Abstract Painting as Painting – A Theory and History

Larry Heaton ©2010

This paper offers a theory of abstract painting as painting and an evolutionary view of European/American painting’s 700 year history – including both its continuing traditions, figurative and now also abstract – in 66 pages. Only 53 pages if you skip over Part 2.

What is abstract painting? (As presented between 1910 and 2000 in the definitively abstract paintings of Kandinsky, Mondrian, De Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Hofmann, Frankenthaler, Davis, Louis, Noland, Riley, Kelly, Marden, and Scully, which we will view via the web.) Where does it come from in figurative painting? How is viewing abstract painting the same as viewing figurative painting? What are the most basic general painting practices and visual structures of abstract painting? How does abstract painting fit into the 700 year history of European/American painting? And what is its future?

I started writing this theory paper four years ago, to show and tell my dear casual-viewer family and friends who haven’t studied art history (yet) where the kind of painting in this show – abstract painting, with even color, geometric shapes, and a geometric compositional structure – comes from in the whole European/American painting tradition. (“I really like your work, Larry, but I just don’t get abstract painting.”) I figured six or eight pages, in a couple of months. I underestimated.

The separate “Jazz on the Wall” essay is just about my own paintings in this show – where they came from in my personal painting interests and direct influences. (I’m very aware of the difference in scope between this paper’s 700 year history of European/American painting and that essay’s personal background of one unknown painter’s first show. I did keep glancing up at the big picture.)

I’ll give simple, specific Internet directions throughout this paper, to view the famous work I’ll be discussing, by about 25 painters, both abstract and figurative, from 1300 to 2000. This is some little show, thanks to our new world-wide virtual museum.

The paper will print in 12 point Adobe Caslon typeface, like this. The Contents section on the next two pages appears in slightly smaller, 10 point Palatino for easier overviewing. There’s no color. To make an easy-to-handle printed copy, I suggest printing on both sides of 33 sheets (select odd pages only, then even pages in reverse order), and a standard, 30-sheet, no-hole report cover.

Introduction (Figurative Painting and Abstract Painting)

My casual-viewer friends are mostly about my age (63 in 2010), and along the way they’ve had the good fortune to view a wide range of outstanding painting from the European/American tradition, both figurative painting and, from the last century, also abstract painting.

By European/American figurative painting I mean our 700-year-old tradition of painting people and things in places. This tradition includes both Leonardo and Picasso. Sometimes this kind of painting is called “representational”, but in my view that term misleadingly understates the historic central project (and historical continuity) of the whole European/American painting tradition, which has always been the presentation in painting not of “the world through a window”, but rather of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world, as I hope this whole paper will make clear.
By abstract painting, I mean our new tradition, now about a century old, in which painters use the two basic kinds of abstract markmaking (which I’ll call “body-language” markmaking and “even-color” markmaking) to draw the two basic kinds of abstract shapes (‘body-language’ shapes and geometric shapes), and can compose their abstract shapes in abstract composition space (plane-space). Please let me show you, while we view some of the most respected, definitively abstract paintings from the pioneering period, say 1910 to 1970, via the web, in Part 1 (29 pages).

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Part 1 (of 3): A Theory of Abstract Painting (Chapters 1-5)

In Chapters 1 and 2, I’ll begin by showing you where abstract painting – or markmaking with paint, meaning paint-handling and paint-color choice – came from in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figurative painting we call Modernist – especially Impressionism (as in Monet), Post-Impressionism (as in Van Gogh), and Early-Twentieth-Century Modernism (as in Matisse).

Then, in Chapters 3 and 4, I’ll introduce you to abstract drawing and composition, in four acclaimed, definitively abstract paintings by Mondrian, De Kooning, Pollock, and Rothko. I’ll show you how abstract painting works just like figurative painting works, but with abstract shapes (drawing), in plane-space (composition). It’s amazingly simple.

And then, in Chapter 5, I’ll show you how those four painters and six more of abstract painting’s most famous pioneers (along with all their less famous contemporaries) definitively and comprehensively introduced abstract painting’s most basic general painting practices and visual structures (for markmaking, drawing, and composition) through the pioneering period from 1910 to 1970. In the epilogues, I’ll show you how that pioneering abstract period began, in the seminal abstract painting of Kandinsky and Mondrian (“the first abstract painters”), influenced by the radical Modernist figurative painting that they were looking at. Part 1 includes the following five chapters and wonderful viewing:

1. Look at Paintings as Painting (Markmaking, Drawing, and Composition – in The Starry Night) p4

2. Body-Language Markmaking and Even-Color Markmaking Appear (in the Work of Monet, Van Gogh, and Matisse, for Outstanding Examples) p5


4. Abstract Composition, in Abstract Composition Space (in De Kooning, Pollock, Mondrian, and Rothko) p8

5. The Four Basic Combinations of Abstract Markmaking With Abstract Shapes (in De Kooning, Pollock, Mondrian, Davis, Rothko, Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Hofmann, and Kandinsky. With Epilogues on Kandinsky and Mondrian as the first abstract painters, and markmaking in Cézanne, the father of Early-Twentieth-Century Modernist figurative painting – according to Matisse and Picasso, among others.) p22
Part 2: An Analytic Look at Four Contemporary Abstract Painters’ New Work
(Chapter 6)

Part 2 (13 pages) is an analytic appreciation of some new paintings from around 2000 (and some earlier work) by four well-established, internationally acclaimed abstract painters – Brice Marden, Sean Scully, Bridget Riley, and Ellsworth Kelly – using the terms and definitions from Part 1. But you can read this paper to survey pioneering abstract painting from 1910-1970 (Part 1) and take the 700-year history ride (Part 3), with its own overviews of Marden’s and Scully’s work, without lingering in between for the contemporary developments in Part 2.

However – if you’ll also join me (now or maybe later) to view and reflect on this outstanding contemporary abstract painting – I have very high respect for the career work of these four painters and it would be my pleasure to show you how I view their work, and perhaps heighten your own viewing experience of their new, very different, highly individual paintings, starting via the web.

6. Into the Twenty-First Century, Say 2000 (Marden, Scully, Riley, and Kelly) p33

Part 3: The 700 Year History of European/American Painting – Both the Figurative and Now Also Abstract Traditions (Chapters 7-9)

Part 3 is 21 pages about the 700 year history of European/American painting. I’ll begin in Chapter 7 by showing you how the European/American painting tradition has always characteristically presented in painting not “the world through a window” but rather, a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world (the real secret to appreciating The Mona Lisa).

In Chapter 8, I’ll review figurative painting’s pioneering period, say 1300-1500, and the historic appearance then of all its most basic general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition. This review will show that the pioneering period of abstract painting, as reviewed in Part 1, is directly comparable to the pioneering period of figurative painting. We’ve just begun another painting tradition.

In Chapter 9, I’ll conclude the paper with my understanding of the true historical continuity of the abstract painting tradition. I’ll explain, in visual terms, why abstract painting was quietly widely displaced after around 1970, how it has been unexpectedly developed to become contemporary abstract painting, for example in the work of Marden and Scully, and what the new tradition offers future painters.

7. The European/American Painting Tradition – The Presentation in Painting of a Unique Contemporary Awareness of Our Shared World (Leonardo) p46

8. 700 Years Ago, Our Other Tradition Was Just Beginning, Too. (Giotto) p49

9. The Abstract Painting Tradition (Past, Present, and Future) p53

Here we go.
Part 1: A Theory of Abstract Painting

1. Look at Paintings as Painting (Markmaking, Drawing, and Composition – in The Starry Night)

European/American painting, since around 1300 at the dawn of the Renaissance, can be helpfully understood as having three levels of visual organization – markmaking, drawing, and composition. By markmaking, I’ll mean some method of applying some kind of paint, with some particular paint-color, to some kind of surface (like brushstrokings an oil paint on canvas). Or, markmaking can mean the applied marks themselves (like brushstrokes).

By drawing, I’ll mean the organization of markmaking into shapes, or the shapes themselves. By a shape I’ll mean, very generally and intuitively, a separate visual object. In painting, the term shape normally refers to the shape’s whole appearance, not just its boundary configuration. A shape may be simple or include other shapes, and its appearance may be volumetrically shaded, highly detailed, silhouetted, barely sketched-in, or otherwise more or less precisely drawn, and its boundary may be clearly identifiable or not. A shape can also be drawn as just an outline of its boundary, but that’s not usual in drawing with paint.

And by composition, I’ll mean the organization – the distribution and balancing – of shapes into a coherent, unified, whole composition (like a particular landscape, still life, or interior). I’ll consider those three practices – markmaking, drawing, and composition, interrelated that way – to be the three fundamental practices of this painting tradition.

With those terms, let’s view Van Gogh’s 1889 masterpiece, The Starry Night. (Google The Starry Night and go to Wikipedia for a good web-image of this about 2½’x3’ painting. Click on the picture to expand it twice – or three times for details.) Van Gogh used his very obvious markmaking (his ecstatically excited and exciting oil-brushstrokes) to draw the shapes of a cypress tree, the crescent moon and other celestial bodies with glow-shapes around them, yin-yang shaped celestial swirls, a steepled church, houses, round trees, and waves of rolling hills.

And he composed – distributed and balanced – all those shapes, in this deep landscape, within its particular perspective, around our given point of view at the center of the painting’s rectangle shape. I’ll show you. In the volumetric foreground of his composition, Van Gogh distributed and balanced his five most prominent, featured shapes (one is a group of shapes) around our given central point of view: (1) the church with the tall pointed steeple in the low middle distance, down and right from the center, (2) the top of a nearby, pointed cypress tree just to the left, that rises almost to the top of the composition, (3) the distant crescent moon and round moon-glow at the top right, and (4) the other glowing celestial bodies left of the moon that surround (5) the giant yin-yang shaped swirls, which are just up from directly opposite our central point of view.

Van Gogh distinctly divided the background of his composition into two parts (that is, the volumetric background of his volumetric foreground of featured individual shapes). The upper two-thirds of the background is the turbulent, bright, night sky. The bottom third of the background is the calm, dark village and countryside. The bottom of the sky is a wide light band that makes a clear division between the bright heavens above and the
dark Earth below.

And Van Gogh also centralized his composition of the shapes within the lower background. So the wide area of houses and trees below us on the right (which mostly fills the plain within the hills that recede from the right edge) narrows down to the line of buildings, including the church, that leads our attention into the central middle distance, and the line of trees that eventually leads our attention all the way to the hills in the central far distance, beyond which there is only the sky above – the starry night.

Thus, Van Gogh centralized his whole composition around our given central point of view into this volumetric natural composition space. And by centralizing his composition, Van Gogh composed all his shapes, within the particular perspective of this deep landscape, into a coherent, unified, whole visual world that is actually distributed and balanced around the viewer's given central point of view.

I view volumetric natural composition space, bounded by an implicitly centered rectangle, as a defining characteristic of European/American figurative painting. I view the painter's centralization of their composition in that space as the most basic general organization of figurative composition.

(In the Jazz On The Wall essay, I've given a brief geometric explanation of how the painter's centralization of composition connects the composition's imaginary world, as described from within its own particular perspective, to your actual point of view in the real world. It's only three pages – Chapter 3, Section 2 – and it offers a visual understanding of composition, and a practical approach to viewing figurative painting, that have heightened my own enjoyment of the viewing experience. If this chapter helped you get further into the composition of The Starry Night and perhaps enjoy it even more, you might find the general visual idea interesting to read about sometime and try out while you're viewing all your other favorite figurative paintings.)

Abstract painting evolved from figurative painting after around 1910, retaining figurative painting's characteristic, rectangle-shaped, implicitly centered composition space. Abstract painters, however, soon developed a new coordinate structure for their rectangle-shaped composition space – usually (though not always) replacing the volumetric natural composition of figurative painting with plane-space composition, as we'll view and consider in Chapters 4 and 5. And the composition of fully abstract paintings does not present the appearance of recession (going back) in volumetric perspective, like The Starry Night does. But the centralization of composition is also the most basic general organization of abstract composition in plane-space.

2. Body-Language Markmaking and Even-Color Markmaking Appear (in the Work of Monet, Van Gogh, and Matisse, for Outstanding Examples

Body-language markmaking, like we just viewed in The Starry Night, means just what (I expect) you're intuitively thinking. Body-language markmaking presents an intentionally obvious record of the painter's body actions, directly communicating the painter's deeply personal attitudes, sensibilities, and sensuous awareness of the material world. The painter's choice of paint-colors to be applied in their body-language markmaking (their color work) may strongly support the drawing's representation of the natural world, as in The Starry Night, or be much more obviously personally expressive, even contradicting
the drawing’s representation.

Even-color markmaking (like we’ll soon view in Matisse’s The Red Studio, 1911) is likewise what its term suggests – extended areas of more or less uniform (or more or less uniformly blended) paint-colors. The painter’s choice of paint-colors to be applied in their even-color markmaking (their color work) can support the drawing’s representation of the natural world, but even-color markmaking especially allows the painter to intentionally obviously communicate their individuality through their color work, by their personally expressive choice and combination of extended, unshaded paint-colors.

Body-language and even-color markmaking are declaratively individual markmaking. By that I mean they intentionally obviously show us the painter painting while we perceive/imagine the composition. Body-language and even-color markmaking first widely appeared in figurative painting, historically quite suddenly and very unexpectedly, between say, 1870 and 1910, in the painting we call Modernist – especially Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Early-Twentieth-Century Modernism.

(Web directions follow.) For body-language markmaking, think of Monet’s The Regatta at Argenteuil, 1872 (Impressionism, from say 1870 on), or your favorite late Van Gogh – perhaps The Starry Night, 1889 (Post-Impressionism). For even-color markmaking, think of Matisse’s The Red Studio, 1911 (Early-Twentieth-Century Modernism).

To get in touch with Monet’s very personal impressions of nature, Google Regatta at Argenteuil and go to the artchive site. To view how Matisse felt about modern art in 1911, Google The Red Studio and go to the artchive site.

Until the late 1800s (for about 600 years, since the European/American figurative tradition began, around 1300 in Florence), painters kept the inherent individuality of their markmaking (their brushwork and paint-colors) comparatively inconspicuous and visually absorbed within their drawing. A painter’s highly individual markmaking could certainly be very fast and loose (like Velasquez’ in the mid-1600s), or especially brightly colorful (like Titian’s in the early 1500s), but it would not intentionally obviously show us (attract our attention to) the painter painting while we perceive/imagine the composition, the way Monet’s, Van Gogh’s, and Matisse’s markmaking does.

Consider, for example, Velasquez’ oil-brush drawing in the mid-1600s, which is famous for astonishingly transforming fast, loose markmaking into a perception of some highly particular natural space in our imagination. I can’t show you this directly (books will, with originally close-up photos), but I can show you his about 10’x9’ masterpiece Las Meninas, 1656, from viewing distance, via the web, and tell you that the leading art writer Kenneth Clark wrote of this painting that “I would start from as far away as I could, when the illusion was complete, and come gradually nearer, until suddenly what had been a hand, and a ribbon, and a piece of velvet, dissolved into a salad of beautiful brush strokes.” The “dissolved into” is what distinguishes Velasquez’ highly individual but drawing-absorbed markmaking from Monet’s and Van Gogh’s declaratively individual body-language markmaking.

Google Las Meninas and go to Mark Harden’s Artchive at the archive.com site. Clark is quoted there in a longer passage from his appreciation of this painting in his 1960 book, Looking at Pictures. Click on the picture to go to the artchive site’s image viewer, in which the image is size-adjustable.
By 1870, figurative painting had been served very well for almost 600 years (and still is) by drawing-absorbed markmaking practices, whether in such deliberate, seamlessly blended brushwork as Leonardo’s in The Mona Lisa, or such rapid, spontaneous brushwork as Velasquez’ in Las Meninas. But markmaking is the most physically and personally direct of the three fundamental painting practices (markmaking, drawing, and composition). And body-language markmaking and even-color markmaking introduced radical potential for painters to declaratively communicate their individuality through their paint-handling and paint-color, in the most basic practice of painting.

I think that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, figurative painting’s comprehensive developments in markmaking, drawing, composition, and subject matter followed in large part from that period’s leading painters bringing into painting the historically unprecedented independence of modern individual awareness (social, political, economic, scientific, psychological, and so on) that was then generally developing in our increasingly democratic, middle-classed, urban society. In my view, those developments in figurative painting were most radically achieved through the introduction of declaratively individual markmaking, specifically body-language markmaking and even-color markmaking, in the painting we call Modernist – especially Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Early-Twentieth-Century Modernism.

I view the unprecedentedly independent modern individual awareness of our shared world that was characteristically presented by all of that period’s leading painting, in both declaratively individual and drawing-absorbed markmaking, as European/American painting’s declaration of modern individual independence – with body-language markmaking and even-color markmaking as its signature expressions. In the twentieth century, abstract painters expanded that presentation of unprecedentedly independent modern individual awareness in painting, by transferring body-language and even-color markmaking into the drawing of abstract shapes, and by composing abstract shapes in abstract composition space – plane-space.

3. **Abstract Painting Means Drawing Abstract Shapes** (Body-Language Shapes and Geometric Shapes, in De Kooning, Pollock, and Mondrian)

In the twentieth century (between say, 1910 and 1970), the pioneers of abstract painting transferred the two kinds of declaratively individual markmaking – body-language and even-color markmaking – from drawing natural/figurative shapes to drawing the two kinds of definitively abstract shapes: body-language shapes and geometric shapes.

Body-language shapes are drawn/produced by body-language markmaking when it’s liberated from drawing any other shapes (either natural/figurative or geometric). For two definitive, very different mid-century examples of body-language markmaking drawing body-language shapes, view the following two acclaimed 1950s paintings by Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Google (without the date) De Kooning Composition (1955, about 6½’x6’), and go to the Guggenheim site (or better if available, the arthistory.about.com site – expand twice). Then Google Lavender Mist (1950, about 7’x10’) and go to the NGA Web Feature site to imagine the fine detail and exceptional multiplicity of Pollock’s cast-painting body-language shapes. (Markmaking-drawing includes the paint’s
Further physical action and material behavior after release.)

By geometric shapes, I simply mean what you would intuitively expect from having taken basic high school Euclidean geometry – two-dimensional plane-shapes that are defined by their mathematical structure. The most general geometric shapes are the most common, especially squares or rectangles (simple arrays of stripes being rows of elongated rectangles). For example, view Piet Mondrian’s 1943 masterpiece of even-color markmaking used to draw squares and rectangles, Broadway Boogie Woogie – about 4’ square. Google Broadway Boogie Woogie, and go to the MoMA.org/collection/browse site. (If MoMA’s image is not available, go to the archive site.)

Curvilinear geometric shapes have also famously appeared in abstract painting (as we’ll view in Chapter 5), especially disks, bands, and dots (bounded by circles) and wave-shapes (which repeat as curvilinear stripes). And (as in the work of Riley and Kelly in Chapter 6), geometric shapes can also be highly particular and unconventional, including shapes with both straight and curved boundaries, whether uniquely drawn as freestanding individual shapes (Kelly), or defined by unique, curved-and-straight-line grids (Riley).

In De Kooning and Pollock, we’ve just viewed the basic combination of body-language markmaking and body-language shapes. In Mondrian, we’ve viewed the basic combination of even-color markmaking and geometric shapes. But the two kinds of abstract markmaking and the two kinds of abstract shapes can also be oppositely combined, with body-language markmaking drawing geometric shapes, and even-color markmaking drawing body-language shapes. In Chapter 5, we’ll view the historical development of all four basic combinations of abstract markmaking and abstract shapes, as presented in the work of these three and seven more of abstract painting’s most respected pioneers. I believe you’ll enjoy discovering the underlying visual connection of all this highly individual, very different-looking work.

But next, a look at abstract painting’s composition and composition space.

4. Abstract Composition, in Abstract Composition Space (in De Kooning, Pollock, Mondrian, and Rothko)

Or, abstract painting works just like figurative painting works: markmaking, drawing, and composition organize the paint you see into viewing experience in your perception/imagination.

When we view a figurative painting, for example The Starry Night, we see the physical substance paint. But Van Gogh has organized that paint, by markmaking-drawing his shapes and composing them into the deep landscape we perceive/imagine – a volumetric natural space that contains a nearby cypress tree, a church in the mid-distance, and far-off hills, all under a bright night sky and a crescent moon. And further, because Van Gogh applied that paint as declaratively individual body-language markmaking, we also perceive/imagine him painting, while we perceive/imagine the landscape, and from his body-language markmaking we intuitively interpret his personal attitudes, his sensibilities, and his sensuous awareness of the material world.

How our marvelous perception/imagination works is beyond me. But I do trust that from my general description just above of how we view The Starry Night – from my
simple distinction between seeing the paint and perceiving/imaging the composition and Van Gogh painting – you could easily recognize your own (marvelous) routine experience of how figurative painting works. So in this chapter I'll show you how (rectangle-shaped) abstract painting works just like that, just like (rectangle-shaped) figurative painting works.

Of course, abstract painters use their body-language and/or even-color markmaking to draw abstract shapes – body-language and/or geometric shapes – instead of natural/figurative shapes. And abstract painters can compose their abstract shapes in abstract composition space – plane-space – instead of natural figurative composition space. But the two kinds of painting really do work the same way, using the same fundamental painting practices of markmaking, drawing, and composition to organize the paint you see into viewing experience in your perception/imagination. I'll show you.

