the philosophy of abstract painting with their neatly restrictive language. In high circles, it had to be adhered to at all costs if one was to be accepted into what amounted to an academy of abstraction. One painter friend referred to Greenberg as an "aesthetic Stalinist." The result, of course, was a backlash. From the nineteen-seventies to this day, Formalism has been challenged as an irrelevant, restrictive, and exhausted (even dead) language—the Latin of Post-World War II art, if you will. At least three generations of artists have felt uneasy when the term was spoken.

That Terry Haggerty—who began his career more than a half-century after Greenberg's early writings—has embraced this language is a testament to Formalism's ability to not only survive Greenberg's strictness, but to continue to develop in a postmodern environment, with its blending of art and Pop culture, Relational aesthetics, and New Conceptualism. It is also a testament to Haggerty and a few other painters of his generation who have adapted Formalism to their own, more expanded vision. If Greenberg's Formalism was like a restricted diet, Haggerty's is more like an all-inclusive buffet. Everything is on the table, or more appropriately, on the picture plane. For these artists, Formalism has become a focus for re-grounding Abstract painting. However, it is a new day with a new ambition for Formalist aesthetics.

Greenberg's authoritarian reductionism notwithstanding, he was an insightful polemicist for arguing modernist abstraction's literalist singularity. My guess is that if he were still alive, he would take an immediate liking to Haggerty, who is also a polemicist of sorts. Rather than looking for elemental and material truths, however, he presents either / or propositions. Greenberg would certainly appreciate the young artist's engagement with the fundamentals of Formalism and how very little means can be used to great effect. Where these two would likely go wrong would be the clash between Greenberg's purity and Haggerty's inclusiveness and willingness to embrace contradictions.

In my mind, I imagine them at the local bar, Greenberg waxing that in order to maintain its distinction from the other arts, Abstract painting must focus exclusively on its inherent physical characteristics: surface, texture,

color. Raising his glass, as well as his voice, he would intone, "A painting must look like a painting, even if it is abstract! It should not refer to anything else. It should not pretend. This is not theater!" Haggerty would nod his agreement, echoing his love of the fundamental characteristics of painting. He would likely add, "But every art should have its double-takes, its subtle contradictions, and its theatrical aspect. After all, look at Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Gerhard Richter . . ." By the time Haggerty was halfway through his list, Greenberg would be out the door, leaving Haggerty with the bar tab. In order to break rules, you have to understand them. For Greenberg's generation, the picture plane was sacrosanct. If abstraction were alchemy, it would be the base metal. Every painter has to decide what it will be and how to activate it. At times, Greenberg was obsessed with the idea that artists should assert the plane's natural flatness. In his philosophy, an Abstract picture should be static and taut. The picture plane and the image were not separate. Illusion was a sin. Abstraction was a pure phenomenon, unpolluted by anything outside its material nature. Frank Stella put it very succinctly, "What you see is what you see."<sup>1</sup>

Haggerty also embraces the surface plane of abstraction, but his concept of it is entirely elastic. He plays off a viewer's tendency to see the painted surface as ambiguous. He might rephrase Stella's words into a question, "What do you think you see?" It is as if Haggerty cannot allow the picture to be static and clear. It must be animated, subtly or theatrically. Haggerty gravitates to contradictions rather than material truths. The surface of his paintings and the images they support are always in question. He is also accepting of images that are not purely his invention, but can be found in the world. He absorbs representation into abstraction. He also absorbs, and in some cases may even pay homage to, artists who have come between him and Greenberg, reforming their aesthetics to fit his own. Because his art is synthetic in this way, we can choose to see what we will in Haggerty's images.

Haggerty's early works remind me of Ellsworth Kelly's early abstractions, in which abstraction and representation melt together. Kelly was a master of abstracting his surroundings into simple codes. When he was living in Paris in the late nineteen-forties, Kelly photographed fragments of things that he saw daily, and carefully honed them into Abstract paintings. As he described it, he was not inventing anything; he was simply seeing things in a highly focused and fragmented way. "That's what Abstraction is about," he said. "It's an affliction of seeing the world differently, just as shapes."<sup>2</sup> Kelly's *La Combe* (1950) is a geometric, abstract image that, in fact, depicts fragmented shadows on a staircase. Stripped from the context of a staircase, the shadows become geometric bars anchoring a white void.

In some of Haggerty's early paintings, hard-edged horizontal shapes cover a canvas. They are vaguely familiar and, at some point, a recognition takes place that they might be air vents, creating horizontal shadows. These abstracted forms, however, have a very different presence than Kelly's shadows, which have the static, minimalist clarity of classic Hard-Edge Abstraction. Kelly's forms divide the space of the surface. Although they are "found," Kelly has carefully composed the bars so that they form a perfect part-to-part-to-whole balance. Also, his forms and their edges are consonant with the paintings' surface. There is a perfect static balance

between positive form and negative space.

The bars in Haggerty's early works do not appear composed. They appear more Judd-like, simply filling a field with repetition. The painting itself appears to be representing a thing in the world rather than an artistic invention. The raised canvas could be a flat air-conditioning unit hung on the wall. Our perception of it flips between being a painting and a found object. Thus, the world of pure Abstraction is infected by a Marcel Duchampian reality.

Like Kelly, Haggerty is also a Hard-Edge painter, at least upon first viewing. From a distance, the edges appear well defined, which is how they began in the early stages of Haggerty's process. Both artists use masking tape to precisely define their shapes. However, Haggerty varnishes his pictures, in essence burying his forms under multiple layers of resin, which create two slightly disorienting effects. First, the image is not on the surface, but under it. Also, these layers create a subtle distancing effect that slightly blurs the edges of his forms, denying the razor-sharp edge of Kelly's works. The result is a gentle buzz at the edges. I take this to be not only part of the aesthetic of these early paintings, but also an elaboration on the content of the image he is presenting—a visual analogy to the buzz of an air-conditioning unit.

