

Julian Stanczak

What does the painting shown on this card prompt you to think about? The question isn't what do you think the painting depicts or what do you think it means, but what kinds of emotions, memories or thoughts does it prompt in you?

These questions are a little unfair for at least two reasons. First, the image as shown on the card is only 4½ inches by 4½ inches in size, whereas the painting itself is five feet tall by five feet wide. Second, it is impossible for the card to completely capture the subtlety and sophistication of the painting since the painting contains about 15 different color mixtures and yet the card was printed with a four-color printing process. (Some paintings by this artist are even more complex; for example, a recent painting consists of 500 different color mixtures.) But even with these limitations, the image does give you some sense of what the painting looks like, and hopefully it is enough to allow you to spend some time reflecting inwardly.

You might also find these questions a little puzzling because usually the viewer is trying to figure out what the artist intended in creating a piece of art. But rather than try to figure out what the artist was saying, here the question is reversed: what does this painting prompt within you?

The artist who created this work, Julian Stanczak (pronounced “Stine-check” by the artist, although frequently Anglicized and pronounced “Stan-zack”), was born in Poland in 1928. During World War II, he was interned as a child in a Siberian labor camp and was beaten to the point where he permanently lost the use of his right arm (he had been right-handed). Because of the horrific nature of his experiences, Stanczak does not want to “tell his story.” He also believes that art communicates more directly and universally if it is not limited by narrative content. After escaping from the Siberian labor camp, wandering through Pakistan, and finally joining and then deserting from the Polish Army in Teheran, Stanczak spent his teenage years in a hut in Uganda, Africa. It was in Africa that he taught himself how to paint—left-handed. The intensity of the equatorial African light and his exposure each day to African rhythms, tribal cloths and other patterns electrified the young Stanczak and permanently influenced the paintings he would make. He saw how he and an African boy could both look at the same sunset, or the same tribal carving, and know that the two of them had shared something—had communicated—even though they came from radically different cultures and neither had spoken a word.

From an art historical perspective, Stanczak was one of the leading artists involved in creating an art movement known as “Op Art” (short for “Optical Art”). In 1964, New York’s Martha Jackson Gallery opened its fall season with an exhibition titled “Julian Stanczak—Optical Paintings.” Both Stanczak and Josef Albers, who had been Stanczak’s professor at Yale University, objected to the title. Yet Jackson held firm, saying that it was “something for the critics to chew on.” The critics bit. They contracted the exhibition title and, by rhyming “Op Art” with “Pop Art,” gave a name to the new movement.

Stanczak objected to the “Optical Paintings” title because he believed that it implied optical illusion and visual trickery. What he does, instead, is capture the essence of what we see when we look at the world around us and then place this distilled visual experience on the canvas. By doing so, Stanczak invites the viewer to provide his or her own meaning and emotional response to the painting. As a result, a single painting might prompt one viewer to think of ducks flying in the late summer sky, another viewer to think of a particularly favorite vacation with family, and a third viewer to think of a beautiful piece of music. What is most important to Stanczak is that the painting allows Stanczak and each of these viewers to share some essence about themselves in a non-verbal way. As Stanczak said in a recent interview:

Your experiences of life are different than mine. ... If it is a really provocative piece for you, I want you—unmuddled, with your experiences—to match what you see to your lifetime experience, somewhere, somehow. Not mine. I am totally out of it. I did it because of me, my experiences. But hopefully I can create something that is more universal, something that you can look at with a different life than mine. Through its provocation, you have your connection and the experiences of your life entering into your perception of it, or appreciation of it. ... If you ask me how you should feel or understand this thing, I feel invaded. Or I feel, the other way around, I feel that I have no right to interfere by answering, because it might interfere with your makeup of your entity as a person: your logic, your percept, your sensitivity, your experiences, your connections: your need to even look at it. The fact that I can make you look at it, that is what I find pleasing. Because I know that I am not alone. I am sharing myself, but I am sharing myself not through means of physical facts. I am sharing myself by taking a fraction of your life and overlapping it with mine.

Stanczak developed a particular love for color, and his use of optical mixture and interaction of color has been said to be perhaps the most sophisticated in the history of art. Albers considered Stanczak to be one of his best students, and Stanczak’s use of color can be thought of as continuing the work begun by the Impressionists, the Neo-Impressionists and painters like Pierre Bonnard, but distilled and intensified by Stanczak’s African experience.

Stanczak’s work is included in the collections of numerous museums throughout the United States and in selected museums in Canada, Mexico, England, Germany and Poland. A major 50-year retrospective of his work is currently touring the United States. The *Los Angeles Times* said that the exhibition “stands out as one of the most scintillating shows of the year.” More than 20 museums have acquired paintings for their collections since the retrospective began.