I hope I've made the following understanding of abstract composition and composition space straightforward, and easy to try out while you're viewing some of the most celebrated paintings by many of the most respected pioneers of the whole new tradition, in Chapters 4 and 5. The theory of how abstract painting works just like figurative painting works is unpacked in Chapter 4, in seven sections, and I'll tell you the section headings now so you'll know where we're going. It's only 14 pages (and four masterpieces), and I promise the whole chapter will be at least as interesting as the headings. And then we'll get right back to the visual history and more wonderful viewing in Chapter 5. Here are the section headings for Chapter 4.

1. Plane-Space
2. Paint and Our Perception/Imagination of Shapes
3. Paint and Our Perception/Imagination of Markmaking
4. Paint and the Composition of Geometric Shapes in Mondrian and Rothko
5. Paint and the Composition of Body-Language Shapes in De Kooning and Pollock
6. The Two Basic Kinds of Abstract Composition: “Open” and “Structured”
7. A One-Page Summary – Abstract Composition, in Abstract Composition Space

1. Plane-Space

I view abstract composition and composition space as planar and geometric/mathematical, as distinguished from figurative painting’s volumetric natural composition and composition space, like in The Starry Night. By “geometric/mathematical”, I'm simply referring to the world of order we perceive in geometry and numbers.

In the twentieth century, European/American society (among others) became existentially dependent on new technologies that require advanced scientific and engineering knowledge to invent, operate, maintain, and replace – for our food, shelter, communication, transportation, health care, political organization, and so on. The universal language of science and engineering is mathematics. As our society became increasingly interconnected by these new technologies, the abstract order of geometry and numbers progressively (and without our much remarking) became our common, everyday frame of reference for describing our practical environment.

And not just for describing our made environment – it seems increasingly urgent that the planetary environment we collectively exploit – no judgment intended – be practically described and commonly understood scientifically, as life evolving in our planet’s rapidly
changing outer spheres – for the sake of our technologically advanced society’s survival. In our new and coming society, we must all acquire a comfortable, intuitive awareness of geometric/mathematical order, just to adapt successfully to constant, personally affecting environmental change in general – or now even just to open the mail. Space-times have changed since 1900.

I’ve introduced this very general, early twenty-first century view of our society’s modern history because I think it can provide the appropriate overarching social-historical context for the appearance in European/American painting of abstract painting’s geometric/mathematical composition space and geometric shapes. I don’t believe that this view was in any way required for the painting of outstanding abstract paintings in the twentieth century, or will be in the twenty-first.

In my view, the characteristic central project of the whole 700-year-old European/American painting tradition is the presentation in painting of the painter’s unique individual awareness of our shared world. (And, throughout this paper, I’ll show you how that view can help us to appreciate and enjoy that painting.) But painters also bring their shared contemporary social awareness into painting within their unique individual awareness of our shared world. And in the 1900s, that shared contemporary social awareness included our increasing everyday awareness of our geometric/mathematical world.

So, in the 1910s, after 40 years of the comprehensive Modernist developments within figurative painting that included the widespread introduction of body-language and even-color markmaking to figurative drawing, that new shared social awareness suggested geometric shapes to some painters (especially Mondrian) as another liberation of markmaking-drawing. Geometric shapes liberated even-color markmaking-drawing from the given meanings and color associations that natural/figurative shapes imply to our perception/imagination. And around 1910, body-language shapes also appeared (especially in Kandinsky), correspondingly liberating body-language markmaking into the drawing of abstract shapes.

Thus, distinctly abstract painting first appeared, in Europe, in the 1910s, as body-language and even-color markmaking were transferred into the drawing of abstract shapes. Kandinsky, however, retained volumetric natural figurative composition space, composing his pioneering (body-language) abstract shapes, from around 1910 on, into very general landscape compositions. And then Mondrian, by 1920, pioneered fully abstract painting, bringing our society’s new shared geometric/mathematical world into abstract painting as a whole visual world by composing his (geometric) abstract shapes in the new geometric/mathematical abstract composition space – plane-space, which is directly comparable to the volumetric natural figurative composition space of figurative painting.

(In separate Epilogs to Chapter 5, we’ll view and look historically at the seminal, complementary, and completely independent work and careers of Kandinsky and Mondrian, the two abstract pioneers who may meaningfully be called “the first abstract painters”.)

And then, in the United States, especially between, say, the end of World War II (1945) and 1970, a series of outstanding abstract painters pioneered all four most basic combinations of body-language and even-color markmaking with body-language and geometric shapes. In Chapter 5, we’ll view all four combinations in paintings
by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and eight of the most famous U.S. pioneers, six of whom composed their combinations of abstract markmaking with abstract shapes in the new geometric/mathematical plane-space.

A Few Words, in Passing, About Cubism and Abstract Painting:

I've been showing and telling specifically where I do view abstract painting as having come from in the European/American figurative painting tradition. Simply put, I view abstract painting as having come from (inherited) the figurative tradition's fundamental painting practices of markmaking, drawing, and composition; body-language and even-color markmaking; and the figurative tradition's implicitly centered, rectangle-shaped composition space. All of the abstract pioneers transferred body-language and/or even-color markmaking from drawing natural/figurative shapes to drawing abstract shapes – body-language shapes and/or geometric shapes. Some abstract pioneers retained the figurative tradition's volumetric natural composition, but of their abstract shapes, (as in, for example, very general landscapes of abstract shapes). And some of the abstract pioneers also developed the plane-space composition of their abstract shapes, still within the figurative tradition's rectangle-shaped composition space but instead of the figurative tradition's volumetric natural composition.

But it has sometimes been suggested that abstract painting followed from, or even originated in, the radical drawing and compositional innovations of Cubism, so I'll just note here explicitly that I don't view abstract painting as having followed from, or come from, Cubism. I view Cubism, which was begun by Picasso and Braque around 1907, as figurative painting’s crucial project in the planar, geometric restructuring of figurative drawing and composition, which represents the volumetric natural world of people and things in places (whether actually, fictionally, or purely hypothetically, and however particularly recognizably).

In my view, Picasso and Braque – and many other outstanding figurative painters at the time and since – brought the same, modern, shared social awareness of our new geometric/mathematical world into figurative painting that the pioneering abstract painters brought into abstract painting. And their then-radical geometric restructurings of figurative drawing and composition have since been widely assimilated into figurative painting, and are now developed by figurative painters according to the special visual interests of the individual painter. The various innovations of Cubism and other geometric restructurings of figurative drawing and composition, however, when first introduced, produced such very different appearances from previous figurative painting that they were sometimes viewed as introducing a distinct new kind of painting, which was sometimes called abstract.

But Picasso and Braque and the other painters who geometrically restructured figurative drawing and volumetric natural figurative composition did not, in that restructuring, transfer body-language and even-color markmaking into the new general practice of drawing body-language and/or geometric shapes rather than natural/figurative shapes. And, in the 1910s, historically concurrent with the Cubists’ geometric restructuring of figurative drawing and composition, the painters who did introduce the new general practice of drawing body-language shapes and/or geometric shapes rather than natural/figurative shapes, and introduced the composition of such abstract shapes in plane-space, were introducing a distinct new kind of painting, the kind I think we can
Welcome to plane-space:

Since the pioneering period, painters and interested viewers have routinely intuitively used the word plane(s) when referring to spatial relationships in fully abstract paintings. In my view, that’s because the composition space of fully abstract painting is structured as a geometric/mathematical plane-space, either as a single two-dimensional plane or as overlapping two-dimensional planes – whereas the characteristic composition space of figurative painting is structured as a continuous volume of natural space.

Let’s consider plane-space in four definitively, fully, and exclusively abstract paintings by Mondrian, De Kooning, Pollock, and Rothko. We’ve already viewed highly acclaimed paintings by the first three of those four outstanding pioneers (websites in Chapter 3). To view Mark Rothko’s 7½’ tall Orange and Yellow, 1956, Google Rothko Orange and Yellow and go to the artchive site, or select from the images at the top of the Google list. The intensity and subtlety of actual painted color is, of course, not there to see on the monitor, but for just being able to get the picture, isn’t this an unexpected world, our new geometric/mathematical world.

The terms we routinely use to describe the composition of people and things in places, in volumetric natural composition space, in figurative paintings like The Starry Night (a deep landscape, as distinguished from a still life, an interior, or a portrait, for example), are obviously not helpful for describing the composition and composition space of these paintings. Instead, since the pioneering period, we have intuitively described their composition, and the coordinate structure of their composition space, in common terms that refer quite specifically to the distribution and balancing of abstract shapes across a two-dimensional plane or overlapping two-dimensional planes.

Here are some very common examples of our intuitive description of abstract composition space as plane-space, in these paintings. We routinely describe Pollock’s cast-paintings as “all-over” paintings, in a popular critical term from the time. To a dictionary, “all over” means over the whole extent. And “allover” means a pattern or design covering an entire surface. Surface and plane are synonymous in two dimensions.

Rothko’s fully abstract paintings are routinely called “color-field” paintings. Field means area, which is a two-dimensional definition of space. (In physics, the term field has been expanded to describe a multi-dimensional region of space or space-time. But then, contemporary physics has expanded space-time to 11 dimensions. This chapter is just about the geometry of painting, even when it’s abstract.)

We can comprehensibly describe Mondrian’s compositions as grids or grid-networks, meaning two-dimensional geometric organizations of two-dimensional rectangles and squares.

We can identify Orange and Yellow as one of Rothko’s stacked rectangles paintings, and comprehensibly describe its composition as a vertical array of two almost-frame-width rectangles in the foreground plane, overlapping a continuous background plane. (Rothko’s stacked rectangles paintings do often represent overlapping rectangles, composed in more than one foreground plane.) And when we perceive the foreground and background planes of Rothko’s composition as overlapping in the third, perpendicular dimension (that is, the plane of the rectangles overlaps the plane of the background or,
simply, the rectangles overlap the background), we do not perceive any continuous natural distance between the planes. There’s no *figurative* representation implying the volumetric natural world to our perception/imagination – just the overlapping order of the two-dimensional planes.

We do, of course, still always *see* the paint on the canvas, as a three-dimensional physical substance, a sometimes overlapping thin solid with *actual* volumetric depth in nature. And however more or less noticeable the thickness, if you’re seeing the paint-colors, you’re seeing the paint. So how does seeing the three-dimensional paint on the canvas, in a De Kooning, Pollock, Mondrian, or Rothko, relate to *perceiving/imagining* plane-space? The same way that seeing the paint in The Starry Night relates to perceiving/imagining its volumetric natural figurative composition space: markmaking, drawing, and composition.

2. Paint and Our Perception/Imagination of Shapes

When we view a figurative painting, like The Starry Night, we see the paint on the canvas and we perceive/Imagine a volumetric natural composition. When we view The Starry Night, we perceive/Imagine a deep landscape, which includes the shapes of a nearby cypress tree, the distant hills, and the moon.

More particularly, when we see Van Gogh’s largest, dark, physical paint-shape in The Starry Night, we perceive/Imagine a similar shape of a volumetric natural cypress tree. And if I say that Van Gogh has *drawn* the cypress tree shape we perceive/Imagine, you’ll immediately understand that two-step meaning of drawing, which is using markmaking to (1) draw the paint-shape we see on the canvas to (2) imply the natural shape we perceive/Imagine. We do routinely use the term drawing that way, to mean that the painter draws the shape we ultimately perceive/Imagine – as in Van Gogh has drawn (“from life” or not) a tall, nearby, living cypress tree, which we know would be *evergreen* if it were daylight.

But if I said Van Gogh drew the cypress tree paint-shape we see on the canvas, you’d immediately understand that simpler meaning of the term drawing too, right? No problem. The term drawing works either way – we’re drawing a shape either way – one’s on the canvas, made of paint, and one’s in your perception/Imagination. And that’s as complicated as this theory gets. The rest of the chapter is just a description of how abstract painting works the same way.

My point in this section is simply to make a distinction between the physical paint-shapes that we see on the canvas, and the corresponding perceived shapes that the paint-shapes imply to our imagination. I’ll try to keep that distinction clear whenever it comes up by routinely referring to the shapes of physical paint on canvas as paint-shapes. But practically speaking, once you’ve noticed this simple difference in general, its particular relevance will usually be obvious (to whatever aspect of markmaking, drawing, or composition we’re considering).

In figurative paintings, the paint-shapes we see, like the cypress tree paint-shape in The Starry Night, imply volumetric natural shapes to our perception/Imagination. In abstract paintings, the paint-shapes we see imply abstract shapes to our perception/imagination – either geometric shapes or body-language shapes.

In Broadway Boogie Woogie, the geometric paint-shapes we see imply geometric
shapes to our perception/imagination. Specifically, Mondrian’s more or less precisely rectangular and squarely-drawn three-dimensional paint-shapes imply two-dimensional rectangles and squares to our perception/imagination. By definition, geometric shapes like rectangles and squares are structured by ideal geometric/mathematical relationships in two-dimensional plane-space in our imagination. (Just as when you draw a square with a pencil on paper – that is, represent a square – freehand or with a ruler. Rectangles and squares are not made of paint or pencil marks.)

Rothko’s very rough drawing of his paint-shapes, compared with Mondrian’s, makes the difference much more obvious between his three-dimensional rectangular paint-shapes, which we actually see on the canvas, and the ideally averaged two-dimensional rectangle shapes they imply to our perception/imagination. In both Mondrian and Rothko, however, we see more or less precisely rectangular paint-shapes, and we perceive/imagine two-dimensional rectangles.

In De Kooning’s and Pollock’s paintings, the body-language paint-shapes we see imply body-language shapes to our perception/imagination. We see their body-language paint-shapes as three-dimensional paint. But to our perception/imagination, those paint-shapes imply “shape-records” of their unique body actions, directly visually communicating their attitudes, sensibilities, and sensuous awareness of the material world. Thus we perceive/imagine body-language shapes as shape-records of the painter painting, with all their intuitive meanings for us as four-dimensional body-language communication.

So – we always see three-dimensional paint-shapes on the canvas. In Van Gogh (and all other figurative painting), the paint-shapes imply and we perceive/imagine volumetric natural shapes (the shapes of three-dimensional volumes like trees or angels).

In abstract painting, the paint-shapes imply and we perceive/imagine abstract shapes – either geometric shapes or body-language shapes. In Mondrian and Rothko, we perceive/imagine geometric shapes (two-dimensional rectangles). In De Kooning and Pollock, we perceive/imagine body-language shapes (the four-dimensional shape-records of the painter painting).

In Section 4, we’ll look at how Mondrian’s and Rothko’s very individually different markmaking-drawing of their 2d geometric shapes relates to their composition in 2d-plane-space. In Section 5, we’ll look at how De Kooning and Pollock (brilliantly) composed their markmaking-drawing of 4d body-language shapes across 2d-plane-space. In Section 6, I’ll generalize those painters’ pioneering compositional achievements to identify the two basic kinds of abstract composition, which I’ll call structured composition and open composition. And in Section 7, I’ll briefly summarize (in one page) Chapter 4’s whole look at abstract composition in abstract composition space – plane-space.

But first – since we’ve just been thinking about seeing paint and perceiving/imaging shapes, here’s a brief historical background note about seeing paint and perceiving/imaging markmaking – the painter painting.

3. Paint and Our Perception/Imagination of Markmaking

I think that whenever we identify paint as markmaking – meaning some painter’s method of paint-handling and choice of paint-colors (color work) – we are by definition perceiving/imaging the painter painting, however vague or minimal or incorrect is our imagination of their actual practice.
When we move in to look at The Mona Lisa's paint as paint-handling and paint-colors (and therefore stop perceiving/imagining her, in living color), we discover that Leonardo’s markmaking blends the paint and its colors so gradually and smoothly that we can't see his separate brushmarks. So we must imagine and admire his brushstroking "invisibly", however vaguely. But we are still imagining him brushstroking the surface with colored paint, however vaguely – that's why we're looking for his brushstrokes, to more precisely perceive/imagine him doing that brush-drawing.

Leonardo’s highly refined markmaking-drawing technique for oil-brushwork and dusk-light color work in The Mona Lisa, 1506, called “sfumato”, directly served his special individual interest in drawing expressions. Leonardo’s special interest was in drawing expressions that implied a changing, emotionally responsive awareness, as hers does, rather than (as was conventionally expected) simply implying a constant, trustworthy, typical character, such as holiness, bravery, or dignity. (I'll discuss Leonardo's innovative portrayal of expression further in Part 3, Chapter 7.) And if you Google Mona Lisa and go to Wikipedia, then expand the image three times, you can enjoy an originally close-up web-view of her face that will remind you what Leonardo’s special interest in drawing expressions and his sfumato technique produced.

But Leonardo’s individuality is only indirectly perceptible/imaginable from his markmaking. Even close-up we can't perceive Leonardo’s markmaking as a record of his body language. And his paint-color choices are clearly not intended to be personally expressive, but entirely support the representation. We infer his professionalism from his disciplined skill at intentionally unnoticeable paint-handling and color work.

We can, however, perceive Velasquez’ uncommonly fast, loose, 1656 markmaking as a record of his body language, but only when we move in closer to see his salad of beautiful brush strokes – in the parts of Las Meninas where he used such markmaking because it inconspicuously served his naturalistic drawing and composition. We don't perceive Velasquez markmaking as a record of his body-language while we're perceiving the composition because it's not declaratively individual body-language markmaking – it’s just fast, loose Velasquez markmaking, employed when useful for his masterful naturalistic drawing. And his paint-color choices, like Leonardo's, are not intended to be personally expressive, but directly serve our perception/imagination of the composition.

Just to remind you, from Chapter 2 – “a salad of beautiful brush strokes” is Kenneth Clark's eloquent description, and you can view Velasquez’ masterful naturalistic drawing, though not the salad, by Googling Las Meninas and going to Mark Harden's artchive site. Click on the picture to go to the artchive site’s image viewer, in which the image is size-adjustable.

In our most respected contemporary figurative painting, we find highly individual markmaking that is intentionally inconspicuous as markmaking (as paint-handling and paint-colors), like both those examples, as well as markmaking that is declaratively individual, like the body-language and even-color markmaking that appeared in Modernist figurative painting between, say, 1870 and 1910. All those kinds of markmaking are routinely practiced by contemporary figurative painters, consistent with the special visual interests of the individual painter.

Abstract painting begins with declaratively individual body-language and/or even-color markmaking used to draw abstract shapes – body-language shapes and/or geometric
shapes. And since abstract shapes do not represent the natural world as natural/figurative shapes do, abstract shapes are not associated with particular given colors in our perception/imagination.

In fully abstract painting, the painter composes their abstract shapes in plane-space, and the natural world is not intentionally represented at all by the painter’s markmaking, drawing, or composition. In fully abstract painting, the geometric/mathematical world is represented instead of the natural world, by the composition of abstract shapes (geometric and/or body-language shapes) in plane-space, and by the drawing of geometric shapes. If a painter chose their paint-colors for a fully abstract painting – for example, a grid-network painting like Mondrian’s or a cast-painting like Pollock’s – by mixing a palette for a highly recognizable landscape painting, from life, I would still call the paint-colors – the color work – in that painting personally expressive, not representative of the natural world. To the viewer, they’re the painter’s colors.

Abstract shapes, however, can be composed in abstract composition space – plane-space – or in volumetric natural figurative composition space (presenting the appearance of, for example, a very general landscape of abstract shapes). In Chapter 5, we’ll view work by three outstanding abstract pioneers who compose/composed their abstract shapes in volumetric figurative composition space. And in figuratively composed abstract painting, the abstract painter’s markmaking (paint-handling and paint-colors) can support the figurative composition’s representation of the natural world very generally.

(As we’ll view in Chapter 5, body-language shapes can strongly support a figurative composition’s representation of the natural world in abstract painting by very generally implying the natural shapes and colors of landscape. But body-language shapes, as individual shapes, don’t represent either of our shared worlds – natural or geometric/mathematical. They are the abstract shapes that are drawn/produced when body-language markmaking is liberated from drawing either natural/figurative shapes or geometric abstract shapes. So body-language shapes can support a figurative composition’s representation of the natural world in abstract painting without themselves representing either the natural or geometric/mathematical world. Geometric shapes, however, obviously represent the geometric/mathematical world, even when composed in volumetric figurative composition space, as in a landscape, and drawn with paint-colors that are easily associated with nature in our perception/imagination.)

But whether or not the abstract painter’s body-language and/or even-color markmaking also supports a figurative composition’s very general representation of the volumetric natural world (as in a landscape of abstract shapes), markmaking in abstract painting is primarily dedicated to showing us the painter painting (implying the painter painting to our perception/imagination) – directly presenting the painter’s unique contemporary individuality through their paint-handling and personally expressive choice of paint-colors, while we perceive/imagine the composition.

And now I’ll show you, in Sections 4-6, how Mondrian, Rothko, De Kooning, and Pollock definitively pioneered the abstract composition of abstract shapes in plane-space. Then, in Section 7, I’ll briefly summarize this whole chapter’s simple theoretical look at how abstract painting works just like figurative painting works: the physical paint-shapes we see imply (abstract) shapes and the whole (abstract) composition of shapes to our
perception/imagination, while declaratively individual markmaking shows us the painter painting. And then we'll go on to Chapter 5's wonderful show of the painting that this paper is meant to help us appreciate and enjoy.

4. Paint and the Composition of Geometric Shapes in Mondrian and Rothko

In Orange and Yellow, Rothko's geometrically structured composition is very simple. By reducing the drawing and composition in this painting to just two almost-frame-width rectangles, vertically distributed and balanced in one foreground plane, overlapping a second, background plane, Rothko could especially feature – and concentrate our attention on – his highly involving brushed-oil-color markmaking. (Orange and Yellow is especially simple, even among Rothko's stacked rectangles paintings, which typically present more than just two frame-width rectangles, sometimes in overlapping foreground planes.)

