

## Julian Stanczak

When you first look at the image on this card, there is probably a sense that, on some level, you “get it”—you see how the artist used lines on a flat surface to create the illusion that the surface is not flat. But there is far more to it than that.

The popularity and prevalence of these types of art images relate back to a landmark 1965 exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art titled “The Responsive Eye,” which had the highest attendance totals in MoMA’s history up to that point.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition explored something that came to be known as “Op Art” (short for “Optical Art”) and brought together the work of 107 artists from four continents. It was one of the first truly global art movements.

Julian Stanczak is a pioneer of this type of art. In fact, the term “Op Art” was first used by artist Donald Judd in a review of Stanczak’s first exhibition in New York, in 1964. However, for those who are familiar with Stanczak’s work, a black and white “Op” painting always comes as somewhat of a surprise because, as most of his work shows, he is a brilliant colorist. He explains that he avoided color at this time because it allowed him to better experiment with form and line. He discovered “The *clash* of the boundary of light and dark, without color. How fast or not fast it fatigues our eye receptors, how the fatigue creates an after-image...I could more easily measure all of these responses to the activities if I used black and white.”<sup>2</sup>

As alluded to in Stanczak’s quote, he cares deeply about the viewer’s “response” to the visual activity taking place on the canvas. This intense focus on the spectator’s experience, rather than just the artist’s, is reflective of the time period in which Op Art emerged—the 1960s. Frances Follin has pointed out the trend in the 1960s toward more audience participation and has connected this type of art to such things as Beatlemania and the civil rights marches.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, audience participation extended beyond entertainment and politics. Artists began to engage in things such as “Happenings”—performances in which viewers were invited to interact with the artists in some way. Op Art, too, represented an egalitarian attitude since you don’t need any special education in order to experience it. Many have connected this desire for a more egalitarian art to a reaction against the macho image of the “artist-genius” that was evident in the 1940s and 1950s in the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock.

Of course, not focusing on the “artist-genius” goes against what we are used to. Indeed, a desire to know what the artist is “saying” is exactly what we hope to find on museum labels. It is no surprise, then, that people have long looked to Stanczak’s biography to try to help them interpret his work, especially because his biography is so remarkable—arrested with his family as a child in Poland during World War II, taken to a Siberian labor camp, permanently losing the use of his right arm, escaping from the camp and making his way to the West by way of Tehran and Uganda, etc. When asked why these experiences aren’t evident in his work, Stanczak responded: “I went through the hell of the Second World War; who cares about my daily pain? Why should I expose someone to that?”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in his long and full life, his ordeal represents only a short period of time.

Although Stanczak’s paintings may seem somewhat impersonal—there is little evidence of the artist’s biography or “hand” in them—they are in fact deeply personal because they are

prompted by his experiences. He explains, “I often think of the aurora borealis seen in Siberia, or my car caressing the surface of the land driving from Cleveland to Cincinnati. The surface of the water. The starry night.”<sup>5</sup> Stanczak often refers to nature as a gift and says that he would consider himself ungrateful were he not to pay attention to it. Rather than just copying nature, however, Stanczak seeks to recreate the sensations he feels when experiencing nature. By abstracting in this way, the paintings become more universal so that the viewer can be prompted to think of his or her own life experiences. Stanczak does not consider his experiences to be more important than the viewer’s. Rather, he wants the viewer to participate fully as an equal.

The painting depicted on this card is a superb example of how the artist’s experience is translated into a perceptual experience for the viewer. Stanczak has expressed how paintings like this were prompted by his sensation of the hills in Ohio or water formations. However, they are left “open” and can be seen differently by the viewer. The viewer may not think of landscape at all. For example, some viewers have described these paintings as being very sensual. The fact that these works evoke different things to different people points to the advantages of working in an abstract way.

Describing these kinds of undulating visual activities, Stanczak explains, “Wonderful! What a beautiful deception, flat is not flat! Again a denial, a deviation from fact to illusion. So these curvilinear situations still bother me. I leave them alone, then come back to them. I leave them alone, come back to them.”<sup>6</sup> This quote also hints at the logic behind the title of this painting—*Repulsive Attraction*. The title describes the viewer’s experience of the work. The viewer is drawn into the painting, which is quite large. The more we look, the more it provokes us. Despite the power of the “clashes” on the borders between black and white that push the viewer away and fatigue our vision, the forms elicit an equally strong desire to get as close as possible. Our body says both “yes” and “no” to the painting.

So take another look at the card. Don’t try to decipher what the artist intended when he painted it. Rather, what does it make you think about? What experiences in your life does it prompt you to reflect on? Your experience with the work—whatever it is—is what the painting is about.

--Clint Buhler

*Julian Stanczak is a major figure in post-war abstraction. His paintings are included in numerous public and private collections, including in the permanent collections of more than 60 museums. An important survey of his “color-grid” paintings was held this fall at Danese Gallery in New York ([www.danese.com](http://www.danese.com)).*

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Houston, “New Sensations,” in *Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s*. (New York: Merrell Publishers, 2007), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Neil Rector, June 22, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Follin, “The Resurrection of the Body: Op Art as Modernist Event,” in *Op Art*, edited by Martina Weinhart and Max Hollein (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2007), 48.

<sup>4</sup> “Past Imperfect,” in *The Columbus Dispatch*, July 22, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Millen, “Op Art Erases Past of Ex-Prisoner in Siberia,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Neil Rector, June 22, 2000.