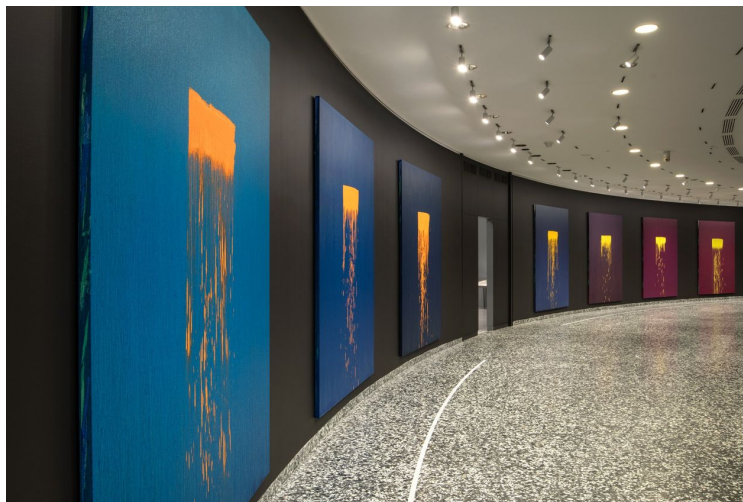


ART REVIEW

'Pat Steir: Color Wheel' Review: Ordering Artistic Chance

Her site-specific commission at the Hirshhorn follows her usual approach of setting parameters for works but leaving much of the act of creation out of her control.



An installation view of 'Pat Steir: Color Wheel'

PHOTO: PAT STEIR/LEVY GORVY/HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

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Pat Steir has long tried to remove herself from her paintings. For decades, she has adhered to strict rules to strip away ego and gesture from her work: She keeps her distance from her canvases, many of which are considerably larger than she is, by pouring or throwing or dripping the paint off a sopping brush, often from atop a cherry picker (formerly a ladder). She does not mix her colors, but lets the pigments blend together as they flow down—gravity, she says, is her main collaborator. She sets the parameters for each piece, such as its size and palette, but leaves the rest to chance. She typically works in the afternoon, in her New York studio, and then revels in the surprises that greet her in the morning. “It’s a joy to let the painting make itself,” she says in “Pat Steir: Artist,” a 2019 documentary by Veronica Gonzalez Peña. “It takes away all kinds of responsibility.”

Pat Steir: Color Wheel*Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden**Through Sept. 7*

This sounds like a remarkable lack of agency for an artist, now 81, whose work is suddenly very much in demand. Yet the paintings themselves are not only conceptually intriguing—inspired largely by John Cage’s Zen-informed embrace of uncertainty in art—but also mesmerizing. Reproductions fail to capture the depth of her work, the way each canvas is animated by layers upon layers of paint, poured thinly in scrim-like veils, dripping thickly like molasses, or spattered in a dance that evokes the natural world. (Ms. Steir duly calls these her “waterfall” paintings.) The canvases are often large enough to feel immersive, even transporting. Her claim that she is making landscapes, not landscape paintings, feels apt.

A uniquely sweeping Steir experience is now available at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, where “Color Wheel,” her largest ever site-specific commission, is now on view. Evelyn C. Hankins, a curator at the Hirshhorn, invited the artist to fill the perimeter walls of a large, circular, inner gallery. Ms. Steir obliged with 30 vivid, 7-by-9-foot paintings that explore gradations of contrasting and complementary hues. [continues below]



Pat Steir in 2019

PHOTO: GRACE ROSELLI/PANDORA'S BOXX PROJECT

Each canvas uses a wash of background color to set off a cartoonishly drippy daub of paint. The shades arouse different sensations. Against a chartreuse or yellow background, a splash of red looks violent. A swipe of lime green vibrates when paired with orange, while a stroke of canary yellow is elegantly subdued against deep plum. All together, this series feels festive, even playful. With these works, Ms. Steir seems to be poking gentle fun at her Abstract-Expressionist forebears, with whom she is occasionally, and mistakenly, grouped. In her paintings, the dripping does not represent a dramatic feeling, but is the subject itself. Her works are meant to represent little more than the potential of paint, yet her jellyfish-like shapes feel at once familiar and otherworldly.

When Ms. Steir started spilling paint in the 1980s, she was hardly a pioneer. Jackson Pollock was splattering raw canvases in the late 1940s. Helen Frankenthaler began soaking and staining her work in the early 1950s, and she was soon followed by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella. Larry Poons was pouring acrylic paints in heavy, textured layers by the late 1960s, and by the 1970s the medium was pronounced dead. Ms. Steir created her first waterfall paintings in the late 1980s, after studying Japanese calligraphy, Chinese brush paintings and Zen Buddhism. Her canvases were arresting and her ideas were sharp—and in

sharp contrast with those of her Europhilic predecessors, who were more interested in tapping into the subconscious—but her aleatory process seemed limiting. It was easy to assume her experiments would run their course in a few years. Remarkably, she has not only persisted, but has been creating some of her finest and most ambitious work.



Pat Steir's 'One' (2018-19)

PHOTO: PAT STEIR/LEVY GORVY/HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Ms. Steir approached her “Color Wheel” paintings in a spirit of research, to see what shades she could create and how they work together. What might appear like a flat plane of color reveals itself up close to be a dramatic array of layers—as few as five, as many as 11—that she pours from the top of each canvas over the course of days or weeks, depending on how long it takes for each layer to dry (the sides of her canvases offer a roadmap to her layering process). Despite Ms. Steir’s claims to randomness, the vibrant and often pulsating colors that result could come only with skill and care. Yet the repetitiveness of these works, with their lone smears of paint, ensures there are fewer mysteries than usual to draw the eye. The Hirshhorn’s circular gallery is also arranged like a donut around a courtyard, which unfortunately makes it impossible to see every painting at once.

Ms. Steir has always insisted her paintings do not have a message, that they are meditative journeys in which she strives to lose herself. Yet her work feels meaningful, nonetheless. It is

hard not to be moved by the fact that Ms. Steir is not only still painting, still innovating, and still investigating the properties of paint on a grand scale, but also, in her ninth decade, creating some of the boldest works of her life.

—Ms. Bobrow, a former culture editor for the Economist, is a journalist and arts critic based in New York.