Rothko's pioneering use of very free hand body-language markmaking to draw geometric shapes presents a significant development in abstract markmaking-drawing – another of the four basic combinations of abstract markmaking (body-language and even-color) with abstract shapes (body-language and geometric). We'll look at the development of all four basic combinations in the next chapter, in the paintings of Mondrian, Rothko, De Kooning, Pollock, and six more outstanding pioneers.

Rothko's rectangular paint-shapes are very roughly and imprecisely drawn compared with Mondrian's. But Mondrian's paintings especially feature his geometric drawing and composition. Each Mondrian painting features a very different variety of many individually sized and proportioned rectangles (drawing) and a quite different distribution and balancing of those shapes into a highly particular grid-network (composition). And to imply those complex compositions to our perception/imagination clearly and distinctly, Mondrian defined his geometric paint-shapes much more precisely with his even-color markmaking than Rothko defined his geometric paint-shapes with his body-language markmaking.

In both Mondrian's and Rothko's paintings, however, we see more or less precisely rectangular paint-shapes, and we perceive/imagine two-dimensional rectangles, distributed and balanced into a coherent, unified plane-space composition within the painting's geometric compositional structure (and with each composition centralized within the composition space's implicitly centered rectangle shape).

5. Paint and the Composition of Body-Language Shapes in De Kooning and Pollock (Everywhere at Once)

Body-language shapes, like De Kooning's and Pollock's, signify the passage of time to our perception/imagination. Hence, we can perceive body-language shapes as shape-records of the painter painting, with all their meaning for us as four-dimensional body-language communication – showing us the painter’s personal attitudes, sensibilities, and sensuous awareness of the material world. (The painter painting includes the paint’s further physical action and material behavior after release.) Think of each body-language shape as a time-lapse “action-still” that records a painter's touching, stroking, pouring, casting, or some other painting action.

Geometric shapes, like Mondrian's rectangles for example, don't signify the passage of
time to our perception/imagination. Geometric shapes are simply definitions of space. And even if – as in Rothko's stacked rectangles paintings with overlapping rectangles – the rectangular paint-shapes were drawn by body-language markmaking, we still perceive/imagine the rectangle shapes they imply – the rectangles – as simply definitions of space, there and there and there, in front of and behind, everywhere at once.

(In that case, of course, we do perceive/imagine the painter painting as implied by their markmaking. That is, we perceive/imagine Rothko's body-language markmaking-drawing of his rectangular paint-shapes, and their background, as having taken time, and been overlapped in temporal order. Thus, in Rothko, we see the paint-shapes and background, and we perceive/imagine both the simply spatial geometric shapes – the rectangles – that the paint-shapes imply, everywhere in the overlapping-plane-space at once, and the painter painting with his body-language markmaking-drawing.)

Body-language shapes, however, do signify the passage of time to our perception/imagination. Body-language paint-shapes are dedicated to implying the passage of time to our perception/imagination by implying shape-records of the painter painting. So we don't perceive/imagine body-language shapes as everywhere at once – simply there, and there, and there, as we perceive/imagine simply spatial geometric shapes – but rather as the painter painting there-then, and there-then, and there-then.

But De Kooning and Pollock were also improvising a composition as they drew their body-language shapes, there-then, and there-then, and there-then. And their whole composition (bounded by the composition space's implicitly centered rectangle shape) was given to their perception/imagination everywhere at once.

So (it appears to me) they drew their body-language paint-shapes to be perceived/imagined as body-language shapes – as the painter painting there-then. But they concurrently composed their body-language paint-shapes as implying geometric shapes – to be perceived/imagined as simply there, and there, and there, everywhere at once.

That was possible because body-language paint-shapes also inherently imply highly particular geometric shapes to our perception/imagination (meaning highly particular geometric/mathematical figures that we perceive as similar or different areas, lines, points, angles, curves, and so on), everywhere at once. Those coincident geometric shapes can be composed simply spatially, everywhere at once, just like the geometric shapes that geometric paint-shapes imply to our perception.

Of course, all the highly particular geometric shapes that De Kooning’s and Pollock’s body-language paint-shapes also imply to our perception are much more various and multitudinous than the highly general and vastly fewer geometric shapes implied by Mondrian's and Rothko's geometric paint-shapes. The markmaking-drawing of body-language paint-shapes in Lavender Mist implies a myriad of highly particular geometric/mathematical figures to our perception/imagination. The markmaking-drawing of geometric paint-shapes in Orange and Yellow only implies two rectangles. But in both Orange and Yellow and Lavender Mist we're perceiving/imagining a full-frame centralized composition (distribution and balancing) of geometric shapes, all across the plane-space everywhere at once.

So De Kooning and Pollock intuitively distributed and balanced the salient geometric shapes/figures that were also implied by their body-language paint-shapes, all across plane-space within the composition space's implicitly centered rectangle shape. And
thus, they also distributed and balanced their body-language shapes, with all their four-dimensional meaning for us, within that coherent, unified, two-dimensional composition, everywhere at once.

And so, when we view their body-language paint-shapes as drawing, as implying the body-language shapes of the painter painting there-then, and there-then, and there-then, we can perceive/imagine the painter’s personal attitudes, sensibilities, and sensuous awareness of the material world very specifically, in highly particular and various detail. And when we also view their body-language paint-shapes as composition, as also implying geometric shapes/figures everywhere at once, intuitively distributed and balanced across plane-space within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape, we can also perceive the painter’s unique intuitive awareness of geometric/mathematical order, in the new, abstract composition space.

De Kooning and Pollock composed their body-language paint-shapes as geometric shapes/figures visually intuitively (not through theory like this), using only the implicitly centered rectangle of plane-space as their compositional structure. In my view, their historic achievement in composition (the distribution and balancing of shapes) is their fully abstract paintings’ deeply engaging global coherence, given the intensely local focus of their body-language markmaking-drawings of body-language shapes. Their drawing is so personally liberated and involving that I can easily take their composition’s whole world of geometric/mathematical order for granted.

Willem de Kooning – the self-described “slipping-glimpser”. And Jackson Pollock – whose post-war paint-casting soon became the most infamous abstract painting ever done – often publicly derided at the time as “Jack the dripper”.

6. The Two Basic Kinds of Abstract Composition: “Open” and “Structured”

I view Mondrian’s and Rothko’s compositions of geometric shapes (from around 1920 and 1950 on, respectively), and De Kooning’s and Pollock’s compositions of body-language shapes (around 1950), as the definitive pioneering presentations of the two most general kinds of abstract composition. I’ll refer to Mondrian’s and Rothko’s kind of composition as structured composition. I’ll refer to De Kooning’s and Pollock’s kind of composition as open composition.

In the terms of this paper, composition means the distribution and balancing of shapes within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape. (I’m referring to the composition of rectangle-shaped paintings in the European/American tradition, in either abstract or figurative composition space.) And specifically abstract composition means the distribution and balancing of geometric shapes (implied by either body-language or geometric paint-shapes) across the plane or overlapping planes of plane-space, within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape.

(But I’ll note again that three of the ten outstanding abstract pioneers we’ll view in Chapter 5 don’t/didn’t typically practice abstract composition. Like the others, they pioneered the body-language and even-color markmaking-drawing of abstract shapes, but they retained volumetric natural figurative composition. So those painters could distribute and balance their abstract shapes into compositions that present the appearance of, for example, very general landscapes of abstract shapes.)

**Open** Composition: De Kooning and Pollock composed body-language shapes by
distributing and balancing their coincident geometric shapes/figures across plane-space within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape—without introducing a further, more particular geometric compositional structure. The without introducing a further, more particular geometric compositional structure makes their compositions open compositions.

Structured Composition: Mondrian and Rothko also distributed and balanced (solely) geometric shapes across plane-space within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape. But they each introduced a further, more particular geometric compositional structure (Mondrian’s grid-network structure and Rothko’s stacked rectangles structure), in addition to the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape. The further, more particular geometric compositional structure makes their compositions structured compositions.

So, in Mondrian and Rothko, we perceive a structured composition of geometric shapes. In De Kooning and Pollock, we perceive an open composition of body-language shapes as their coincident geometric shapes. But open composition can also distribute and balance solely geometric shapes. And structured composition can also distribute and balance body-language shapes as their coincident geometric shapes. Like this, for example:

Consider the following thought-painting of an open composition of solely geometric shapes. Imagine a 6’ square piece of primed (white) canvas that is stapled to the studio wall, two feet off the floor (so its center is 5’ from the floor for viewing). Centered in the white canvas is a neatly taped-off 5’ square, already painted an even medium blue to be a background. Imagine drawing and composing 20 red triangles on that 5’ square blue background, as follows:

In the blue square, paint 20 masking-tape-edged triangular paint-shapes, one at a time (all in one even, medium red to keep it simple), of intuitively varied sizes, angular configurations, and orientations, not overlapping (just one plane to keep it simple), within any still available space, cropped by the square and/or not, as you choose. Specify, distribute, and balance all your triangle shapes as you add them one at a time. Distribute and balance your composition within the implicitly centered square, without introducing any further, more particular geometric compositional structure. That would be an open composition of solely geometric shapes.

Now imagine painting the same 5’ square blue background with 400 approximately 1”x1” individual free hand 1” house-brushmarks, all in that same medium red, in a regular 20x20 grid array (one mark more or less centered in each 3”x3” square of the unbroken medium blue background). That would be a structured composition of body-language shapes as their coincident geometric shapes (probably appearing as variously oriented squares or rectangles, or simply irregular dots).

7. A One-Page Summary – Abstract Composition, in Abstract Composition Space

In Chapter 4, we’ve been looking at how (rectangle-shaped) abstract painting works just like (rectangle-shaped) figurative painting works. Markmaking, drawing, and composition organize the paint you see into viewing experience in your perception/imagination, but with abstract shapes, composed in abstract composition space. It’s simple. In both kinds of painting, we see paint-shapes. And we perceive/imagine shapes, distributed and balanced into a coherent, unified whole composition within the
composition space's implicitly centered rectangle shape.

And further, in all abstract painting we perceive/imagine the painter painting, as implied by their body-language and/or even-color markmaking, while we perceive/imagine the composition, just as we do in any modern figurative painting that was painted with declaratively individual markmaking. So, just to summarize very briefly:

**Plane-Space** We perceive/imagine abstract composition space (the composition space of fully abstract paintings, like Pollock’s cast-paintings or Mondrian’s grid-network paintings) as a geometric/mathematical plane-space, structured as a two-dimensional plane or overlapping two-dimensional planes, whereas we perceive/imagine the composition space of figurative paintings as a continuous volume of natural space.

Some abstract paintings do present a very general *figurative* composition of their abstract shapes – appearing as, for example, very general landscapes of abstract shapes, and we perceive/imagine the composition space in those abstract paintings as a continuous volume of natural space.

**Abstract Shapes** We see actual three-dimensional paint-shapes, either geometric paint-shapes (like Mondrian’s and Rothko’s) or body-language paint-shapes (like De Kooning’s and Pollock’s). They imply and we perceive/imagine abstract shapes, either geometric shapes (like Mondrian’s and Rothko’s two-dimensional rectangles) or body-language shapes (meaning shape-records of the painter painting in four dimensions, there-then, and there-then, and there-then, and there-then, like De Kooning’s and Pollock’s).

And, body-language paint-shapes (like De Kooning’s and Pollock’s) also inherently imply highly particular geometric shapes to our perception/imagination (meaning highly particular geometric/mathematical figures that we perceive as similar or different areas, lines, points, angles, curves, and so on), everywhere at once. (Those coincident geometric shapes/figures can be composed simply spatially, everywhere at once, just like the geometric shapes that geometric paint-shapes imply to our perception/imagination.)

**The Composition of Abstract Shapes Across Plane-Space** By abstract composition (in rectangle-shaped paintings), I mean the distribution and balancing of geometric shapes across the implicitly centered, rectangle-shaped plane or overlapping planes of plane-space – either the geometric shapes implied by geometric paint-shapes (as in Mondrian and Rothko) or the geometric shapes (highly particular geometric/mathematical figures) also implied by body-language paint-shapes (as in De Kooning and Pollock).

I’ve used the term *open* composition to refer to the painter’s distribution and balancing of their shapes across plane-space within the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape – without introducing any further, more particular geometric compositional structure. In my view, this is how De Kooning and Pollock intuitively composed their body-language shapes’ coincident geometric shapes.

I’ve used the term *structured* composition to refer to the painter’s distribution and balancing of their shapes across plane-space within both the composition space’s implicitly centered rectangle shape and some further, more particular geometric compositional structure (as in Mondrian’s grid-network structure and Rothko’s stacked rectangles structure). In my view, this is how Mondrian and Rothko intuitively composed their
geometric shapes.

I’ve also given thought-painting examples of how open composition can distribute and balance solely geometric shapes, and structured composition can distribute and balance body-language shapes’ coincident geometric shapes.

And that’s Chapter 4, about the abstract composition of abstract shapes in abstract composition space. Now, with the first four chapters’ simple, interrelated descriptive terms available for looking at abstract paintings as abstract painting, on with the show and the history.

5. The Four Basic Combinations of Abstract Markmaking With Abstract Shapes
(in De Kooning, Pollock, Mondrian, Davis, Rothko, Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Hofmann, and Kandinsky. With Epilog on Kandinsky and Mondrian as the first abstract painters, and markmaking in Cézanne, the father of Early-Twentieth-Century Modernist figurative painting – according to Matisse and Picasso, among others.) Also, a cameo appearance by the highly respected and influential father of Impressionism, Camille Pissarro. And for comparison, the paintings of William Bouguereau, the Academy’s most celebrated counter to all this highly individual painting.

In this chapter, I’ll show you the four basic combinations of abstract markmaking with abstract shapes, in the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, and eight of the most famous abstract pioneers from the post-war period in the U.S., say 1945-1970. The Epilog are six pages about the historic beginnings of definitively abstract painting between around 1910 (in Kandinsky) and 1920 (in Mondrian), and the beginnings of modern figurative painting in the 40 years before.

By abstract markmaking I mean the two kinds of declaratively individual markmaking – body-language and even-color markmaking – that first widely appeared in figurative painting in the late 1800s and early 1900s and then were transferred into the drawing of abstract shapes by the pioneers of the new tradition. And the two basic kinds of abstract shapes are body-language shapes and geometric shapes. So the four basic combinations are: body-language markmaking used to draw body-language shapes or geometric shapes, and even-color markmaking used to draw geometric shapes or body-language shapes.

In the next four pages, we’ll view:
1. body-language markmaking used to draw body-language shapes in De Kooning and Pollock,
2. even-color markmaking used to draw geometric shapes in Mondrian, Davis, and Noland,
3. body-language markmaking used (as body-language and even-color markmaking) to draw geometric shapes in Rothko and Louis, and
4. even-color markmaking used (as even-color and body-language markmaking) to draw body-language shapes in Frankenthaler.

And then we’ll look historically at the work of Hofmann, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Cézanne, Pissarro, and Bouguereau. (Even just on the monitor, this is a very good show.)

As we viewed in Chapters 3 and 4, De Kooning’s brushwork (in his exclusively abstract paintings) and Pollock’s cast-painting are straightforward examples of body-
language markmaking used to draw body-language shapes. For a reminder of De Kooning, from 1955, Google De Kooning Composition and go to the Guggenheim site (or better if available, the arthistory.about.com site – expand twice). And for Pollock, from 1950, Google Lavender Mist and go to the NGA Web Feature site.

Mondrian's rectangles, from around 1920 on (as we also viewed in Chapters 3 and 4), and Gene Davis' vertical stripes, from around 1960 on, are both straightforward examples of even-color markmaking used to draw geometric shapes. For a reminder of Mondrian, Google Broadway Boogie Woogie, and go to the MoMA.org/collection/browse site. (If MoMA's image is not available, go to the arthistory.about.com site.) For Davis, Google Gene Davis, and go to the Gene Davis Catalogue at the artnet site. Click on “Works of Art”, then click on “1960s”, to view some definitively 1960s abstract paintings. Click on them to enlarg. Davis' even-color stripes provided an early, basic example for all the geometrically-drawn, even-colored abstract color-painting that flowered briefly in that optimistically beginning decade, succeeding the post-war and 1950s work of pioneers like De Kooning, Pollock, and Rothko. (Davis was 40 in 1960.)

So Mondrian, from 1920, and Davis, from 1960, used even-color markmaking to draw geometric shapes. Mark Rothko, however, in his stacked rectangles paintings from around 1950 on, used body-language markmaking to draw geometric shapes, thereby presenting the third basic combination of abstract markmaking and shapes. Rothko combined body-language markmaking with even-color markmaking, by using his body-language markmaking (his very free hand brushwork) to draw his rectangles in even color (not a uniform single even color, but a more or less uniformly blended even color).

For a reminder of Rothko from Chapter 4, view Orange and Yellow, 1956. Google Rothko Orange and Yellow and go to the artchive site, or select from the images at the top of the Google list.

For the fourth basic combination – even-color markmaking used to draw body-language shapes – view Helen Frankenthaler's celebrated, influential 1952 painting Mountains and Sea (about 7'x10'). Google Frankenthaler Mountains and Sea, and go to the archive site.

Frankenthaler, who painted Mountains and Sea at 23, in 1952, pioneered stain markmaking, by both pouring and freely brushing very thinned oil paints on/into raw canvas (not sized or primed), flat on the floor, to draw body-language shapes. (But she composed her abstract, body-language shapes into natural figurative compositions, as I'll discuss below.)

In Mountains and Sea, I view all of Frankenthaler's shapes as body-language shapes, except for the natural sea-shape. (She does sometimes include geometric shapes or specific natural shapes in her paintings, but Frankenthaler drawing most typically and famously means spontaneously drawn body-language shapes like these.) And many of the shapes in Mountains and Sea were drawn by straightforward body-language markmaking (like De Kooning's and Pollock's), without exceptional or featured even-color extension (especially, obviously, the narrow charcoal lines). Stain markmaking is not inherently even-color markmaking, and can appear as straightforward body-language markmaking, just like a brush-stroke of full-bodied paint on primed canvas.

But many of Mountains and Sea's other body-language shapes were obviously drawn to also feature her stain markmaking as extended even-color – hence clearly presenting
her stain markmaking as even-color markmaking used to draw body-language shapes. And still other shapes in Mountains and Sea balance body-language and even-color markmaking in primarily linear body-language shapes with extended even color width.

Frankenthaler’s work always features her markmaking-drawing. In Mountains and Sea, the integration of body-language and even-color markmaking in her drawing of body-language shapes, at every scale, from the largest lines and extended areas to the smallest lines and smallest extended areas, stained edges, splashes, and sprays, presents her sensibilities with an extraordinarily dramatic (high-contrast) combination of large-scale bodily power and large-scale extended-color optical power with very delicate, intimate, body-language and color detail.

The influence of Frankenthaler’s pioneering stain markmaking-drawing in Mountains and Sea began even before the painting left her studio. But to first view how she immediately developed its potential, go back to the same Google list, at Frankenthaler Mountains and Sea, and then go to the artnet.com/magazine site, which has reproductions of five of her paintings from 1957-59. Click to expand them.

Notice the volumetric natural figurative composition space of these paintings – like Mountains and Sea’s – containing all that pioneering abstract markmaking-drawing of body-language shapes. Frankenthaler’s paintings (intentionally) typically imply a very general figurative composition, like landscape.

Conversely, Frankenthaler’s typical composition doesn’t imply a full-frame plane-space composition, like De Kooning’s Composition and Pollock’s Lavender Mist do – a two-dimensional composition of the geometric/mathematical figures that are also implied by body-language paint-shapes. And those two compositions, unlike Frankenthaler’s, are very difficult to perceive/imagine as distributed and balanced in volumetric natural composition space.

Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland saw Mountains and Sea, 1952, together, in Frankenthaler’s studio the next year. (In 1953, Louis was 40 and Noland 29.) Both Louis’ and Noland’s subsequent painting was also based on stain markmaking – Louis’ on pour-staining and Noland’s on brush-staining. But Louis and Noland soon began using their stain markmaking to draw repeating geometric shapes (stripes, target bands), and composed them in repeatable geometric compositional structures (forms). Gene Davis (with them, the third famous “Washington, D.C., school” color-painter) was developing his own geometric drawing and composition at the same time, coming to his vertical stripes form. So all three of them were soon composing geometric shapes into structured abstract compositions across plane-space (like Mondrian with his grid-network form, from around 1920 on).

For Louis, Google Morris Louis and go to Morris Louis Online at the artcyclopedia site. In the list of “Paintings in Museums and Public Art Galleries”, click on “Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden”. You can enlarge the paintings twice. Louis died in 1962, at 49, still just beginning his mature work. But these five paintings, all done between 1959 and 1961, fairly represent the color painting for which he is famous. Note that all are over 6½’ high, and the two largest are very large. Where, 1960, from the Florals and Columns series, is about 8’x12’, and Delta Theta, 1961, from the Unfurleds series, is about 8½’x14’.

In all these paintings, Louis (like Frankenthaler) used stain markmaking as body-language markmaking. Viewing Louis’ poured shapes, we immediately perceive/imagine
the painter handling the paint, with all that his pouring implies to us about his attitudes, his sensibilities, and his sensuous awareness of the material world. But Louis (unlike Frankenthaler and like Rothko) used his body-language markmaking to draw repeating geometric shapes in even color (pour-shaped rivulet-stripes – short and wide, long and thin, tapered and not, curvilinear and straight), which he composed across plane-space in repeatable geometric forms.

