

Julian Stanczak

Julian Stanczak (usually pronounced “stine-check” by the artist, although frequently Anglicized and pronounced “Stan-zack”) was born on his grandfather’s farm in Poland in 1928 and, like many Eastern Europeans of all nationalities and religions, was forced into a Siberian labor camp during World War II, where he lost the use of his right arm (he was right-handed). In 1942, Stanczak (age 13) left Siberia to join the Polish army-in-exile in Persia. Stanczak learned to paint left-handed in Africa, then moved to England and finally the United States, where he eventually settled in Cleveland.

Stanczak’s most influential formal training was in the Bauhaus tradition: he was a student of Josef Albers at Yale from 1954-1956. While at Yale, he also studied with Conrad Marca-Relli.

Stanczak was a founder and leader of the “OP Art” (short for “optical art”) movement, which flourished during the mid 1960s. “OP Art” and Stanczak were the subjects of articles in numerous newspapers and magazines, including Time and Life. In 1966, Stanczak was selected as one of the “Outstanding Artists, U.S.A.” by Art in America magazine.

“OP Art” proved to be a short-lived phenomenon, however. Stanczak never liked the phrase “optical art” anyway, believing it to be redundant. Some (including Albers) have preferred to call Stanczak’s work “perceptual art,” since he uses line and (particularly) color to force the viewer to become aware of a “perceptual response” to the painted canvas.

This induced “perceptual response” can take a variety of forms. For example, many of Stanczak’s paintings (including Diagonal and Warm Colors, pictured on the cover of this card) appear to have an “X” painted in the middle, particularly when viewed from a distance. Careful examination, however, reveals that Stanczak uses gradual changes in shades of color that get lighter (or, in some paintings, darker), as he approaches the center of the canvas. As our eyes search the square or rectangular canvas for an image to look at, our concentration automatically causes us to connect the corners of the canvas and “perceive” an “X” even though one is not actually there.

Many of Stanczak’s paintings also create the illusion of transparency (overlapping shapes). We sometimes “perceive” this transparency in response to Stanczak’s careful use of different shades of color. Stanczak can also create the illusion of transparency by using only two colors, which are not mixed on the canvas, but which our eyes “optically mix.” The Impressionists also used color in this way so that viewers would optically mix colors when viewing their paintings from a distance. It is particularly interesting to notice that Stanczak sometimes creates the same image using each of these different methods of creating illusions of transparency.

Another major theme of Stanczak’s work is his use of color and line to create visual “energy.” The visual energy created by some paintings is so strong that it almost

appears as if an electric current is running through the “form” created by the colored lines.

Ultimately, though, Stanczak’s art is much more than the skillful demonstration of how we as viewers “perceive” the painted canvas to be other than what it actually is. Stanczak’s manipulations of line and color are merely the tools he uses to create paintings of great beauty and elegance, paintings that have great expressive power and are, in Stanczak’s words, “visual analogues of human experience.”

Because he lives and works in Cleveland rather than New York, Stanczak is somewhat out of the public eye. It is clear, however, that Stanczak is an important 20th Century artist: his work is owned by (among many others) The Museum of Modern Art, The National Museum of American Art, The Albright-Knox Art Museum, The Museum of Fine Arts (Los Angeles), The National Gallery, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Contemporary Art Museum (Houston), The Corcoran Art Museum, The Indianapolis Museum of Art, The Hirshhorn Museum, The Phoenix Art Museum, and all of the major Ohio museums as well as museums in Canada, Mexico, Germany and Poland. In 1990, the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo published a book about Stanczak and his work titled Decades of Light.