This "buzz" effect is subtle in the early works, the beginnings of an abstract animation that would become a signature characteristic of Haggerty's paintings. In another early work, satellite images of golf courses are rendered as small, biomorphic shapes hovering in the abstract field. They remind me of Larry Poons's "blip" paintings, but with a twist. When Poons placed abstract dots around a canvas, he saw them as "absolutely abstract, frozen, asymmetrically balanced compositions." Haggerty abstracts actual representations and they do not appear frozen, but in apparent movement. To coin an oxymoron, they are rhythmically static.

I'm not sure whether Haggerty is making a direct reference to Kelly or Poons, but it is clear that he has absorbed their precedents and is finding ways to create a visual dialogue between generations. After a century of development, Abstraction has become a series of found positions that can be reused by the likes of Haggerty. However, he also challenges the static and iconic nature of the Abstraction of his elders, and in so doing challenges our habitual ways of looking at the modern picture plane.

In *Up, Down* (p. 13), what may be an Abstract version of red Venetian blinds appears to be sliding out of alignment from the window / picture plane. The image has slid from its ground, creating a disjunction in the modernist gestalt. The reference to Venetian blinds also reminds us that a picture is a virtual window that can be open, closed, or flickering with the virtual movement of every gesture or shape.

Haggerty has become increasingly aggressive about illusion and distorting the rectilinear character of the stretched canvas. In many of his more recent paintings, lines curve and twist, creating a pronounced disjunction between image and picture plane. Here the "shaped canvas" that was so much a part of the aesthetics of the nineteen-sixties and seventies takes on new meanings. Stella and Kenneth Noland created parallel lines and bands of color that followed the contour of their canvases. This eliminated the seeming arbitrariness of part-to-part compositions, and at the same time emphasized the literal, physical character of the canvas support. Illusion is, in a sense, muscled out of the equation.

Haggerty asks, why not have both? Let the viewer sort it out. Rather than have the shape of the canvas dictate the image, he has the image reshape the canvas, using lines that become actively dimensional. A rectangular canvas supports a river of parallel lines that completely contradict the flatness and rectilinearity of their support, crossing its edges and creating the illusion of a loose planar material, like a flag blowing in the wind. The result is a flat plane that appears wobbly and out of shape. Do I see another punning engagement with his elders—this time Jasper Johns's obdurately flat Flag paintings of the nineteen-fifties?

In many cases, as the lines bend in unison, the canvas becomes architectonic, suggesting niches and minimalist pilasters. It's not surprising that a gallery's walls would become Haggerty's preferred picture plane. Embracing the architectural scale of Minimalism, his wall paintings pay homage to Sol LeWitt, who essentially invented the contemporary wall drawing, making it into a genre of its own. LeWitt, however, was almost Greenbergian in honoring the wall as a primary plane. "The wall," he once said, "should be as strong as the drawing. I don't want the drawing to contradict the architecture. I want them to make the architecture apparent."<sup>3</sup> Haggerty is not so deferential to the wall. His preference is for contradiction.

While LeWitt affirms the wall, using subtle pencil lines, Haggerty destabilizes it. Long waves of lines ripple across large expanses of wall that appear to bend to the momentum of his liquid geometry. Minimalism and Op Art are combined to make a new architecture. In one recent wall work, thick green lines transform a wall into a kind of corrugated tube, inviting the viewer into an interior white void that is both the center of Haggerty's illusion and a flat Greenbergian plane.

The shape of Haggerty's lines does a lot of the work to reform the architecture, but color also carries a good part of the load. As his scale has increased, color has become more dominant. As his early paintings create an ambiguity between paintings and objects in the world, so his colors seem vaguely familiar, though not specifically identifiable. Neither industrial nor metaphysical. When color loses a specific identity, it starts to become pure sensation. There is no texture here to distract from the color. Haggerty's sinuous lines carry the color like electricity, bringing various energies into a room.

While many Abstract painters use color because of its "weight," Haggerty employs it for other, more animated purposes—some very subtle, others overt. In several instances, even in a few of the large-scale wall drawings, his hues seem almost demure. They are apparent, but not distinct. In these cases, they have a gentle, atmospheric quality, like air moving through a room. The colored lines and the white space / wall between them slightly blur, suggesting the wall is moving. Other colors are pregnant with a charged, bouncy quality. The color and line appear to bow out into the room. His color is also about different speeds paired with various linear rhythms; some gently flow across a wall, while others are like fast waves. This Abstract Illusionism presents us with a new kind of pictorial architecture.

In one of his largest public wall paintings, an immense ribbon-like form of red and white stripes stretches over 126 feet. It floats above a wall of concession stands at the Dallas Cowboys Stadium. Its animated presence stands up well to the frenzy of fans jostling each other for beer and hot dogs. One could easily say that public abstraction is an oxymoron.

Abstraction is a personal, phenomenological event. When it becomes public, particularly on this scale, it is reduced to decoration. Surely Haggerty knows this, but he resists the decorative by making an ambiguous form that is both mural and moving picture. As you look from underneath it, you can see that it is a flat, painted field. But from across the concourse, it ripples across the wall like an abstract cartoon. Haggerty is bending Greenberg's Formalism almost to breaking point. The artist has titled his 2009 piece *Two Minds* (pp. 128–31), a perfect title for an artist who wants each thing to be something else. Haggerty knows that Formalism cannot be an absolute. In order to survive, it must have multiple minds.

1 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 158–59.

2 The artist in conversation with the author, June 24, 1988.

3 The artist in conversation with the author, September 10, 1994.