For Noland, Google Noland Early Circles and go to the sharecom early circles site, to see how Noland’s initially very free hand brush drawing of a roughly circular band gradually became, between ’56 and ’63, his careful brush drawing of regular target bands in the famous Targets, like Untitled, 1963. Click to enlarge. (Noland returned to the target form in the 1990s, and you can view his work from around 2000 by Googling Noland Mysteries and going to the sharecom site, but the famous Targets are the 1960s paintings of the target form.)

By the way, I find the first two paintings in that 1956–63 Noland retrospective – Globe, 1956, and Ex-Nihilo, 1958 – especially interesting for showing us the road that Noland did not take. In those earliest target paintings, Noland used his stain markmaking as body-language markmaking to very freely draw his geometric shapes (his target bands) in even color. So Noland began the target work painting like Rothko and Louis – using body-language markmaking to draw repeating similar geometric shapes in even color.

But over the next seven years, Noland gradually marginalized and eliminated the body-language component of his markmaking, and featured his beautiful stained color work only as even-color markmaking in geometrically regular bands (and later in other comparably regular geometric shapes, like horizontal stripes or chevrons). So when the Targets matured, Noland was painting like Davis and Mondrian, using even-color markmaking to draw repeating similar geometric shapes.

By Untitled, 1963, Noland’s acclaimed, mature, stained color work does present his sensibilities very personally. But he could also have continued, at the time or later, as he intuitively began (brilliantly, in my view), freely performing concentric, roughly circular even-color bands with a full range of body-language markmaking, and we would perceive the painter painting in both kinds of declaratively individual markmaking.

That potentially very powerful, very subtle, even more personal development of the target form – performing target bands in even color with fully gestural body-language markmaking – still remains to be explored at length and in depth and, I hope, in many painters’ body-language and color. (The acrylic paints that are especially appropriate for that exploration have advanced significantly since 1956, which was also the year that water-thinnable acrylic artist’s paints were first mass-marketed, by Liquitex. Those paints were liquid, however, and the first full-bodied Liquitex paints didn’t appear until 1963. Today’s technologically mature, much more intensely color-charged acrylic artist’s paints are available in consistencies from fluid to heavy body.)

So, to summarize, we’ve viewed the four basic combinations of abstract markmaking (body-language and even-color) with abstract shapes (body-language shapes and geometric shapes), as follows:

In De Kooning and Pollock, we viewed body-language markmaking used to draw body-language shapes. In Mondrian, Davis, and Noland, we viewed even-color markmaking used to draw geometric shapes. In Rothko and Louis, we viewed body-language markmaking
used (as body-language and even-color markmaking) to draw geometric shapes. And in Frankenthaler, we viewed even-color markmaking used (as even-color and body-language markmaking) to draw body-language shapes – but composed into very general figurative compositions, like Kandinsky’s and Hofmann’s, as we’ll view and consider now.

Unlike all the other abstract painters we’ve viewed so far, Frankenthaler typically composes her abstract shapes into very general figurative compositions. Frankenthaler’s paintings share this characteristic combination of pioneering abstract markmaking-drawing (of abstract shapes) and very general volumetric figurative composition with typical paintings by two other outstanding abstract pioneers, Wassily Kandinsky (from around 1910 on) and Hans Hofmann (from around 1960 on). Their sites follow. (As a new college graduate, Frankenthaler tried studying with Hofmann in 1950. But not finding it helpful, she left in weeks, two years before Mountains and Sea.) All three painters are especially acclaimed and widely enjoyed for their pioneering liberation of highly individual, deeply personal body-language and even-color markmaking into abstract markmaking-drawing. We’ll view Kandinsky in a separate epilog below.

Hofmann is also very famous in American art history as a drawing teacher. Born in 1880 in Bavaria, he was a contemporary and acquaintance of Picasso (born in 1881 in Spain), Matisse, and the avant-garde community in early 1900s Paris. He started his own school in New York in 1933, and quickly became perhaps the most influential (and legendarily inspiring) studio teacher of declaratively individual figurative markmaking-drawing in America. His teaching was a primary influence in establishing the dedicatedly experimental attitude of the then very small community of internationally aware painters in New York. One wonderful development from that pervasive experimental attitude was the mid-century abstract painting we’ve been viewing. Another was Hofmann’s own late abstract work.

Go to the website hanshofmann.net, then click on “paintings”. I especially recommend his paintings from his 80s, starting around 1960. (Don’t miss The Lark from 1960, on the left.) These paintings are a master class in abstract markmaking-drawing. I say master class because that’s why these paintings will look so completely obvious to you. Even if you haven’t seen Hofmann’s work before, you’ve seen his influence. But keep looking. Once you get past the shock of the familiar, Hofmann’s work will still look deeply and truly personal to you (and for you), in your present, and therefore still new.

**Epilog – Kandinsky and Mondrian (the first abstract painters), and Markmaking in Cézanne (the father of Early-Twentieth-Century Modernist figurative painting)**

Kandinsky

If you Google Kandinsky and go to the WebMuseum – ibiblio – site, you can view his sudden, rapid, pioneering progress around 1910, from drawing natural landscape (figurative) shapes to drawing body-language (abstract) shapes – while still composing his shapes into very general, volumetric natural figurative compositions.

Wassily Kandinsky is often called the first abstract painter for that pioneering abstract drawing of body-language shapes, beginning around 1910 in Germany when he was 43. Kandinsky, who was a Russian born in Moscow in 1866, with a law and economics degree
from the U of M, lived most of his life in Russia and Germany, and spent his career in the
Russian, and especially the German modern art worlds.

Kandinsky had, however, lived near Paris for a year in 1906-1907, just when Matisse
and the “Fauve” (wild beast) painters were dramatically and famously advancing both
body-language markmaking and brightly-hued, declaratively individual color work in
figurative painting (Google Fauvism, see Wikipedia). Kandinsky participated in that
Paris art world and exhibited in the major Salons. He was already 40 then (and he began
drawing lessons when he was 10, though he only committed to professional painting at
29, in 1896), and his markmaking-drawing and color work developed rapidly after that
exposure to the French Modernists, as you can view in the 1908 Autumn in Bavaria.

Then, with his body-language markmaking significantly liberated to draw natural
shapes very generally, Kandinsky went on immediately to begin substituting his own
body-language shapes for natural shapes. And his shapes began to present colors that
were independently the painter’s, since body-language shapes are not associated with any
given color as natural shapes are.

Thus, Kandinsky achieved this radical transition from figurative to abstract drawing
(from drawing natural shapes to drawing body-language shapes) by composing his
pioneering body-language shapes into volumetric figurative compositions implying
very general landscape. Over the next 30 years, Kandinsky increasingly drew geometric
shapes, like lines, dots, disks, and polygons, and shapes that were geometric refinements
of body-language shapes or of natural shapes. And he did sometimes experiment with
abstract, geometrically structured plane-space composition of those shapes. But mainly,
he continued composing his shapes in apparently volumetric figurative composition space,
although horizon-free and gravity-free, like outer space.

But between 1910 and 1914 (when World War I began and he returned to Moscow),
Kandinsky definitively pioneered abstract drawing in painting, by using body-language
markmaking to draw distinctly body-language shapes. Those first years of Kandinsky’s
abstract painting already presented the characteristic, fully mature Kandinsky
combination of abstract markmaking-drawing and volumetric figurative composition that
he would continue exploring for the next three decades, and many interested viewers have
judged that early abstract period to be his most visually powerful and personally involving
work. I agree. I view his pre-World War I abstract work as an independent standard of
excellence for boldly and subtly impassioned abstract painting.

Kandinsky and Mondrian both lived until 1944, Kandinsky to 78 and Mondrian to
71, but they pursued very different visual interests, in geographically separated careers.

Mondrian

To view a succinct retrospective of Mondrian’s rapid pioneering progress in the 1910s
from figurative painting to fully abstract painting, Google Piet Mondrian and go to the
archive site. Click on “View Image List”. The site lists the paintings by only their titles
and year, rather than by thumbnail pictures of the paintings. But the visual story I’m about
to briefly show and tell you – of Mondrian’s radical development of his abstract painting
from his figurative painting in the 1910s – can be viewed in just the first nine paintings,
from 1908 to 1920, and the chronological list should make the story easy to follow in
those paintings. (If sometime you want a much fuller, multi-page survey of Mondrian's work before, during, and in the 25 years after this crucial decade, Google Piet Mondrian Olga's and go to Olga's Gallery, at the abcgallery site.)

To any abstract painter today, and I expect you'll agree, this visual story appears so completely obvious in its progress that in retrospect it seems goal-oriented and simply inevitable, as if Mondrian knew where he was going and methodically went there. There, of course, is his extraordinarily identifiable and famous painting since this story, which all interested viewers recognize as a definitive, initial example of fully abstract painting.

In 1911, Piet Mondrian was a 39 year-old figurative painter in Holland. In October of that year he exhibited in an Artists' Society show in Amsterdam that included some early Cubist work by Picasso and Braque (from 1908). Mondrian's painting had already become increasingly geometric and planar, and in December he moved to Paris to follow the development of Cubism, which Picasso and Braque had begun together around 1907, though without approaching them. By 1912, they (both 30) had reached their most fragmented geometric analysis of their figurative subjects (people and things in places).

Picasso and Braque were always figurative painters, but by 1912 their Cubist geometric analysis of natural volumes had become so extremely geometric and planar in appearance that their compositions were often mainly structured by overall distributions of short horizontal and vertical lines, meeting or intersecting at right angles. The reticent Mondrian, privately pursuing his own analytic project in Paris, was painting horizontal/vertical analyses of building facades and trees.

In 1914, Mondrian went back to Holland for a visit and was trapped there by World War I until 1919. When he then returned to Paris, he found that Picasso and Braque had both (now separately) returned to comparatively more familiar figurative drawing. French painting remained mainly figurative under the continued leadership of Matisse and Picasso, with Matisse living until 1954, at 84, and Picasso until 1973, at 91, while abstract painting developed in the new New York art world at mid-century. Mondrian remained a comparatively marginal painter in Paris, until in 1938, at 66, he left ahead of the next war, moving first to London, and then in 1940 to New York. He died there in 1944, at 71, his last finished painting the very New York masterpiece, Broadway Boogie Woogie.

But in Holland, during World War I, Mondrian had gone on at full speed with his horizontal/vertical analysis, first of the ocean surface and then of the implicitly centered rectangle of plane-space itself. And by 1920, back in Paris at 48, Mondrian had produced a body of painting that definitively presented both the abstract markmaking-drawing of abstract shapes (even-colored rectangles) and abstract composition (both open and structured) across plane-space. And he had arrived at his now-famous black line grid-network form for structured composition.

Mondrian spent most of his mature career in Paris, so when the Met presented the New York art world's definitive coming-of-age retrospective, New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940 to 1970 (in 1969), featuring all that pioneering abstract painting, he was, of course, not in the show. But his work was well known to every painter who was in the show, thanks to early respect from the connoisseurs of European Modernism who had gathered in the New York art world to support modern painting, led by the Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 1929.

I've read that early in 1943, Mondrian's dealer, Peggy Guggenheim, asked his
opinion about some of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, at around age 30, which were incomprehensible to her (not just her). These would have been some of Pollock’s early full-frame brush attacks on canvas. And Mondrian replied, after extended silent viewing, that this might be the most exciting painting he’d seen in a long time.

Pollock, supported by Guggenheim from 1943 with a guaranteed living income, a major commission, and four solo shows at her gallery, began his historically acclaimed cast-painting in 1947, at 35. By 1948 he was a recovering alcoholic and by 1950, at 38, he was at his mature peak and star-famous thanks to Life magazine, but utterly without confidence in his entirely intuitive achievement, and drinking heavily again. By 1954 he was a personal ruin and had ceased painting, and in 1956, driving drunk, he crashed his car into the woods on Long Island and died at 44.

I’m just sure that Mondrian, of all painters, could appreciate the full-frame, two-dimensional-plane-space composition that Pollock was intuitively developing, even while his drawing was still figuratively-based in the early 1940s – even when all that was obvious was Pollock’s embarrassingly blunt body-language brushwork, awkwardly animating that nascent plane-space. But that early Pollock markmaking could also be hypnotically energetic and turbulent, and daringly emotionally charged, and I’m also sure that the ascetically self-disciplined Mondrian, of all painters, could appreciate the intense sincerity of Pollock’s increasingly unbridled body-language markmaking when he felt it.

Piet Mondrian, painting Broadway Boogie Woogie in wartime New York, was the living link between the comprehensive developments of modern individual painting in European figurative painting in the late 1800s and early 1900s and their explosive post-war expansion in abstract painting in the new art world.

Cézanne (Pissarro, Bouguereau)

Van Gogh, who died in 1890 at 37, was perhaps the superlative pioneer of body-language markmaking in figurative painting, as perhaps Matisse was, by around 1910, of even-color markmaking. But by 1900, Cézanne’s famed markmaking had consummately united body-language and even-color.

Both Matisse and Picasso are often cited for recognizing Cézanne as the father of their Early-Twentieth-Century Modernist painting, for comparative visual reasons that, after a full century of Cézanne’s radical influence on all subsequent modern figurative painting, we’re still trying to translate into helpfully descriptive words. In our usual historical terms, Matisse’s and Picasso’s painting in the early 1900s follows Post-Impressionism in the 1880s and 90s, as in Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, and Gauguin – after Impressionism, from say 1870, as in Monet and Renoir (all called Modernist).

By uncontroversial convention, the father of Impressionism (which began very quietly in the late 1860s) was Camille Pissarro, 1830-1903, friend and colleague of Monet, Renoir, and all. He was a loving painter, especially of the rural landscape, devoted husband and father of nine, subsisting marginally on his family farm. He’s also the older mentor who got the gloomily dark young Cézanne to lighten up, and taught Gauguin, the stockbroker, to paint. (A Pissarro site follows below.)

By “the Impressionist period” (or “the Impressionist movement” or sometimes even just “Impressionism”) we usually mean two nested groups of highly individual, all very
loosely affiliated painters, in Paris, over about two decades between roughly the mid-
1860s and 1880s. The larger group includes, for outstanding examples, not just Monet and
Renoir, but also Manet and Degas. That whole larger group led the about 50 year long
(say, 1865 to World War I) comprehensive development of figurative painting that I view
as liberating all painters’ unprecedentedly independent modern individual awareness (as I
discussed briefly in Chapter 2).

A smaller group within is directly identified with the development of typical,
definitively “Impressionist” painting – that is, painting outdoors (“en plein air”) with
rapid, declaratively individual Impressionist brush-stroking, without black paint, to
capture momentary light effects. Pissarro, Monet, and Renoir are in this smaller group,
but not Manet or Degas – although both of them were influenced by the pioneering
Impressionists’ work and absorbed their innovations selectively into their own highly
individual projects. (And, speaking of Impressionist markmaking, the Impressionists’
outdoor painting – that is, painting while actually seeing and feeling the landscape
environment – was made practically possible in 1841 by the invention in America of the
collapsible metal paint tube, which replaced pig’s bladder for storing oils.)

Pissarro was a uniting figure and friend in both groups. He was an original pioneer
of Impressionist markmaking, color work, and plein air painting – he, Monet, and
Renoir are the paradigm Impressionist painters. And he was also an active participant
in the community activities of that whole larger first painting generation of dedicatedly
individual modern painters (who were also each other’s closest professional colleagues,
sharing their rejection and ridicule by the establishment, and holding independent
exhibitions together) because Pissarro could get along even with Degas.

(Collaterally, all those developments within painting on behalf of modern individual
awareness also effectively ended the state-associated French Academic painting system’s
authoritarian control over training, practice – including subject matter – and exhibition.
That state-centered art world was originally established 200 years before in the mid-
1600s, under the Sun King Louis XIV, at home in Versailles, consistent with his royal
obligation to provide Europe with a definitive example of unlimited state-centralization
on absolute monarchy.)

Cézanne, a young and passionately committed but intensely awkward painter, met
Pissarro in 1861 in Paris, when Cézanne was 22 and Pissarro was 31, and was strongly
influenced and liberated by his Impressionism through the 1870s. But the older Cézanne
we’ll soon view on the web is the historically acclaimed, fully mature Post-Impressionist
painter, of the succeeding professional generation that includes Van Gogh, Seurat, and
Gauguin. And at the foundation of Cézanne’s most celebrated later work is his own
unique markmaking.

And at the foundation of Cézanne’s mature markmaking is his famed color-patch
brushmark, which unifies body-language and even-color markmaking at a single stroke.
The economic balance within each Cézanne brushmark is exquisite – between the
determined, concentrated, passionately self-disciplined body-language of his markmaking
and the mark’s modular surface of even color, which provided the basis for his acclaimed
color work. Cézanne’s extraordinarily solitary, nature-excited individuality is palpably
colored into every deliberately but unhesitatingly placed brushmark in his mature
painting.
The sample of his landscapes I will recommend below was painted over the 20 years before his death at 67, in 1906, of pneumonia from being caught in a storm while painting. These paintings will show you his markmaking’s eloquence for presenting his intimately personal individual awareness of our highly recognizable shared natural world. This is the single-mindedly dedicated, increasingly reclusive Cézanne, at his most direct, performing the paint live in nature, near his family home in Aix in the south of France.

Many of Cézanne’s unusually remote and therefore unusually little-changed views have been photographed from approximately where they were painted, both in black and white and in color, allowing remarkably direct comparison of the photographs with the paintings, and those paintings and photographs are reproduced together in books. The resemblance – and what resemblance can mean, in the highly individual, deeply personal representations of modern figurative painting – are eye-opening for viewing all modern figurative painting. Between this sample of his landscapes, and the sample of his still lifes on another page of this site, you can get a good look at our conventional standard of excellence in modern painting in 1900, for interested painters and viewers since.

(“Since” really began publicly in 1907, with the posthumous revelation of Cézanne’s full radical achievement at his memorial retrospective in the Salon D’Automne, and his acclaim by the leading modern painters, with whom his influence was already established and growing. That respect is – to say the least – undiminished among interested painters and viewers today.)

Google Cézanne, go to the WebMuseum – ibiblio – site, and click on “The Mont Sainte-Victoire and Bibemus Saga”. And after that intense little sample of Cézanne live in the light, go back to the home page and click on “Still Life galleria”.

And you can view Impressionism and declaratively individual body-language Impressionist markmaking appearing in Pissarro by Googling Camille Pissarro and going to the archive site. Click on “View Image List”. Compare his 1867 View of l’Hermitage, Jallais Hills, Pontoise, with the 1872 Le Verger (The Orchard), just five years later, and then, from 1877, The Rainbow and Path Through the Woods in Summer.

And while we’re looking at the beginnings of Modernism, you might like to view exactly what the Académie des Beaux-Arts de l’Institut de France and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts expected that all those highly individual painters weren’t delivering. (Both Monet and Renoir, for example, were students.) Google Bouguereau ARC Biography and go to the ARC Museum’s Bouguereau Biography site. Then scroll down, viewing the work of William Bouguereau (1825-1905), acclaimed member and professor, who was very famous and popular at the time (which most viewers now know only as the Modernists’ time). I recommend expanding “The Rapture of Psyche”, 1895, twice, to view the antithesis of the individualistic Modernist project.

This site offers a very serious defense of Bouguereau’s painting. In the necessary paragraph (further down) about his famously telling Matisse, who was briefly his student, that he would never know how to draw, they actually use the phrase “benevolent master”. When you look up “Academic painting” in the painting dictionary, you find Bouguereau’s pictures.

I’m sending you to the ARC’s home page next, in the interest of fair and balanced reporting. They advocate for a return to very specific 19th century Academic standards of excellence in painting that, in their opinion, have been utterly corrupted by all the
post 1860 work you have viewed with this paper (figurative and abstract) except for Bouguereau’s, which they hold in their highest esteem. I believe they would unhesitatingly agree with my summary of their position, but you can read and view it for yourself at the website artrenewal.org. Click on “Philosophy”. Scroll down a bit and read “The ARC Philosophy / Table of Contents”. I believe you’ll be surprised by the intensity of their commitment to their general view, and to the continuing practice of Academic painting.

The general view that informs this paper continues now, either with the next 13 pages, which are Part 2’s analytic look at the work of four internationally acclaimed abstract painters who were showing new work in 2000 – or on page 46, with Part 3’s exciting 700 year history of European/American painting (both the figurative and abstract traditions) in 21 pages. (You can always come back for Part 2.)
Part 2:  An Analytic Look at Four Contemporary Abstract Painters’ New Work

6. Into the Twenty-First Century, Say 2000 (Marden, Scully, Riley, and Kelly)

And now, some abstract painting from around 2000. Part 2 is 13 pages to appreciate the work of four outstanding contemporary painters. First, we’ll view recent paintings by Brice Marden and Sean Scully, both working at full stretch in their 60s (in 2008). Marden now uses even-color markmaking to draw body-language shapes (Frankenthaler’s pioneering markmaking-drawing combination, very surprisingly developed in plane-space) and composes open compositions (like De Kooning and Pollock). Scully uses body-language markmaking to draw geometric shapes (like Rothko) and composes complex structured compositions (like Mondrian).

In Chapter 9 (in Part 3) I’ll explain why, for historical visual reasons, I view Marden and Scully as leading painters of the new abstract tradition’s second period. But for now, I will just show you, quite specifically, how they have developed basic general painting practices and visual structures that were introduced in the pioneering painting we have already viewed.

