

Julian Stanczak^{aa}

Julian Stanczak (pronounced “Stine-check” by the artist, although usually Anglicized and pronounced “Stan-zack”) was born on his grandfather’s farm in eastern Poland in 1928. At the beginning of World War II, this aspiring young cellist was forced into a Siberian labor camp, where he lost the use of his right arm (he had been right-handed). In 1942, Stanczak left Siberia to join the Polish army-in-exile in Persia. Stanczak learned to paint left-handed while living in the jungles of Uganda, Africa. He 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. Along with roommate Richard Anuszkiewicz, Stanczak was a student of Josef Albers at Yale University, where he received his MFA in 1956. At Yale, he also studied with Conrad Marca-Relli.

Stanczak was a pioneer and leader of the “OP Art” (short for “Optical Art”) movement, which flourished during the mid 1960s. Even though Stanczak has never liked the phrase “OP Art,” believing it to be redundant (since most art is “optical” to at least some extent), the term itself was coined by art critics in response to Stanczak’s first one-person show at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York City. Martha Jackson titled the show “Julian Stanczak – Optical Paintings” over Stanczak’s and Albers’ objections. 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. More recently, a distinction has been made between those artists who primarily explore the perceptual qualities of line, form and pattern, and others, including Stanczak, who focus on the perceptual qualities of color. The phrase “color function painting” is sometimes used in connection with this second group of artists because their work explores how colors function together to change and influence each other. Avoiding labels, Stanczak has described his work as follows:

“My primary interest is color, the energy of the different wave lengths and their juxtapositions. But color cannot easily be presented in a vacuum. ... Shape is secondary to me. Nonetheless, [shape] is scrupulously investigated because I have to see to it that it is compatible with the behavior of the colors – my primary aspect.”

Many of Stanczak’s paintings are exceedingly complex, sometimes with more than 100 shades of color carefully painted to create canvases that glow and appear to emit light or shapes that seem to fold and unfold in exquisite, transparent, three-dimensional layers. The painting shown on the cover of this card, Concurrent Colours, in contrast, consists of only two colors – a dark red and a light turquoise – that undulate in “waves” from the top to the bottom of the canvas. (On the card, the painting is displayed against a black background to make the image appear as bright as the painting actually is when seen in person.) Yet even within such simplicity, Stanczak is able to create a powerful work.

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The power of the painting is caused primarily by the colors Stanczak selected. As Floyd Ratliff, one of the leading vision scientists of our time, described when writing about Stanczak's work, the photoreceptors in our eyes and brains have difficulty processing certain "complementary colors" at the same time, including the two colors chosen by Stanczak. Although the wave lengths of light for both colors are received by our eyes simultaneously, they compete with each other as they head up the optic nerve to our brain, where sight really takes place. As a result, these colors appear to have a "flicker" about them as, in a technical sense, our brain "sees" instantaneous alternations between red and turquoise rather than "seeing" both colors simultaneously.

This "flicker" is enhanced by the "value" (the lightness/darkness) of the colors chosen. "Warm" colors (such as red) usually appear visually to come toward us; "cool" colors (such as turquoise) appear to recede. But it is also true that light colors tend to come toward us while dark colors tend to recede, and if you make a black and white photocopy of this card, you will see that the turquoise color is much lighter than the red color. Thus, there is a contest between the colors and "values" chosen, which gives the painting a very strong "push/pull" effect as first one color, then the other, appears to assert priority.

These effects are all further enhanced by the undulating nature of the shapes in the painting. In the early to mid 1960s, Stanczak was teaching at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and driving to Cleveland almost every weekend to help take care of his family. The undulating hills along the drive prompted Stanczak to adopt this particular form.¹ The fact that the lines undulate rather than remain static enhances the "flicker" and "push/pull" effects because the surface of the painting appears to be constantly moving, which keeps the eye from focusing on any one portion of the work.

Regardless of the technical effects used, however, it is clear that the painting is simultaneously simple and complex, powerful and elegant. It manages to build and hold a tremendous amount of visual energy and yet keep that energy poised and perfectly balanced. This gives the painting the enigmatic ability to be somehow both extremely active and perfectly at rest.

Because he lives and works in Cleveland rather than New York, Stanczak is somewhat outside the public eye. It is clear, however, that Stanczak is an important 20th Century artist. His work is owned and has been shown 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. A second book about Stanczak's work, titled simply Julian Stanczak, will be published in early 1998 in celebration of a 50-year museum retrospective of Stanczak's work.

¹ Although other painters, most notably Bridget Riley, later made paintings with similar undulating shapes, Stanczak was the first to create and to exhibit such works.