After that analytic look at Marden’s and Scully’s paintings, I’ll show you some recent and early work by two long-established and internationally famous senior abstract painters, Bridget Riley and Ellsworth Kelly, whose highly individual visual interests are taking even-color markmaking in geometric shapes into the new century.

Now, work from around 2000 by Brice Marden and Sean Scully, two of our most respected contemporary abstract painters.

Marden

I recommend two Marden paintings, on different sites. First, Google Brice Marden Chinese Dancing. Click on the UBS Art Collection site. Then click on the up-arrow above the little painting. Then click on the title “Chinese Dancing”. It’s 5’x9’, 1996.

Next, go directly to the website hirshhorn.si.edu. In the “search art collection” window, type Cold Mountain 2, then click on the arrow. Expand the image twice to see the markmaking up close. Cold Mountain 2, 1991, is 9’x12’. (Cold Mountain was an eighth century Chinese poet, and therefore calligrapher.)

Back in the early 1990s, with the muted-color Cold Mountain paintings, Marden became internationally famous for his extraordinarily involving body-language markmaking by very long-handled brushwork. Chinese Dancing presents the same kinds of drawing and composition as Cold Mountain 2 — that is, body-language shapes in an open composition. But now Marden’s markmaking is full-spectrum even-color markmaking, used as body-language markmaking to draw body-language shapes in even color. So now, as in Chinese Dancing, he’s taking us along again on his unhurried, meditative explorations of plane-space, but this time we’re following the spontaneously appearing paths of his new, even-colored “moving stripes” (just my term).

Marden’s Drawing of his Moving Stripe Shapes

Marden’s moving stripes are his highly individual body-language shapes, drawn by
even-color markmaking (oil-brushwork). The term “stripe” makes sense here because the sides of his shapes remain approximately equidistant. By “moving”, I'm referring to his shapes as primarily the body-language shape-records of Marden’s slow hand brushing the paint, as he gradually explores the overlapping-plane-space and draws our attention further into his own even sense of time passing. An individual shape would just be any segment or interval of his continuous moving stripes to which we give separate notice. (So in these terms, his extended moving stripes are continuously connected moving stripe shapes.)

Marden’s Composition

As we view Chinese Dancing, we perceive/imagine Marden drawing out his moving stripe shapes, there-then, and there-then, and there-then. He draws a moving stripe freely across plane-space until he reaches the edge of the world (and sometimes follows it along for a while), and then leads us back in, continuously changing direction.

And as he goes, Marden also intuitively distributes and balances all his meandering, looping, body-language paint-shapes into a coherent, everywhere-at-once, overlapping-plane-space composition of their implied geometric shapes/figures. Thus, Marden has assumed and developed the general kind of composition (open composition) that De Kooning and Pollock pioneered around 1950, for composing their own body-language paint-shapes, drawn by their very individually different body-language markmaking.

De Kooning’s oil-brush body-language markmaking-drawing, as we viewed in Composition, 1955, was refined by his formal training as a young man in Holland, drawing the model and studying to become a certified artist. (He immigrated to the United States at 22, in 1926, and was 51 painting Composition in 1955.) De Kooning’s markmaking-drawing was sometimes referred to as “biomorphic”, in a common critical term of the time, meaning not representing specific life-shapes, but generally biological or organic in appearance.

Pollock’s radically expansive body-language markmaking-drawing, as we viewed in Lavender Mist, 1950, was refined by the influences of gravity and the atmosphere, after being projected over the flat, outstretched canvas by his rhythmically repeating full-body gestures. Hence, Pollock’s markmaking-drawing presents more geometrically regular body-language paint-shapes than De Kooning’s, and Pollock’s composition presents much more repetition of highly similar body-language paint-shapes than does De Kooning’s composition.

So Marden’s repetition of his even more geometrically regular and similar body-language paint-shapes in Chinese Dancing presents more geometric similarities to Pollock’s markmaking-drawing and composition than to De Kooning’s. (And Cold Mountain 2’s markmaking is straightforward body-language markmaking, without significant even color extension like the markmaking in Chinese Dancing. So Cold Mountain 2 presents that further general similarity to Pollock’s cast-paintings – while still presenting very different markmaking, drawing, and composition from Pollock’s, both technically and personally.)

Noticing the similarities of geometric regularity and repetition between Marden’s and Pollock’s body-language paint-shapes and open compositions – even though those similarities are highly general – does help us to appreciate the deep differences between
Marden’s and Pollock’s highly individual and deeply personal paintings, from their very different times. Look at 1950 Pollock’s impulsively urgent, sudden gestural displays of life–in–the–moment emotional release (like Brando’s and Bird’s, which also came out of New York in the 1940s). Compare 2000 Marden’s patient, constant, even–paced pursuit of contemporary beauty, as his body–language drawing modulates – and his even–color markmaking tempers – continuous unpredictable change. And his steady dynamic balancing calms the chaotic turbulence that we’re all feeling now in our shared geometric/mathematical world. This is abstract painting from the turn of the twenty–first century.

**Scully**

Please Google Sean Scully Metropolitan and go to the Metropolitan Museum’s “Sean Scully: Wall of Light” site to view his 2006 show. Then click on “View images from this exhibition”. (You can expand the pictures twice.) Of course, when we’re noticing the appearances of “light” in reflective art like painting, the monitor is a particularly complicating source of examples – but you will get the beautiful picture and you’ll easily imagine why “Wall of Light” was a good poetic title for the paintings in this show live, too. Notice that these paintings range in actual size from very large, over a hundred square feet, to very small.

I believe you’ll agree that the “Wall of Light” analogy, which likens the appearances of these paintings to the appearances of sunlit (or moonlit) stone walls, does make intuitive sense, very generally, simply because these paintings present block–proportioned rectangles in a very full range of light/dark contrasts – very subtle through very dramatic. But also, the sunlit wall analogy can immediately make its intuitively familiar sense because we haven’t viewed an abstract composition of light/dark contrasts like this before, to provide an abstract visual reference.

I think the Wall of Light analogy, however, significantly understates the abstract painting achievement in this work. There’s no figurative representation here. And no natural scene ever looked like these compositions. The Met’s website can show you something of the viewing experience these paintings offer live. Let me just show you the elegant visual order in these paintings, which structures that viewing experience. For these five pages, let’s think of this work as abstract markmaking, drawing, and composition, organizing light/dark (color) contrasts.

The following discussion of light/dark contrasts refers to what painters call the value of a color, which is its comparative lightness or darkness (as measured on a “gray scale” from white=0 to black=10), not its hue, as in red, brown, or dirty yellow. I’m going to discuss the light/dark color contrasts in Scully’s paintings mostly as in a black and white photograph.

Regarding the title analogy’s background, I’ve read that this work was particularly inspired, back in the early 1980s, by Scully’s seeing the appearance of actual stone walls in Mexico change with the changing sunlight, and that this work was deeply informed by Scully’s study of Monet’s Rouen Cathedral paintings (1892–4), which represent the appearance of the cathedral’s actual stone walls under various sunlights. But these are not those.

When we see the appearances of sunlit nature, or we perceive/imagine the
appearances of sunlit nature by viewing their representation in Monet’s paintings, the coherent order of the light/dark contrasts we’re viewing is organized by the sun’s lighting of volumetric natural space. In Scully’s paintings, however, the coherent order of the light/dark contrasts we’re viewing is organized entirely by Scully, in plane-space. And Scully organizes his light/dark color contrasts precisely according to the three levels of painting practice – markmaking, drawing, and composition. I’ll show you.

These paintings are very straightforward as body-language markmaking-drawing, and very sophisticated as composition. Viewing live, you can directly feel the personal strength of this work, and intuitively recognize the coherence of the geometric order, and still have no clear idea of how all those rectangular paint-shapes of radiant body-language brushwork are actually organized for your viewing. But I think you’ll also enjoy understanding the order that you are visually perceiving, so I’m going to describe the organization of light/dark contrasts in these paintings as plainly as I can.

I’ll show you that order systematically, from the lowest organizational level, which is all that powerful markmaking, to the highest organizational level, which is Scully’s full-frame color composition. I’ll try to be precise and clear, but I’ll have to be constantly describing, so for the next four pages please have Scully’s work available to view while you read. The work will reward your attention, while you find out what kind of abstract, geometric/mathematical order your contemporary perception can simply enjoy.

I’ll describe Scully’s organization of his light/dark contrasts under the following six headings:

1. First, the subtle light/dark contrasts within Scully’s markmaking
2. Next, the dramatic light/dark contrasts among all the individual rectangle shapes of Scully’s drawing
3. A brief historical background note about color composition in abstract painting
4. Scully’s drawing composition (his “stripe-sets” form)
5. Scully’s color composition of his form (especially his composition of light/dark contrasts)
6. The circulation of Scully’s composition

1. First, the subtle light/dark contrasts within Scully’s markmaking
   Within each rectangular paint-shape, Scully’s layered, translucent, body-language oil-brushwork produces dancelingly subtle variations of light/dark contrast. (Such subtle oil-painting contrasts were introduced to figurative painting in the Renaissance – beginning in the early 1400s, and especially around 1500 in the glazed, glowing, oil-brush markmaking-drawing of such outstanding pioneers of oil-brushwork as Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian. They and their contemporaries, of course, produced those subtle, then-new oil-painting contrasts to shade unprecedentedly convincing representations of flesh, fabric, woods, and sky – not to perform extended surfaces of declaratively individual body-language markmaking.)

2. Next, the dramatic light/dark contrasts among all the individual rectangle shapes of Scully’s drawing
   Like Rothko, Scully uses body-language markmaking to draw rectangles in even color.
Each rectangle, therefore, as a whole shape, presents one average, more or less uniformly blended, even color/value. The light/dark contrasts between and among all the individual rectangles in each painting establish the range of light/dark contrasts of the painting (however all the individual rectangles are organized together in Scully’s composition, which we’ll consider below).

Those light/dark contrasts between and among all the individual rectangles in each painting typically include very dark/very light and many intermediate contrasts. We ordinarily see such a full range of light/dark contrasts in sunlit nature, as full reflection/full shade and various intermediate contrasts (but presented, of course, in sunlit nature’s own organization of light/dark contrasts).

So Scully’s drawing – of all the individual rectangles of one color/value each – typically establishes a very full range of light/dark contrasts that we associate with seeing nature in sunlight, from fully reflected to fully shaded. (And those light/dark contrasts would be presented between and among all the individual rectangle shapes of Scully’s drawing even if the individual rectangles were randomly composed, which, as we will soon consider, they certainly were not.)

3. A brief historical background note about color composition in abstract painting

This section is a background note about how abstract painting’s color work (the painter’s choice of paint-colors) and color composition are fundamentally different from figurative painting’s color work and color composition.

The natural shapes we perceive/imagine when viewing figurative paintings are associated with natural colors in our perception/imagination. The cypress tree in Van Gogh’s The Starry Night is green – or will be in the daylight anyway. A painter may choose colors to fulfill our expectations, as Leonardo did in the Mona Lisa, so that we can imagine her, in living color, and not notice Leonardo painting. Or a painter may choose colors that don’t readily fulfill our expectations, or even contradict our expectations, as Matisse did in the famously shocking 1905 portrait of Madame Matisse known as The Green Line or Green Stripe, and then we do notice the painter painting. (Google Green Stripe and go to the WebMuseum – ibiblio – site.) We may think the painter didn’t deliver the given color we expect because they just couldn’t, or because they were just being Matisse, but we notice the painter painting. (Of course, just what paint-colors can fulfill any viewer’s expectations depends on their viewing experience.)

By the way – when Matisse painted Green Stripe in 1905, even interested viewers were still getting used to noticing the painter painting in the new, declaratively individual body-language markmaking. And this new, declaratively individual color work was precisely the sort of over-the-top attention-demanding that got Matisse and his friends called the Fauves – the wild beasts. And then, of course, it was only one small step for Matisse to extend this declaratively individual color work into the declaratively individual even-color markmaking of paintings like The Red Studio, 1911. Well, one small step for Matisse. One giant leap for painting.

Unlike the colors in a figurative painting, the colors in an abstract painting are independently the painter’s, because abstract shapes (geometric shapes and body-language shapes) aren’t associated with any given color in our perception/imagination as natural
shapes are. So an abstract painting always presents a whole, full-frame color composition that is correspondingly independent of the drawing composition.

Hence, abstract pioneers like Rothko, Davis, and Noland drew and composed simple geometric shapes in repeatable geometric drawing-composition forms, like Rothko’s stacked rectangles form, Davis’ vertical stripes form, and Noland’s target form, precisely so they could feature their independent color composition and, in effect, make color (meaning the painter’s personally expressive choice and combination of paint-colors) an independent subject in abstract painting.

And so, given that fundamental independence of abstract painting’s color composition from its drawing composition, we’ll take a brief look first at Scully’s drawing composition of his shapes (as imaginary outlines) within his form, independent of his color composition (and therefore independent of his light/dark contrasts). Then, with Scully’s drawing composition clearly defined in our perception/imagination, we’ll look at his color composition of all the shapes in that drawing composition, especially his composition of light/dark contrasts.

4. Scully’s drawing composition (his “stripe-sets” form)

Let’s view Scully’s whole drawing composition as just imaginary outlines of all his rectangles. Scully’s drawing composition organizes sets of repeating similar rectangles – typically two or three similar rectangles per set, but sometimes more. Each set thus presents two or three or more stripes. Scully’s sets are themselves also rectangles, as you can perceive, but I’ll just call them sets for clarity. And Scully organizes those sets together into a grid-network composition of sets of stripes – rectangles of rectangles.

This whole grid-network structure for composing rectangles of rectangles as sets of stripes is Scully’s gradually developed, geometric drawing-composition form – his stripe-sets form, if you will – directly comparable to Rothko’s stacked rectangles form, or Davis’ vertical stripes form, or Noland’s target form. (All four forms are descended from Mondrian’s pioneering black line grid-network form – the first form for structured abstract composition.)

5. Scully’s color composition of his stripe-sets form (especially his color/value composition of light/dark contrasts)

Let’s view Scully’s color composition as the color/value organization of all his individually colored/valued rectangles. Scully’s color/value composition has two levels. At the first, lower level, he simply color composes the stripes in the individual sets (which are also the drawing form’s first, lower level of organization). Within each separate set of stripes, he composes a simple AB color/value pattern (one light/dark contrast – or lighter/darker, if they’re closely valued).

But at the second, higher level of his color composition, he does not simply follow the form’s second, higher level, and organize a color composition of distinctively colored individual sets. (The single exception here is Mexico Zacula, 1983, where he does exactly that. So you can compare.) Instead, while he is composing the simple AB color/value patterns within the sets (the first level of both compositions), he concurrently composes full-frame distributions and balances of those colors/values, as the second, higher level of the color composition. I’ll show you. It’s elegantly simple. We just need four easy terms to
describe Scully’s full-frame distribution of his same-color/value-rectangles – arrays, pairs, couples, and singletons.

Here’s what those terms mean in words first, then we’ll look with them. By an array, I mean three or more rectangles of the same color/value that belong to more than one set. In each painting Scully typically composes several arrays. He may also compose one or more pairs (only two of that color, but in the same set). He may also compose one or more couples (only two of that color, but in two different sets). And often, one or more uniquely colored single rectangles – singletons.

Now – to notice each of the arrays of rectangles separately, as well as each of the pairs, couples, and singletons, just notice the different colors/values one at a time. It’s that simple. Perhaps start by noticing (only) all the rectangles of just the darkest color at once (often approximately black). Then the next darkest color, and so on, through the lightest color (often approximately white). By noticing each of the different colors/values separately, in their own particular distribution of rectangles within the full frame, as an array, pair, couple, or singleton, you’ll discover Scully’s second, higher-level color/value composition of all his individually colored/valued rectangles.

6. **The circulation of Scully’s composition**

Then you can notice (if you haven’t already) the unexpected appearance that I believe you’ll find is already there in your perception/imagination, that both Scully’s drawing and color compositions are centralized and circulating. His distribution and balancing of all the rectangles in the drawing composition (imagine just the outlines of all the sets and their stripes) implies the circulation of all the rectangles around the painting’s implicitly centered, rectangle-shaped plane-space, independent of their colors/values. And his color composition’s distribution and balancing of all those rectangles according to their same colors/values (both as full-frame compositions of arrays, pairs, couples, and singletons, and as AB patterns within the sets), independently implies their circulation around the implicitly centered plane-space.

I think our verbal-intellectual awareness doesn’t immediately notice that we perceive Scully’s composition(s) as centralized and circulating for two basic reasons. First, we really don’t have an obvious abstract painting precedent (except in Scully’s simpler earlier work) for Scully’s complex organization of the directions of rectangles (in both the drawing and color compositions, independently and together). And second, we don’t notice because the sunlit wall analogy of the show’s title really does work, immediately and comfortably, to provide a familiar natural reference for this unambiguously abstract viewing experience, and the organization of stone walls is not centralized and circulating. But as I said, these compositions are something else.

**Closing Note**

Mondrian pioneered structured composition in general, and in particular the grid-network form from which Scully’s stripe-sets form is directly descended, in Paris in the 1920s. And in Part One, we viewed Mondrian’s 1943 masterpiece, Broadway Boogie Woogie, which was his last finished painting before he died in New York in 1944. In that painting, Mondrian – still a pioneer at 71 – composed the grid-lines (rectangles) of his grid-network form, which for 20 years had typically been solid black, and always (I
believe) a solid color, from colored squares and rectangles, anticipating within his grid-lines Scully’s very contemporary geometric composition of rectangles of rectangles in his stripe-sets form. For a reminder, Google Broadway Boogie Woogie, go to the MoMA.org/collection/browse site. If MoMA’s image is not available, go to the artchive site.

Oh yes. A footnote about Scully’s markmaking-drawing. Sometimes Scully leaves distinct interstices between his rectangular paint-shapes, like in Pale White Wall, 2002. Those spaces-between expose the colors of the underpainting and may thus define his whole stripe-sets composition explicitly and continuously, as outlines of all the individual rectangles, though as negative space (just as Mondrian’s black lines positively outlined all his rectangles before Broadway Boogie Woogie). In the wall analogy, Scully’s negative-space drawing of his circulating stripe-sets form is, of course, the mortar.

So here we are in 2000. Marden is using even-color markmaking to draw body-language shapes (the general kind of markmaking-drawing pioneered by Frankenthaler in the 1950s) in open compositions (the general kind of composition pioneered by De Kooning and Pollock in the 1950s). Scully is using body-language markmaking to draw geometric shapes in even-color (the general kind of markmaking-drawing pioneered by Rothko in the 1950s) in structured compositions (the general kind of composition pioneered by Mondrian from the 1910s). And both of them are showing us the highly individual, deeply personal awareness of our new geometric/mathematical world of a mature contemporary painter. When the twentieth-century pioneers’ work said watch this space, I believe this was what to be watching for. (But we’ll get into that in Chapter 9.)

Riley

Bridget Riley, born in 1931 in London and 77 as I write this in 2008, has maintained a prolific, internationally acclaimed exhibiting career for almost 50 years.

Throughout her career, Riley has composed geometric shapes in structured compositions, like Mondrian, Davis, and Noland. And like them, she draws her geometric shapes with even-color markmaking (her very precise, even, oil and/or acrylic brushwork – or now her dedicated assistants’).

But Mondrian kept his color composition very general and constant over his whole long mature abstract career, while strongly featuring each painting’s different drawing composition (the highly particular distribution and balancing of the variously sized and proportioned rectangles within his grid-network form). And Davis and Noland did the reverse, keeping their drawing composition very general and constant over their careers (Davis in his vertical stripes form and Noland in his targets and a few other simple forms), while strongly featuring each painting’s different color composition.

The story of Riley’s career, however, is the developing relationship between her drawing composition and her color composition. In the first stage of Riley’s career, starting in her early 30s in the early 1960s, her first mature work very strongly featured the drawing composition. In the second stage, starting in the 1970s, her work very strongly featured the color composition. In the third stage, since the late 1980s, and especially in her most recent paintings from before 2000 on, her work features the comprehensive unification of her drawing and color compositions. That’s the visual story I’ll show and tell you now.
For a reminder of Riley’s instantly famous black and white 1960s work, Google Bridget Riley and go to the Wikipedia site to view the 4’ square Movement in Squares, 1961. (Click on the image to enlarge it.) Then scroll down to click on the 7’ square Cataract 3, from 1967, and then Shadowplay, from 1990. For what she’s doing now, (for what’s available, anyway – this is the site of the Londoner Riley’s UK dealer), go directly to the website karstenschubert.com and click on “Works Available”, then “Bridget Riley”, then “Overview”. (And, bridgetriley.com is coming, and may be up when you read this, but can’t be the source of my examples here.)

In her early work from the 1960s, the drawing composition was very strongly featured, producing very strong optical effects (including volumetric appearances) that dominate the viewer’s attention. Correspondingly, Riley often limited her early 1960s color composition to the minimal color combination of black and white, as in Movement In Squares, 1961. Black and white, with their maximum value contrast, maximally clarify the drawing composition and sharpen its optical effects. And Cataract 3, 1967, could be colored quite differently but we would view that difference in its appearance as subordinate to the work’s obviously featured attraction, which is the vibrancy of that highly particular drawing composition, in the double diagonal pattern produced by its vertical array of horizontal wave-shapes.

The early relationship of Riley’s color composition to her drawing composition was effectively reversed in the 1970s, in simple compositions of narrow vertical stripes. Those works very strongly feature the color composition, with the drawing composition no longer presenting a significant independent visual attraction, let alone a dominating appearance. This was the second stage of the developing relationship between her drawing and color compositions. Then, from the 1980s on, as in Shadowplay, 1990, her drawing compositions became more particularly structured again, though not to be primarily featured or visually dominate like the 1960s’ drawing compositions, but rather to complement and further liberate her by-then highly personal color composition.

In Shadowplay, 1990, we do still immediately identify the color composition as the featured attraction, as in the earlier vertical stripes paintings. The drawing composition is, after all, basically a checkerboard pattern of identical shapes, although structured by a 45/90 degree grid. (By the checkerboard drawing composition, I mean just the imagined outlines of the shapes, not their colors.) But even so, this drawing composition is much more complex than a horizontal row of vertical stripes. This drawing composition allows Riley to compose her individual even-colored shapes (parallelograms) in full-frame two-dimensional arrays, significantly increasing the number and complexity of color interactions.

But even before Shadowplay in 1990, Riley had already used that same 45/90 degree grid structure to present the third stage of her work’s drawing/color relationship in Ease, 1987 – in which her geometric drawing and highly personal color are united and featured together in unique, individually drawn geometric shapes. Google Bridget Riley Ease and find a helpful current site – usually several sites do present this painting, but the particular sites may change.

And even in the unlikely event that Ease is not available online, you’ve viewed Shadowplay, so you’ll easily comprehend this next development from the following description. And then, while you’re viewing at Karsten Schubert, you’ll quickly perceive
how Riley’s recent work advances this development, by introducing straight-and-wave-line-grid drawing composition.

In Shadowplay, the drawing composition presents an about 13x6 grid of about 78 given “pieces” and most of the pieces are individually colored. A few of the pieces in the vertical rows are combined in the same color but none in the diagonal rows. In Shadowplay, the individual colored shapes are still basically the individual pieces of the overall grid-drawing.

In Ease, the initial, given drawing composition was very similar to Shadowplay’s – a 45/90 degree grid structure, except with a much finer grid (about 20x28) with about seven times the number of (much smaller) pieces. But in Ease, Riley then selectively drew her color shapes from the given grid drawing by intuitively combining the much smaller given pieces. She drew proportionally large shapes by combining, say, a dozen to 18 pieces (either contiguously or tangentially connected) into often highly irregular, single-colored, unique individual shapes. She similarly drew simpler, medium-size shapes by combining fewer pieces, and she kept some of the now comparatively very small single individual pieces as her smallest color shapes. This selective grid-drawing practice (just my term) also inherently involves the third dimension of plane-space, with the added appearance of her shapes overlapping each other, everywhere across the painting, in a multi-plane foreground/background drawing composition.

Riley’s recent work, since before 2000, is selectively drawn and composed the same way, but now she draws her given grids with both straight and wave lines (karstenschubert.com – “Works Available”, “Riley”, “Overview”). These grids are much more visually complex and individually particular than straight-line only grids. These grids allow Riley to selectively draw the particular shape and size of all her individual shapes with sufficient variety that we now perceive all her still grid-based, geometric shapes as remarkably more personally drawn and composed.

Further, the highly particular, very different configurations of all those selectively drawn individual shapes leave the remaining complex and unarticulated grid-drawing not only unrevealed, but mostly inscrutable (unlike the earlier straight-line only grids). This separation in our perception, of the shapes from the still rigorous two-dimensional continuity and coherence of the given grid drawing allows Riley’s shapes to appear much more distinctly independent and freely overlapping in the third dimension of plane-space.

And these distinctly independent, freely overlapping shapes are not only still inherently connected by their (mostly unarticulated and inscrutable) given grid drawing, they are also collectively wave-animated by the grid drawing. And the collective wave animation of all those distinctly independent individual shapes implies that they are in synchronous motion.

Hence, Riley’s whole drawing composition (imagine just the outlines of all the shapes) now also appears to be transient. That is, in Riley’s typical 2000 work we perceive her drawing composition as changing, as a whole, and captured in an instant of passing time – right?

And, as she has since the ’70s, Riley color composes her paintings extraordinarily personally, with colors from her current palette – a previously mixed, comprehensively interrelated, limited set (just my word) of her own intensely interacting, often very high-contrast colors.
So the instant of changing plane-space that we’re viewing in each of these new works is made precious, and a pleasure to linger in, by both the deep coherent order of Riley’s very contemporary, highly particular, selective grid-drawing and drawing composition, and by the delight she can now express in the captured instant (literally within the outlines of the drawing composition), through her highly particular, very contemporary, intensely personal color composition.

*Another Closing Note About Mondrian*

I think that Riley’s selective grid-drawing can make some fascinating retrospective sense of Mondrian’s unfinished last masterpiece. We’ve already viewed Mondrian’s last finished painting, Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1943. The equally famous painting he was working on when he died in 1944 is titled *Victory Boogie Woogie*.

For a good web-image of Victory, Google Mondrian Victory Boogie Woogie and go to Olga’s Gallery – the abcgallery site. For a reminder of Broadway, Google Broadway Boogie Woogie, and go to the MoMA.org/collection/browse site. If MoMA’s image is not available, go to the archive site. When you compare Victory to Broadway or to Mondrian’s earlier work, notice especially the heightened appearance of the third dimension in Victory’s composition – the viewing experience of looking into overlapping plane-space.

Broadway had already presented a radical departure from Mondrian’s previous work, introducing the composition of his previously solid, typically black lines (rectangles) from colored squares and rectangles (anticipating Scully’s comprehensive composition of rectangles of rectangles). Victory, however, presented another radical departure, because the composition was no longer structured as a grid-network of lines, but instead was an open composition of variously sized squares and rectangles, some of which were composed into lines. (Mondrian himself, in a 1943 postcard, very briefly described how his work was changing fundamentally, referring to now painting with colored planes instead of drawing with lines.)

In my view (and many others’, I’m guessing), the drawing composition of Victory Boogie Woogie has always suggested that it could be similarly improvised from a given regular grid of squares of the smallest squares’ size. I view Victory Boogie Woogie as Mondrian’s intuitive anticipation of selective geometric grid-drawing (of the most general geometric shapes – squares and rectangles), about 40 years before Riley began the rigorous selective grid-drawing of her own much more particular, and then also curvilinear, geometric shapes.

*Kelly*

Ellsworth Kelly, our abstract painter laureate, in his 80s, continues to draw intimately particular individual geometric shapes in even color. Kelly’s intuitive visual math still constantly surprises and is still expanding our historical definition of beautiful drawing – both through his shapes’ elegant structures and proportions (alone or in geometrically sophisticated combinations), and through their compelling presence as extended surfaces of his elemental even-color work.

To view what Kelly was doing in the 1960s, in his 40s, and in the 1990s, in his 70s, Google Ellsworth Kelly Guggenheim and go to the Guggenheim’s Collection Online site.
You’ll find two very large paintings (and a sculpture) that are pure, distilled Kelly – Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red, 1966, 5’x20’, and Dark Blue Curve, 1995, about 4’x16’ (You may also have to click on “More Works By Ellsworth Kelly” or some other direction.) Notice that the whole painting, Dark Blue Curve, is only the all blue, shaped canvas. Just imagine the vast blue shape on an open white wall.

The horizontal color composition of Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red is ordered to correspond nominally to the basic five-color spectrum of visible light, as divided by a prism. And that natural order – BGYOR – allows Kelly to put his lightest, brightest color, a yellow, in the middle, and his darkest colors, a blue and a red, on the outside in a bilaterally value-balanced, visually and “naturally” coherent, unified, whole color composition. And the five actual paint-colors that this nominal order allows him to feature in his color work present literally a full spectrum of his bright contemporary paints’ hues. So obvious. So far.

Much has been helpfully written about the physical presence of Kelly’s work. For example, this five-panel painting presents a full hundred square feet of bright even color, and it does matter to our live viewing experience, in the very large spaces in which such large public art can unite us, that each panel is only 5’ tall by 4’ feet wide, about the size of our average adult body space.

But in my view, this painting’s geometric drawing composition is very special, independent of its particular physical realization, size, viewing context, spectral color composition, or particular paint-colors. So while you view the monitor image, please consider my speculation and whether I’m describing your perception, too – and thus perhaps partly explaining this very simple painting’s special intuitive appeal to interested viewers.

The geometric proportions of this painting are simple. There are five rectangles, each 5x4 (vertical dimension first, by convention).

The 5x4 rectangle is a common independent shape. We’re quite used to seeing this shape by itself, as the shape of the most common professional photographer’s “view-camera” film, which is known as “four by five film”, and actually is 4”x5”, but is routinely seen in “portrait profile”, which is 5x4, as well as in “landscape profile”, which is 4x5. So we routinely view the 5x4 rectangle as a basic, generally proportioned, normally independent whole shape.

But Kelly’s 5x4 rectangles are not just here as individual shapes. They’re also here together, side by side in a coherent horizontal drawing composition, as a row of identical vertical rectangles, which is to say stripes. Very short stripes.

This is an extremely horizontal painting, and yet to my perception the verticality of the rectangles dominates the viewing experience. In my view, by uniting five 5x4 rectangles within the compositional structure of a row of stripes, Kelly’s drawing composition implies that we’re perceiving a horizontal section of five stripes that continue beyond the composition.

That is, the drawing of the individual shapes implies that we’re perceiving five independent whole 5x4 rectangles. The drawing composition implies that the drawing only shows part of the individual shapes we’re perceiving – five typically longer stripes.

This is also an unusually horizontal painting – a 1x4 rectangle. In our normal expectations, a more typically proportioned horizontal painting might be, say, 3x4.
3x4 would be three of these rows high, tripling the length of the stripes. If the drawing composition of the actual painting could imply that much extension of the stripes to your perception/imagination, that would mean implying 300 square feet of these colors.

In the 1950s and ’60s, stripes were a new compositional structure, being concurrently explored by many outstanding abstract painters, including Kelly. Kelly had already painted at least one five stripes painting that I know of, with typically elongated vertical rectangles, fourteen years before this painting. But I don’t view Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red as a *stripes* painting – a painting of stripes. In my view, this is a painting of five independent whole colored rectangles, which only as a whole *drawing composition* implies stripes. I think the geometry of this painting is special – and this very simple painting offers such an attractive, repeatedly fascinating viewing experience – precisely because Kelly brought stripes *composition* to his special interest in drawing independent individual geometric shapes. Ellsworth Kelly, keeping it simple and understated in 1966.

Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red *may* imply more color than we’re seeing – you decide. But Dark Blue Curve, 1995, certainly does. And surely the quiet reflection of this vast water-colored surface implies our whole Blue Marble, from the soaring, awe-inspired, absolutely contemporary point of view of intelligent life off Earth. I view the exquisitely balanced Dark Blue Curve as Kelly’s joyous appreciation of our home planet, and an embracing celebration of life on Earth, deep in space and time, which we can never see, but now *must* imagine. This painting is an eloquent sign on the cave wall of our species’ dawning self-awareness.

I don’t know whether Kelly has said anything about where Dark Blue Curve came from. But I’m 61 as I write this in 2008 (born in 1947) and Kelly is 85, and my own viewing experience goes back to the years of consciousness-expanding human space exploration in the 1960s – an era of breathtaking new imagery that culminated in 1972 with Apollo 17 and the iconic photograph (and last in-person view) of the whole Earth (that is, the Earth as an approximately full-diameter disk). Google The Blue Marble and go to Wikipedia. Click to expand. (To view the *first* in-person photographs of the whole Earth, partially eclipsed, taken in 1968 on the first crewed flight to orbit the Moon, Google Apollo 8, go to Wikipedia and scroll down.) And in my view, Dark Blue Curve comes from – as we said then – far out.
Part 3: The 700 Year History of European/American Painting - Both the Figurative and Now Also Abstract Traditions

Part 3 is 21 pages about the 700 year history of European/American painting.
I’ll begin in Chapter 7 by telling you, in three pages, just what I think European/American painting actually does to earn a living tradition (and in particular, what Leonardo was doing in The Mona Lisa).

Then, in Chapter 8 – five pages titled 700 Years Ago, Our Other Tradition Was Just Beginning, Too. (Giotto) – I’ll review figurative painting’s pioneering period, say 1300-1500, and the historic introduction then of all its most basic general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition. Chapter 8 will allow us to directly compare figurative painting’s pioneering period with abstract painting’s pioneering period, say 1910-1970, and the historic introduction then of all its most basic general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition (which are beautifully on view and discussed in Chapters 3-5). I think we’ve just begun another painting tradition.

Then, in Chapter 9 – fourteen pages titled The Abstract Painting Tradition (Past, Present, and Future) – I’ll conclude the paper with my understanding of the true visual continuity of the new abstract painting tradition (which, I will argue, is exactly the same as the true visual continuity of the figurative painting tradition). I’ll explain, in visual terms, why abstract painting was quietly widely displaced after around 1970, how it has been unexpectedly continued and developed to become contemporary abstract painting – for example, in the outstanding recent work of Marden and Scully, and who will make it new next.

7. The European/American Painting Tradition – The Presentation in Painting of a Unique Contemporary Awareness of Our Shared World (Leonardo)

Part 1 of this paper was about the appearance of abstract painting, from around 1910 on, and the appearance of modern figurative painting before that, from around 1870 on. So before we go back 500 years to the High Renaissance in 1500, to see that Leonardo was working for the same continuous cultural project as all those modern painters, I’ll start with a very brief review of Part 1. Here’s a two paragraph summary of how I view modern painting’s appearance – both figurative and then also abstract – from around 1870 on.

In Chapter 2, while we were viewing Monet, Van Gogh, and Matisse, I proposed that the comprehensive developments in figurative painting in the late 1800s and early 1900s followed in large part from that period’s leading painters bringing into painting the historically unprecedented independence of modern individual awareness (social, political, economic, scientific, psychological, and so on) that was then generally developing in our increasingly democratic, middle-classed, urban society. In my view, those developments in European/American painting’s fundamental practices of markmaking, drawing, and composition (and subject matter) were most radically achieved through the introduction of declaratively individual markmaking, specifically body-language markmaking and even-color markmaking, especially in the painting we call Impressionism, Post-
Impressionism, and Early-Twentieth-Century Modernism.

Then in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I proposed that, in the twentieth century, all the pioneering abstract painters intuitively transferred body-language and even-color markmaking from drawing natural/figurative shapes to drawing abstract shapes – body-language shapes and geometric shapes – thereby further expanding markmaking’s presentation of independent modern individual awareness in painting. Some outstanding abstract pioneers, like Kandinsky, Hofmann, and Frankenthaler, retained the figurative tradition’s volumetric natural composition, but of their abstract shapes (as in very general landscapes of abstract shapes). Others, like Mondrian, De Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Davis, Louis, and Noland, also developed plane-space composition, by distributing and balancing their abstract shapes across the two-dimensional plane or overlapping planes of the new abstract composition space – plane-space, still within the figurative tradition’s implicitly centered, rectangle-shaped composition space but instead of the figurative tradition’s volumetric natural composition.

The Characteristic Central Project of the European/American Painting Tradition

In Chapter 7, I want to emphasize that, in my view, all those developments simply modernized the European/American painting tradition’s characteristic central project, which I’ll define as the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world. The individuality – emotional, intellectual, and other – of this tradition’s most respected painters has always been immediately obvious in their work. Think of a Giotto, a Leonardo, a Caravaggio, a Rembrandt, a Goya, a Van Gogh, a Cézanne, a Picasso.

It seems to me that progressively increasing individual independence (just meaning equally shared freedom of speech and action in general) has been central to the historical development of European/American society (for better and worse, and for whatever reasons). So also, this culture deeply values the independence of our individual awareness. European/American painting has always advanced that value. The basic developments in both this tradition’s painting practices and subject matter reflect the highly individual visual interests of our most accomplished painters.

For example, consider our most famous masterpiece. (Google Mona Lisa and go to Wikipedia for a good web-image of this quite dark painting. Click to expand two or three times.) The general pose/setting portrait composition of The Mona Lisa, 1506, was conventional at the time. Since around 1300, Renaissance painters had been steadily advancing the representation of individual faces, in portraits and other compositional settings, as a basic common visual interest of the new tradition.

I have no expertise in Renaissance art, but as I understand our contemporary scholars’ historical view, in the 1300s and 1400s facial and body expressions in pioneering figurative painting normally implied constant, trustworthy (and therefore reassuring) typical character – such as holiness in religious subjects, bravery in heroic mythical subjects, dignity in society subjects, and of course, modesty in women. (Or, expressions would imply comparably untrustworthy and threatening constant typical character in villains.)

But Leonardo’s special interest was in portraying expressions that would imply “the motions of the mind”, in the phrase of his time – a changing, emotionally responsive self. When we view her expression, and the facial and body expressions of the disciples in The
Last Supper, 1498 (Google The Last Supper, go to Wikipedia, expand two or three times), we are seeing Leonardo freshly develop the early practice of naturalistic portraiture to present a perception of others as emotionally responsive selves that is completely obvious and familiar to us today. (Rembrandt, perhaps the superlative portraitist and self-portraitist of such expression, was born in 1606 in the Netherlands, just 100 years after the Mona Lisa was painted.)

Leonardo’s oil-brush-markmaking-drawing technique in the Mona Lisa, called “sfumato”, is very dark overall (consistent with the ambient dusk-lighting), extremely color-muted, and very gradually shaded and smoothly blended. Oil painting as we know it only began in the Renaissance (in the early 1400s, in the Netherlands) and Leonardo was a leading pioneer of its material development and use in naturalistic markmaking-drawing. (Oil painting – whether on board, as in The Mona Lisa, or on canvas – replaced egg-tempera painting on board and fresco painting into wet plaster.)

Leonardo’s highly individual, philosophically deep interest in the insightful portrayal of expressions was both extraordinarily visually sensitive (obviously) and highly professionally developed, as we can view in his freestanding drawings and know from his anatomical studies and notebook sketches of physiognomically classified features. And his brilliantly specialized sfumato technique does masterfully present the expression we have in mind when we say “The Mona Lisa”. But it also gives us the landscape behind her.

The Mona Lisa painting’s starkly uncolorful, skeletal landscape/terrain background drawing does structure the attractively deep, open, volume of the composition, but as you can tell, Leonardo developed his sfumato technique to feature her expression, not the landscape. I’ve read that Leonardo’s independent landscape drawings from nature, drawn in pencil and then inked later, were among the very first in the European/American tradition. Fictional landscapes were conventional then for the backgrounds of painting compositions. But however carefully observed his live drawings were, we view them now, like The Mona Lisa’s fictional background, as more like studies of terrain (or maps, perhaps for military use), than the celebratory representations of nature we now usually expect from landscape painting.

And over the next four hundred years, as representing real landscape, recognizably, became a basic and then independent visual interest of many outstanding painters throughout Europe and America, they certainly did not practice Leonardo’s sfumato technique. They developed very different markmaking-drawing techniques, which were consistent with their own special visual interest in featuring particular aspects of landscape’s appearance. Even in the Florentine Leonardo’s own time, the Venetian Giovanni Bellini painted gloriously colored fictional landscape backgrounds, with his own oil technique, that present his profoundly different individual awareness of nature, in some of the European/American tradition’s most highly respected and visually wonderful paintings.

When we view European/American painting’s most outstanding achievements – the most lastingly respected, most professionally influential paintings of this 700-year-old tradition – we are certainly not viewing the world through a window. What we are viewing is one individual’s unique contemporary awareness of our shared world, presented in painting through the practices of markmaking, drawing, and composition, as the painter has purposefully developed those practices to present that awareness. We simply
expect from the European/American tradition’s most respected paintings, even completely without reflection, a presentation in painting of the painter’s unique contemporary awareness of our shared world.

8. 700 Years Ago, Our Other Tradition Was Just Beginning, Too. (Giotto)

The Figurative Tradition Begins, Around 1300

It’s easy to take European/American painting’s volumetric natural composition space for granted in 2000, 700 years after it first appeared, around 1300 in Italy, at the very dawn of the Renaissance. (Very generally speaking, all of the 1300s may be thought of as the gradual dawning of the Renaissance in Italy. Then, through much of the 1400s, came the historic sunburst of creative illumination throughout Europe called the Early Renaissance. And then came the zenith, called the High Renaissance, centered on the new Rome in the time of Leonardo in Florence and Titian in Venice, from the latter 1400s through the early 1500s.)

But remember that natural space wouldn’t be described scientifically in Europe until the 1500s and 1600s, by Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, in the birth of the new natural science and the foundation of classical physics. By the 1600s, European painting’s natural space was 300 years old, and about to be very freshly developed in that spectacular century of painting (called the Baroque period) by Caravaggio, Rubens, Poussin, Velasquez, Rembrandt, and Vermeer.

You can actually view that volumetric natural composition space appearing, and the tradition beginning, around 1300, in the work of Giotto – only two hundred years before The Mona Lisa was painted in 1506. Giotto’s most celebrated work (and undoubtedly his) is in the fresco-painted walls of the Arena Chapel in Padua. And I’ve introduced that work in the separate Jazz On The Wall essay about my own painting, in Chapter 2 about paint and color. But for this discussion, I recommend you just Google Giotto Olga’s and go to Olga’s Gallery – the abcgallery site. Scroll down on that first page, and click on the first picture of the “Frescoes in St. Francis, Upper Church, Assisi” (“Homage of a Simple Man”). Even 700 years later, you’ll immediately recognize the whole European/American figurative painting tradition from the composition space in which it began. Then click on the detail picture two below it of the two figures on the right, to get a closer look at the new figurative painting world of people and things in places.

That volumetric natural composition space was characteristic of the whole new European painting tradition. In the very big historical picture, the new, rapidly developing European painting tradition, in the new, rapidly developing Europe, succeeded the long-established painting tradition that we call Byzantine.

Byzantine painting means the painting, after say 400, of the officially Christian Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, mainly Greek speaking and centered on Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey now), from around 300 until Constantinople finally fell to the Muslim Ottoman empire in 1453. The Byzantine Empire was what we commonly refer to as Orthodox Christian. Renaissance Italy was what we commonly refer to as Catholic – the western Church having divided theologically and administratively from the eastern over the preceding five or six centuries. (And then in 1517, at the height of the Renaissance, a German Catholic priest and university professor named Martin
Luther published his theological objections to many of the Church’s central practices, including financial, and quite unintentionally precipitated the very rapid rise of Protestant Christianity across Europe. Henry VIII was King of England from 1509 to 1547.

Byzantine painting (like the preceding Roman art) had its origin in naturalistic Greek art from BCE, but had become specialized in devotional pictures – icons – for Christian worship. Images were symbolically representative of religious meaning, and offered worshipers direct connection to the spiritual world. Figures were flat, and the individuality of people was minimally represented, as were specific details of particular places and times in this world.

Italian painting was Byzantine through the 1200s, though outstanding Italian work from the 1200s presents clear intimations of the new naturalism and volumetric composition space that became definitively apparent in Giotto. (Giotto’s outstanding aesthetic achievement was also immediately recognized. Born a peasant, he rose through his painting to know the Pope and be praised by his friend Dante in The Divine Comedy.)

Figurative Painting’s Pioneering Period (say 1300-1500)

In Giotto’s painting we can perceive volumetric natural composition space just beginning to appear as solid depth and receding distance. Solid depth appears especially as the rounded volume of peoples’ bodies, represented by their shading (which implies their directional lighting) and by their instantaneous shapes (which imply that their postures and gestures are changing naturally within the local volumetric space around them).

Receding distance appears as the recession of the built structures, represented by Giotto’s primitive geometric perspective drawing. In Giotto’s primitive geometric perspective drawing, we are viewing the anticipation of fully systematic geometric perspective drawing, only about a century before the still-basic practices were discovered.

And in Giotto’s people, we find the simplest appearances of individuality – in faces, postures, gestures. His paintings may look so old to us. But early is the way to view them.

Fully systematic geometric perspective drawing, with a single vanishing point on the horizon line, appeared in Florence in the 1400s, geometrically unifying continuous, volumetric, natural composition space. What we commonly mean today by geometric perspective drawing was first used in painting by Brunelleschi around 1420, and the practice was written up by Alberti in 1435. (Both are famous as architects. In those days, architecture, sculpture, drawing, and painting were developing very closely together, sometimes within the interdisciplinary careers of outstanding individual artists – the superlative example being Leonardo’s younger contemporary, Michelangelo.)

Only 200 years after Giotto’s primitive geometric perspective drawing in 1300, Leonardo’s The Last Supper, 1498, features his fully systematic geometric perspective drawing, representing the recession of all its built structures. (Google The Last Supper, go to Wikipedia, expand two or three times.) But the perspective composition of The Last Supper was literally unimaginable 200 years before. I’ll show you.

Notice that, in The Last Supper, the vanishing point – the intersection of all the radiating diagonal lines of the walls, ceiling, floor, and table – is on the horizon behind Jesus’ right eye. (I have read that the convergence of all the diagonals in this 15’x29’ painting is that precise. But even if it’s not, quite, Leonardo obviously intended to place –
compose – Jesus’ face in front of the vanishing point.) And look what that means.

Composition shows us the view from our point of view *within* the imaginary world of the composition – *not* from here in the room. Forget the misleading window analogy (vanishing point or not, horizon line or not) and just imagine being *inside, and surrounded by*, the imaginary world of the composition.

In compositions with a single vanishing point on the horizon line (*wherever* the vanishing point is in the composition), the vanishing point is straight ahead, directly opposite our point of view, and the horizon line is our eye level. When Leonardo takes us to the climactic moment of the last supper in our imaginations, we’re not *at* the table – this *is* theater – but according to the perspective, we *are* in the room and we’re seated *directly opposite* the downward-looking Jesus, the calm epicenter of this body-language storm of emotional reaction to his news that someone here will betray him. So when Jesus looks up, he will be looking each of *us* straight in the eye.

Also in the 1400s, the study of optics was beginning in painting. Mirrors, tracing-paper window devices, and the camera obscura were used to describe volumes on surfaces and guide painting. Euclid’s *Elements* was *printed* in 1482, because Gutenberg invented movable type printing around 1440, in Germany. (And so, in 1517, printing carried Luther’s radical theological objections all over Europe *in months.*) In the 1400s, the ways we see things really changed.

During figurative painting’s pioneering period, just as in abstract painting’s pioneering period, all the most basic general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition in the new composition space were introduced very quickly. In *markmaking*, between say 1300 and 1500, Renaissance painters definitively introduced the practice of naturalistic volumetric *shading*. And some of the most outstanding Renaissance painters achieved extraordinary verisimilitude with their own techniques for applying the new, translucent oil paints, building their radiant, subtly shaded colors through layered glazing.

Primitive oil paints were in very limited, specialized use long before the Renaissance. But what we mean by (artist’s) oil paints today were developed then, by painters, to serve the new naturalistic painting. Between the early 1400s and the early 1500s, all the most basic general markmaking practices for subtle shading by brush-drawing with the new oil-paints were introduced, especially by such historically acclaimed painters as first Jan van Eyck in the Netherlands (Bruges), then later Giovanni Bellini and his apprentices Giorgione and Titian in Venice, and their contemporary Leonardo in Florence.

Jan van Eyck, by the 1420s, had worked out the basic processes and recipes for making the effectively new, Renaissance-quality translucent oil paints that soon became synonymous with European painting – replacing egg-tempera painting on board and fresco painting into wet plaster. He introduced those oil paints in the first (and still breathtaking) masterpieces of the new medium. Google wga van eyck, go to the wga site and click on “Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife (1434)”. You’ll recognize it. The wga site has good detail pictures of this under 3'x2' painting, and van Eyck’s level of detail is historically extreme.

The Arnolfini portrait was painted, amazingly, only about 130 years after the Giotto we just viewed. But notice that the diagonals of the composition still don’t all converge on a single vanishing point (like we saw in The Last Supper, done about 60 years later).
That’s because in 1434, the fully systematic geometric perspective drawing just recently developed in Florence was not yet practiced in the Netherlands. In drawing and composition during the pioneering period, the new general painting practices and visual structures for figure drawing from life, drawing with optical devices, and drawing and composing with systematic geometric perspective were all being commonly introduced to imply the new volumetric natural composition space to our perception/imagination – as the composition would appear from a single point of view, at an instant, directionally-lit. And by say 1500, a continuous volumetric natural composition space had been definitively and comprehensively presented in European painting that had not been perceived/imagined in any painting before around 1300.

600 Years Later, Picasso

And those general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition, and that volumetric natural composition space, have been continuously liberating figurative painters’ particular presentations of their unique contemporary awareness of our shared world for 700 years now. And so, in 1921, Picasso could draw and compose the Synthetic Cubist masterpiece Three Musicians, in even color with almost no shading, lacking even Giotto’s perspective, and with only the barest minimum of particular volumetric representation that even Picasso requires to describe nature to our perception, and we can still perceive/imagine three musicians – Pierrot on clarinet, Harlequin on guitar, and a singing monk holding sheet music – performing for us in the shallow stage space they share with a very alert dog (the version in MoMA). Google Three Musicians Olga’s and go to Olga’s Gallery – the abcgallery site.

Of course, the twentieth-century Modernist Picasso always enthusiastically interpreted the European/American painting project of presenting a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world to emphasize his unique contemporary awareness. And Picasso’s ability to present that awareness – deeply, innovatively, and (we believe) sincerely – in all three levels of painting practice and in his choices of subject matter, is sufficiently extraordinary in its monstrously impulsive self-expression that in Modernist figurative painting, “Picasso” is arguably the category above genius.

So we marvel with respect, often awe, at how and how beautifully Picasso has remade our shared natural world into his own image this time, time after time, even though (if not because) we find his extraordinarily intense and unrelenting self-assertion as demanding as it is beautiful. But Picasso could only meaningfully present his uniquely penetrating awareness of our shared world in those Modernist visual particulars through his profound, then-contemporary developments of all the figurative tradition’s most general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition in volumetric natural composition space (painting people and things in places). And all those most general figurative painting practices and visual structures were definitively and comprehensively introduced in the Renaissance.

The Abstract Painting Tradition

In this Chapter (8), I reviewed the historic introduction of figurative painting’s most basic general painting practices and visual structures (for markmaking, drawing, and composition) in its pioneering period (say 1300-1500). In Chapters 3-5, I reviewed the
historic introduction of abstract painting’s most basic general painting practices and visual structures in its pioneering period (say 1910-1970). I think the historic introductions of those two kinds of painting in their pioneering periods are directly comparable.

That is, I think that between, say, 1910 and 1970, the pioneers of abstract painting definitively and comprehensively introduced the most basic general painting practices and visual structures of a whole new abstract painting tradition, with their own particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition. I think that European/American painting has just begun another tradition.

In Chapter 9, I will explain, in specific visual terms, why we could not identify abstract painting’s most basic general painting practices and visual structures in the pioneers’ work during the pioneering period, and why those basic general painting practices and visual structures are becoming clearly apparent now, in outstanding contemporary abstract painting like Marden’s and Scully’s.

And I will argue that because we could not identify abstract painting’s most basic general painting practices and visual structures during the pioneering period, abstract painting was quite understandably but profoundly misunderstood (by supportive viewers) as visually originating not in the European/American figurative painting tradition, but in the independent self-expression of the abstract pioneers.

Clarifying our initial misunderstanding of abstract painting’s true visual origins will reveal the true visual continuity of the new tradition, as a whole new tradition that is directly comparable to the figurative painting tradition from which it evolved after around 1910. Comprehending the true visual continuity of the abstract painting tradition will change our viewing experience of all the abstract painting we already have, and our expectations for future abstract painting.

9. The Abstract Painting Tradition (Past, Present, and Future)

Abstract painting as defined in this paper appeared about a hundred years ago, between, say, 1910 (in Kandinsky) and 1920 (in Mondrian). And for the next half-century it liberated radical visual innovation into painting, earning critical respect and gaining significant public popularity. But in the 1970s, without any obvious explanation, abstract painting was quietly, widely, and quite rapidly displaced from studios, galleries, museums, university art departments, and publications. Chapter 9 is 14 pages about what happened to abstract painting, what’s happening now, and what happens next.

Part 1 of this paper featured work by some of the most outstanding abstract painters of the pioneering period between 1910 and 1970. But in Part 2, I also took an analytic look at the recent paintings of two abstract painters whose work and careers were just beginning around 1970 – Brice Marden and Sean Scully. Now in their 60s (in 2008), both have produced bodies of mature work of outstanding individuality and definitively contemporary beauty, and attained international career success.

Marden and Scully play leading parts in the following art history story, but you won’t need to have read Part 2 or have viewed their work to grasp their shared contribution to the new tradition. You’ll have their beautiful contemporary work to look forward to after. And I’m hoping that after this story, contemporary will have new meaning for your viewing
of all European/American painting.

(Part 2 also features recent paintings by two senior abstract painters, Bridget Riley and Ellsworth Kelly. I expect their long-established international fame has preceded my respectful recommendation of their work to you.)

This chapter is broken down into eight sections. Here’s where it’s going:

1. 1910-1970 and 1300-1500 (Introducing the General with the Particulars)
2. Marden’s and Scully’s Work Assumes and Freshly Develops the Pioneers’
3. Pioneers Like De Kooning Introduced the Common Tradition.
4. The Shared Painting World of the Common Tradition and the Individual Painter
5. The Previously Not Obvious Shared Abstract Painting World
6. Self-Expression in the Shared Abstract Painting World
7. What Happened
8. Who’s Next

1. 1910-1970 and 1300-1500 (Introducing the General with the Particulars)

In the last section of Chapter 8, I proposed the historical view that between, say, 1910 and 1970, the pioneering abstract painters definitively and comprehensively introduced the whole new abstract painting tradition in general, just as the pioneering Renaissance painters definitively and comprehensively introduced the whole new figurative painting tradition in general, between, say, 1300 and 1500.

That is, in figurative painting in the 1300s and 1400s, the pioneering Renaissance painters introduced the new volumetric natural composition space and all the most basic general painting practices and visual structures for the new naturalistic markmaking, drawing, and composition. By say 1500, that composition space and all those most basic general practices and structures were being assumed and freshly developed by succeeding painters – and taken as the now-given basis of the new tradition.

That new volumetric natural composition space and those new basic general painting practices and visual structures began appearing around 1300 with the particular individual practices and structures of Giotto and his contemporaries (with their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition). By say 1500, that composition space and all those basic general practices and structures were being assumed and freshly developed by succeeding painters with their own particular individual practices and structures (with their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition).

2. Marden’s and Scully’s Work Assumes and Freshly Develops the Pioneers’

In my view, Marden’s and Scully’s work becomes understandably beautiful to us, now, with this historical view that both traditions were definitively and comprehensively introduced during their pioneering periods, and have been developed since – the figurative tradition for about 500 years, since 1300-1500, and the abstract tradition for about 40 years, since 1910-1970. As I’ve described very specifically in Chapter 6, Marden’s and Scully’s particular individual markmaking-drawing and composition present their very contemporary developments of general kinds of markmaking-drawing and the general kinds of composition in plane-space that were introduced by the pioneers during the first
period of abstract painting, with/by the pioneers’ own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

(Just to be specific here, very briefly, about those developments in their work from around 2000, I’ll summarize from Chapter 6 in one paragraph. I’m referring to Marden’s “moving stripe” shapes, which are a development of the general kind of markmaking-drawing – the combination of even-color markmaking used to draw body-language shapes – that we viewed in Frankenthaler, and to Marden’s open composition of his body-language shapes’ coincident geometric shapes/figures, which is a development of the general kind of abstract composition that we viewed in De Kooning and Pollock. And I’m referring to Scully’s brushwork rectangles, which are a development of the general kind of markmaking-drawing – the combination of body-language markmaking used to draw geometric shapes – that we viewed in Rothko, and to Scully’s structured composition of geometric shapes, which is a development of the general kind of abstract composition that we viewed in Mondrian and Rothko.)

So, both Marden and Scully have assumed and freshly developed some of the basic general painting practices and visual structures that were introduced by the pioneers, to present the unique contemporary awareness of our shared geometric/mathematical world of a painter from this following period (obviously not from the pioneering period). And according to the historical view I’ve proposed, Marden’s and Scully’s visual achievements and career success make obvious historical sense. But that historical appreciation of a whole new abstract painting tradition – introduced during the pioneering period by the pioneers’ work – was not only not articulated in the 1970s when Marden and Scully were starting, but was implicitly directly contradicted, as I’ll explain through the rest of the chapter.

And because the pioneering period was not appreciated as the pioneering period – that is, the pioneers’ work was not contemporaneously appreciated as introducing all the most basic general painting practices and visual structures, and the new composition space, of the whole new abstract painting tradition – Marden’s and Scully’s visual achievements and career success since the 1970s actually reward a far more professionally risky and creatively independent, even defiant dedication to abstract painting than you would be likely to guess from this paper so far. I think Marden and Scully play leading parts in a fascinating art history story. And although the story begins with a big misunderstanding, it has a very happy ending, so I’ll tell it now to conclude the paper.

3. Pioneers Like De Kooning Introduced the Common Tradition.

Throughout the pioneering period, as far as I know, no systematic descriptive distinction was made between the new general painting practices and visual structures of abstract painting that the abstract pioneers introduced, and the pioneers’ particular individual practices and structures that introduced them. That is, no systematic distinction was made between such most general painting practices and visual structures as I described in Part 1 – the two basic kinds of abstract markmaking, the two basic kinds of abstract shapes, and the two basic kinds of abstract composition – and the pioneers’ own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition that introduced them.

This distinction allows us to recognize that the significantly unprecedented appearance of the pioneers’ particular individual practices and structures is attributable in great part
to their also being the initial particular presentations of all the historically unprecedented general painting practices and visual structures of the whole new tradition. For example, this distinction allows us to view De Kooning’s Composition, 1955, in its appropriate context for comparative appreciation as this one 1950s individual’s own particular (and also generally pioneering) brushwork-body-language markmaking-drawing of body-language shapes, and open composition. (Later in the chapter I’ll show you those very same general practices and structures that De Kooning pioneered, presented in the very different brushwork-body-language markmaking-drawing of body-language shapes, and open composition, of an outstanding mature painter in the 2000s.)

Some limited distinctions between general and particular practices and structures were certainly made in the critics’ writing of the time, as by such popular, and intuitively penetrating, but only vaguely descriptive terms as “action” painting, “all-over” painting, and “color-field” painting. But overall, with such very limited exceptions, the new general practices and structures that the pioneers introduced with their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition were simply not separately identified – that is, not identified as the common basic general painting practices and visual structures of a whole new, second, European/American painting tradition. Quite understandably, I think, as I’ll explain in Sections 4 and 5.

4. The Shared Painting World of the Common Tradition and the Individual Painter

Throughout this paper, I’ve defined the characteristic central project of the 700-year-old European/American painting tradition, in both figurative and abstract painting, as the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world.

And by “our shared world”, I’ve meant either/both of our shared worlds – natural and geometric/mathematical. Our shared natural world has been represented in figurative painting for about 700 years, by the drawing of natural shapes and by the figurative composition of natural shapes in volumetric natural figurative composition space (as people and things in places, whether the natural world is represented actually, fictionally, or purely hypothetically, and however particularly recognizably). Both Leonardo’s and Picasso’s paintings represent the natural world in figurative painting.

Our shared geometric/mathematical world has been represented in abstract painting for about a century, by the drawing of geometric shapes and by the abstract composition of abstract shapes (geometric and/or body-language shapes) in plane-space composition space. Both Mondrian’s grid-network paintings and Pollock’s cast-paintings represent the geometric/mathematical world in abstract painting (and only the geometric/mathematical world).

(Some abstract paintings – like Frankenthaler’s Mountains and Sea – do retain very general, volumetric natural figurative composition, without introducing abstract plane-space composition. And Mountains and Sea is composed in figurative composition space with body-language shapes and without geometric shapes. Body-language shapes, as individual shapes, don’t represent either of our shared worlds beyond painting – they are the abstract shapes that are drawn/produced when body-language markmaking is liberated from drawing either natural/figurative shapes or geometric abstract shapes. So some figuratively composed abstract paintings, like Mountains and Sea, represent only the natural world in abstract painting, without representing the geometric/mathematical
world in abstract painting at all. And some abstract paintings present a very general figurative composition of both body-language and geometric shapes – as in Hofmann’s late paintings that appear as very general landscapes of both body-language and geometric shapes – and thereby represent both the natural and geometric/mathematical worlds in abstract painting. Abstract painting is, however, intuitively recognizable as abstract painting for its drawing of abstract shapes rather than natural/figurative shapes, whether it represents only the geometric/mathematical world, as in the fully abstract paintings of Mondrian and Pollock, or only the natural world, as in Mountains and Sea, or both worlds, as in Hofmann’s late paintings.)

After the pioneering periods, figurative or abstract painters present their unique contemporary awareness of our shared world(s) beyond painting, in painting, by using their own particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition – to assume and freshly develop some of all the common general practices and structures that have been pioneered and developed in their tradition’s paintings so far. Let’s say that all those inherited common general practices and structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition constitute the given, shared “painting world” of each tradition’s latest painters. So figurative or abstract painters pioneer, develop, and redevelop their shared painting world, according to their own visual interests, to present their unique contemporary awareness of our shared world(s) beyond painting, in painting.

Hence, for figurative examples – around 1510 in Venice, Titian was assuming and freshly developing some of the general painting practices and visual structures of the figurative painting world that the Renaissance pioneers had introduced and developed in the previous 200 years. He oil-painted a fictional deep landscape with trees and houses – also two female “nudes” (idealized naked figures), two young men (one fashionably and one roughly dressed), musical instruments, a well, a glass water pitcher, a shepherd, and some sheep – and we get the mysteriously poetic (and gloriously oil-glazed) Concert Champetre. (Just for the record, this canonically acclaimed masterpiece of High Renaissance painting may have been begun, or even fully painted, by Titian’s close and comparably brilliant colleague Giorgione, who died young suddenly, perhaps of the plague, leaving unfinished work and many attributions uncertain.)

About 400 years later, in 1889 in the south of France, Van Gogh was assuming and freshly developing some of the general painting practices and visual structures of the figurative painting world he inherited, now 600 years old. Van Gogh too oil-painted a fictional deep landscape with trees and houses, but with a crescent moon, a Dutch church, and a remarkable development of “sky” – and we get the ecstatically visionary (and Van Gogh-body-language painted) The Starry Night.

And Leonardo, Velasquez, Ingres, and Picasso all oil-painted women in rooms, representing actual women in their everyday made environments – and we get The Mona Lisa in 1506, Las Meninas in 1656, Louise de Broglie in 1845, and Girl before a Mirror in 1932.

5. The Previously Not Obvious Shared Abstract Painting World
The figurative pioneers (from, say, Giotto to Leonardo and Titian) painted people and things in places their own particular ways, but they were all obviously painting people and
things in places, in the new, shared, naturalistic figurative painting world. And that was obvious because the *common general* appearances of all the figurative pioneers’ particularly painted people and things in places were recognizably preceded by the appearances of actual people and things in places.

So even though the common general appearances of the new shared figurative painting world were significantly unprecedented in the history of painting, interested viewers could easily identify the pioneers’ new common general painting practices and visual structures (like shading in markmaking; the naturalistic drawing of individual faces, bodies, and clothing; perspective drawing; and composition in volumetric natural composition space) as being introduced to painting *with/by* the pioneers’ *particular individual* practices and structures (their *particular individual* shading; naturalistic drawing of individual faces, bodies, and clothing; perspective drawing; and composition in volumetric natural composition space).

But during the pioneering period of the *abstract* tradition, most of the common general appearances of the new shared abstract painting world were significantly unprecedented both in the history of painting *and* outside of painting. I’m referring to the common general appearances of body-language shapes and geometric shapes drawn by body-language markmaking and even-color markmaking, and composed in plane-space. (And when very general figurative composition was retained in abstract paintings, like Kandinsky’s, Hofmann’s, or Frankenthaler’s, the appearances of such composition simply emphasized the disappearance, otherwise, of common general painting practices and visual structures normally found in figurative painting.)

In fact, of all the common general appearances of the new shared abstract painting world, the only common general appearances that were obviously preceded were those of general geometric shapes, like rectangles, and general geometric structures, like rows of stripes, which were mainly preceded in Euclidean mathematical drawing. And those general geometric shapes and structures were often drawn by highly individual body-language markmaking, which was not preceded in mathematical drawing – for example, Rothko’s rectangles and Louis’ stripes. Or, those general geometric shapes and structures were drawn by highly individual even-color markmaking, which was also not preceded in mathematical drawing – for example, Mondrian’s rectangles and Davis’ stripes.

And body-language shapes, like Kandinsky’s, De Kooning’s, Pollock’s, or Frankenthaler’s, were unprecedented either in painting or outside of painting. And both general kinds of abstract composition in plane-space, like De Kooning’s and Pollock’s open compositions (of body-language shapes) and Mondrian’s and Rothko’s structured compositions (of geometric shapes), presented new appearances of geometric order that were unprecedented in or outside of painting. Even-color and body-language markmaking were preceded in Modernist figurative painting – that’s where they came from – but not preceded there in the radically liberated appearances of individuality in markmaking that they presented when used to draw abstract shapes rather than natural/figurative shapes.

So most of the common general appearances of the whole new shared abstract painting world first appeared in all viewers’ visual experience (including the pioneers’) only as they were gradually and separately introduced in painting through the pioneering
period, and then only in the distractingly dissimilar particular appearances of the pioneers’ radically individual abstract markmaking, drawing, and composition. Hence, right through the pioneering period, the new common general painting practices and visual structures of the new shared abstract painting world were not sufficiently plainly apparent to be identified and systematically distinguished from the pioneers’ particular individual practices and structures – the pioneers’ radically individual abstract markmaking, drawing, and composition.

In the 2000s, the whole new shared abstract painting world is just becoming clearly apparent. We can observe now that common general painting practices and visual structures were introduced with the pioneers’ particular individual practices and structures, precisely because such outstanding contemporary painters as Marden and Scully have intuitively assumed and significantly developed some of those common general practices and structures with their own particular individual practices and structures.

6. **Self-Expression in the Shared Abstract Painting World**

So the whole new shared abstract painting world of common general painting practices and visual structures was truly not obvious while it was being introduced during the pioneering period. What was obvious throughout the pioneering period – spectacularly obvious from the very beginning – was the unprecedented *individuality* of the pioneers’ own particular practices and structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

And that division of abstract painting’s significantly unprecedented appearances during the pioneering period, between the new shared abstract painting world’s effectively unnoticeable common general painting practices and visual structures, and the pioneers’ obvious, unprecedentedly individual particular practices and structures, produced a profound initial misunderstanding of abstract painting’s origins, and the achievements of the individual pioneers.

To clarify that misunderstanding, we’ll need to consider from here and now how all that unprecedented painting looked then, to interested, supportive viewers. We’ll especially need to reflect on the meaning of the modern term/concept of “self-expression” as it has been routinely attached to abstract painting since the pioneering period. As I understand our routine use of the term/concept of self-expression to define the project of abstract painting, we mean that abstract painting is an originally *individual* painting project that is liberated when painters don’t follow the figurative tradition by representing the natural world.

I will argue that our routine definition of abstract painting as essentially independent self-expression precisely summarizes our initial misunderstanding of abstract painting’s true visual origins. Clarifying our initial misunderstanding of abstract painting’s true visual origins will reveal the true visual continuity of the whole new abstract painting tradition.

In the next four pages, I hope to both explain and replace our initial misunderstanding of abstract painting’s true visual origins, quite specifically, through a brief summary of the whole new abstract painting tradition’s project and history, using the terms and definitions introduced in this paper. The summary will unfold in three parts, addressing representation, painting and viewing, and self-expression, in both figurative and abstract
painting. I believe interested viewers will subsequently agree that we can appreciate and enjoy all abstract painting much more fully as another whole painting tradition, directly comparable to the continuing figurative painting tradition from which it recently evolved.

**Representation in Both Figurative and Abstract Painting** Throughout this paper, I’ve defined the characteristic central project of the European/American painting tradition as the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world.

The first part of that definition – the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness – refers to the painter’s presentation in painting of their unique contemporary awareness with their particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

But the complete definition – the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world – also assumes that our shared world beyond painting is always represented in painting (figurative or abstract), by some of the common general painting practices and visual structures of the shared painting worlds that the painter introduces and/or assumes and develops with their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

In my view, both figurative and abstract painting always represent our shared world beyond painting, and they can be distinguished, as below, by their typical representations of the natural or geometric/mathematical worlds. I emphasize, however, that I view neither figurative nor abstract painting as “representational” painting, given that term’s common meaning that figurative painting’s central project is representation. In my view, the term representational depersonalizes figurative painting’s central project by defining it as primarily representation. And the term self-expression exclusively personalizes abstract painting’s central project by defining it as independent of representation. Both those terms/definitions, which are commonly used to distinguish figurative from abstract painting, disconnect the painter from our shared world, and therefore from the viewer.

I hope the definition I am offering for the central project of both figurative and abstract painting – the presentation in painting of a unique contemporary awareness of our shared world – will help in the next few pages to reveal and celebrate the deep connection between the painter and the interested viewer, through their shared world.

Here’s a one-page summary of both figurative and abstract painting’s typical representation of our shared world(s) beyond painting, by their most basic general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition.

1. In figurative painting (for example, Leonardo’s and Picasso’s paintings), our shared natural world is represented by the drawing of natural shapes and by their volumetric natural figurative composition (as people and things in places, whether the natural world is represented actually, fictionally, or purely hypothetically, and however particularly recognizably). In figurative painting, until the late 1800s, markmaking (paint-handling and paint-color) normally served simply to represent our shared natural world, absorbed within the drawing. Since then, in some modern figurative painting (for example, Van Gogh’s The Starry Night and Matisse’s The Red Studio), declaratively individual markmaking (body-language and/or even-color markmaking) both represents our shared natural world within the drawing of natural shapes and communicates the painter’s
individuality directly (through their paint-handling and/or personally expressive choice of paint-colors) while we perceive/imagine the figurative composition.

2. In fully abstract painting (for example, Mondrian's grid-network paintings and Pollock's cast-paintings), only our shared geometric/mathematical world is represented, by the drawing of geometric shapes and/or by the plane-space composition of abstract shapes (geometric and/or body-language shapes). In fully abstract painting, markmaking (body-language and/or even-color) and body-language shapes do not represent either the natural or geometric/mathematical world, but are dedicated to the direct communication of the painter's unique contemporary individuality (through their paint-handling and personally expressive choice of paint-colors) while we perceive/imagine the abstract plane-space composition.

3. In abstract painting that is figuratively composed, however, in volumetric natural figurative composition space, the composition represents the natural world in abstract painting, very generally – as in a landscape of abstract shapes.

Some abstract paintings – like Frankenthaler's Mountains and Sea – are figuratively composed with body-language shapes and without geometric shapes. Body-language shapes, as individual shapes, don't represent either of our shared worlds beyond painting – they are the abstract shapes that are drawn/produced when body-language markmaking is liberated from drawing either natural/figurative shapes or geometric abstract shapes. So some abstract paintings, like Mountains and Sea, represent only the natural world in abstract painting, without representing the geometric/mathematical world in abstract painting at all.

Geometric shapes, however, obviously represent the geometric/mathematical world, even when figuratively composed and drawn with landscape colors. So some figuratively composed abstract paintings – like Hofmann's late paintings that appear as very general landscapes of both body-language and geometric shapes, or Kandinsky's paintings that present geometric shapes apparently composed in a volume of gravity-free outer space – represent both the natural and geometric/mathematical worlds in abstract painting.

So in figuratively composed abstract painting, body-language and/or even-color markmaking can support the composition's representation of the natural world in abstract painting, especially by generally implying the shapes and colors of landscape, in addition to directly communicating the painter's unique contemporary individuality while we perceive/imagine the volumetric natural figurative composition.

_Painting and Viewing in Both Figurative and Abstract Painting_ Just for a moment, think of the figurative and abstract traditions' historically developing common general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition as their deeply related, historically developing visual languages. Then the figurative and abstract painting worlds (in 700 years of figurative paintings and a century of abstract paintings, now) are where painters have pioneered, inherited, assumed, and developed those visual languages.

Given that, in my view, our shared world beyond painting is always represented in painting by the painter's use of those visual languages, here's how I understand (in one paragraph) the deep personal connection between the painter and interested viewers that is offered through the viewing experience by the most lastingly celebrated paintings of
both the figurative and abstract traditions:

Each painter’s use of their tradition’s historically developing visual language allows them to present their unique contemporary awareness (sensuous, emotional, intellectual, other) of our shared world beyond painting, in/as painting, for the viewing experience of interested viewers. Viewers bring to the viewing experience both their own unique contemporary awareness of our shared world beyond painting, and their own familiarity with the figurative and abstract painting worlds and their historically developing visual languages. The viewer’s own unique contemporary awareness of our shared world beyond painting, and their own familiarity with the figurative and abstract painting worlds and their historically developing visual languages, allow them to comprehend (feel, intuit, recognize, identify, grasp, understand) the painter’s unique contemporary awareness of our shared world beyond painting, and to appreciate the painter’s presentation of their unique contemporary awareness of our shared world beyond painting in/as painting, through their use and historical development of their tradition’s language.

Self-Expression in Both Figurative and Abstract Painting  As far as I know, however, the most widely offered definition of abstract painting’s characteristic project, through the pioneering period and since, has been the term/concept of self-expression. I don’t know of another positive term or concept that has been comparably relied upon to distinguish abstract from figurative painting, or invoked to defend abstract painting’s virtue against the charge of not representing the natural world as painting should.

And the term/concept of self-expression, as ordinarily used and defined, refers only to the presentation of unique individuality. And so, in the terms of this paper, the term/concept of self-expression refers only to the painter’s presentation in painting of their unique contemporary awareness with their particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

So the term/concept of self-expression does not recognize that abstract painters always introduce and/or assume and develop some of their tradition’s common general painting practices and visual structures for markmaking, drawing, and composition with their own particular individual practices and structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition. And the term/concept of self-expression does not recognize that our shared world beyond painting is always represented in both figurative and abstract painting, by some of the common general practices and structures that the painter introduces or assumes and develops.

And so, the history – and historic consequence – of our routinely defining abstract painting as independent self-expression can be succinctly understood as follows:

1. In figurative painting, like Leonardo’s and Picasso’s, since around 1300, the painter’s self-expression (their unique individual markmaking, drawing, and composition) has represented our shared natural world in the shared figurative painting world by drawing natural/figurative shapes and by composing natural/figurative shapes in volumetric natural figurative composition space (painting people and things in places, whether the natural world is represented actually, fictionally, or purely hypothetically, and however particularly recognizably).
2. In fully abstract painting, like Mondrian’s and Pollock’s, since the 1910s, the painter’s self-expression (their unique individual markmaking, drawing, and composition) has represented our shared geometric/mathematical world in the shared abstract painting world by drawing geometric shapes and by composing abstract shapes (body-language shapes and/or geometric shapes) in plane-space composition space.

(Some abstract painting, like Frankenthaler’s Mountains and Sea, does retain very general **figurative composition** of its abstract shapes, with body-language shapes but not geometric shapes. The painter’s self-expression in such painting, therefore, does represent our shared natural world in abstract painting, and does not represent our shared geometric/mathematical world. And some abstract painting retains very general figurative composition of its abstract shapes and includes both body-language shapes and geometric shapes, like Hofmann’s late paintings that present the appearance of a very general landscape of both body-language and geometric shapes. The painter’s self-expression in such figuratively composed abstract painting, therefore, represents both our shared natural world and our shared geometric/mathematical world in abstract painting.)

3. As abstract painting appeared, the absence of (most or all) representation of our shared natural world was noticed from the beginning. (Hence, abstract painting was sometimes described in the negative as “non-objective” painting.)

4. But during the pioneering period, the new abstract painting was quite understandably *not* appreciated as introducing the basic common general painting practices and visual structures of a whole new abstract painting tradition, or as typically and characteristically representing our shared geometric/mathematical world.

5. And, what was appreciated by supportive viewers – unanimously celebrated – in all the new abstract painting was the radical liberation of the abstract pioneers’ self-expression, in the unprecedented individuality of their particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition.

6. So abstract painting was easily misunderstood as being independent self-expression, an originally individual painting project that is liberated when painters don’t follow the figurative tradition by representing the natural world.

7. And all the mostly unprecedented appearances of the new abstract painting were easily attributed directly to the extraordinary originality of the pioneers’ self-expression – as if there were no common general abstract painting practices and visual structures, or shared abstract painting world – as if there were no new common abstract painting tradition.

8. And implicit in that initial, quite understandable misunderstanding of abstract painting’s project as originally *independent* self-expression, there has always been the following creatively discouraging and career threatening logical corollary: if any succeeding painter assumed and developed any of the most basic general painting practices or visual structures of abstract painting, which were, by say 1970, definitively and comprehensively introduced in/by the pioneers’ paintings, then the succeeding painter’s work could be viewed, utterly wrongly, as directly derived from, and derivatively following-up, the pioneers’ self-expression. As if the pioneers’ self-expression were not the historic first example of abstract painting, but the source of abstract painting.
Of course, given say 40 years hindsight since the pioneering period, and Marden’s and Scully’s contemporary paintings to view, we can begin to observe and comprehend now that the pioneers’ particular individual painting practices and visual structures – their own particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition – introduced all the most basic common general painting practices and visual structures of the new shared abstract painting world and the whole new abstract painting tradition.

And I’m pretty sure that nobody at the time ever disagreed with the historical view I’ve proposed. That is, the abstract painting tradition evolved from the continuing figurative painting tradition after around 1910, as the pioneers transferred body-language and even-color markmaking from drawing natural/figurative shapes to drawing abstract shapes – body-language shapes and geometric shapes – and composed them in (implicitly centered, rectangle-shaped) geometric/mathematical abstract composition space – plane-space, or in very general figurative compositions in volumetric natural figurative composition space (as in, for example, very general landscapes of abstract shapes). But at the time, without our hindsight and without the developments in outstanding subsequent contemporary painting like Marden’s and Scully’s to view, I think the only visually obvious answer to the question “Where did all this unprecedented abstract painting come from?” was “The first abstract painters’ independent, extraordinarily original self-expression.”

7. What Happened

And so in 1970, when I was 23 (Marden was 32 and Scully 25, but I’ve never met either), young visual artists, their possible dealers, and other interested viewers commonly referred to both the pioneers’ particular individual painting practices and visual structures (their particular individual markmaking, drawing, and composition) and all the potential that was suggested by the general practices and structures they introduced – as if they were, inseparably, the pioneers’ personal aesthetic property. It really was said then that Noland had “staked out” targets and Larry Poons had “staked out” dots. (Go to the website hirshhorn.si.edu, type Poons into the “search art collection” window, click on the arrow. Expand the pictures twice.)

And the general potential of Poons’ beautiful, visually inspiring dots paintings – those intensely colorful fields of small round or oval dots that he painted in the early ’60s in his mid-20s – could include (it was easily visually inferred) any intensely colorful composition, open or structured, of any small, repeating discrete shapes, geometric or body-language, that presented an array of points on any continuous background – that is, any painting that might remind the viewer of Poons’ dots paintings. Dots had been done by Poons.

And I believe that for any audaciously unconcerned young abstract painter at the time to have begun their own exploration of the general target form – even presenting boldly freehand, body-language-brush-drawn, roughly concentric circular bands of their own even color, on any background, in arrestingly individual, intensely personally involving body-language brushwork and color work (I mean really exciting painting) – would have meant their being disparaged for derivative trespassing on Noland’s target form.

Consider what abstract “territory” that means was commonly understood to be staked out by the pioneers from exploration by passionately ambitious young visual artists – just by the work I’ve shown you. When the Met opened its definitive retrospective covering
the period of pioneering American abstract painting, *New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940 to 1970* (in 1969), the announcement was tacit but visually obvious to all interested viewers – after a half-century of the pioneers’ accelerating passionate rush to discover the full range of abstract painting’s freedom for self-expression, the abstract territories were now officially settled.

The notice was there on the walls, hand-painted by the already legendary abstract pioneers themselves: adventurous young artists looking for unclaimed frontier space in which to freely and independently express themselves should move on. And they and the art world mostly very soon did, including galleries, university art departments, museums, and publications, suddenly leaving the whole wide-open and once wildly popular abstract painting territories effectively deeded to the pioneers (many of whom were already gone), barely discovered and initially surveyed, and very sparsely populated.

By the way, Poons only painted dots briefly, back in the early ’60s. And I’ve certainly never imagined him thinking he owns dots. By the late ’60s, Poons’ individual interest in markmaking-drawing had already taken him from drawing those elementally simple, even-colored geometric shapes to drawing body-language shapes with radically physical body-language markmaking, and he hasn’t looked back since. His most recent paintings are brushwork-body-language shapes in open compositions, presenting the same general painting practices and visual structures that were pioneered by De Kooning in the 1950s. These paintings will give you a meaningful historical comparison to 1955 De Kooning’s particular individual markmaking-drawing and composition (at 51, in Composition) in the mature painting of a very different individual (at 70 in 2007), 50 years later.

Go to the website larrypoons.com to enjoy some appropriately closely-viewed samples of his recent acrylic markmaking-drawing, and small images of the full paintings. I’ve only seen this recent work on the web, too. But I expect you’ll agree that Poons has apparently delivered a disturbingly attractive viewing experience of the global turbulence in our shared geometric/mathematical world these days. Chaos theory in abstract markmaking-drawing, up close and very personal.

In 1970, Marden and Scully and all other young visual artists had the whole pioneering period of abstract painting from, say, Kandinsky to Noland to view and develop. But then and since, our lack of appreciation of the pioneers’ larger historic achievement, which was to definitively and comprehensively introduce the most basic general painting practices and visual structures of the whole new abstract painting tradition, has led to all passionately ambitious young visual artists being preemptively discouraged from presenting their own unique contemporary awareness of our shared world in abstract painting. Because any abstract painting they do, no matter how personal, contemporary, visually beautiful, and involving to paint and view, will remind them, and will remind others, of the pioneers’ work, or some pioneer’s work, in general. 

(Of course it will. It should. That was abstract painting then, and theirs. In 1300, when Giotto was introducing the new naturalistic figurative painting for his attentive contemporary viewers, he and they had no idea that, or how, his Mary in the stable could lead to The Mona Lisa in just two centuries, let alone to Les Demoiselles in six. But for 700 years since Giotto, figurative painters have been painting women in rooms, one generation of passionately committed contemporary individual painters after another, each painter contributing their own individual, and sometimes subsequently influential,
and sometimes historically extraordinary developments. And today, from our fortunate point of view within the long, continuous history of this still-developing tradition, if Modernist Picasso’s brothel parlor portrait doesn’t remind us of Renaissance Giotto’s Nativity scene, we’re not getting the pictures.)

Marden’s and Scully’s achievements, therefore, represent both an extraordinary confidence in the independence of their own contemporary awareness and an extraordinarily independent commitment to developing the pioneers’ achievements rather than avoiding them. And even with their now obvious appreciation of the pioneers’ achievements, both Marden and Scully began their abstract painting careers in the 1970s as “Minimalists”. That is, they have since then gradually developed their abstract drawing and composition to this level of complex simplicity from about the most minimal drawing and compositional structures that could feature their body-language and even-color markmaking across plane-space – their unequivocal commitment to abstract painting.

8. Who’s Next

The unexpected development of a whole new abstract painting tradition, as revealed by the mature work of Marden and Scully and other persistent contemporary abstract painters, will gradually be noticed, and appropriately appreciated, by a steadily increasing number of passionately ambitious young visual artists, while they are still first discovering art and their own visual interests, and then studying and considering their career paths. I hope this paper will help advance that appreciation. In 2006, Marden had a retrospective at MoMA and Scully had a solo show at the Met. The examples of their international career success will be reassuring.

I expect that some of those passionately ambitious young visual artists will be viscerally attracted (on viewing both the new work and especially all the eventually re-appreciated pioneers’ work) to the visual freedom that abstract painting’s common most-general painting practices and visual structures offer them to compose their own body-language and even-color markmaking across plane-space. I expect those young twenty-first century artists to want the extraordinarily sensuous freedom for self-expression that they can exercise from the beginning in abstract painting, given the pioneers’ examples, and then mature through over a long, respected career. In due course, those painters, and their successors, will make the pioneers’ paintings look early.