

My first visit to Kate Shepherd's Bushwick studio hovers in my memory as the date my scopophilia and legendary visual recall almost faltered due to sheer over-stimulation — almost. The artist moved variations from a unique print series rapidly across a studio table. Most of the prints were presented in pairs so that, while they were stationary, my eyes would dart between two large, vividly colored surfaces. Seconds later the prints would be in motion again, and during these periods of flux, four sheets would be on view, offering too many colors to name or process — too many colors to associate with known color names or their natural references — flowers, fruits, skies, woods (a range of colors to describe the day's intoxicating sensations). While we looked at many artworks in different forms that day, what I recall most are the fluttering birds of printed colors delivering wave after wave of retinal pleasure.

Yes, it was pleasurable, but I am writing here to argue that when the eye/mind interface is properly prepared, receptive, and trained in higher-order looking, the experience can be a form of study as edifying as meditation and salutary as exercise, and its benefits can overflow the limits of the merely aesthetic. "Retinal art" is the term Duchamp invented to make clear the kind of art that did *not* interest him, and hence became inscribed as the eternal opposite of elevated conceptual art. And it is true that visual pleasure can render viewers passive — as the dazed looks on the faces of the crowds before Monet's *Water Lilies* too clearly show.

Yet even in the *Water Lilies* the complexity of human consciousness is foregrounded and splayed out for self-reflexive contemplation. The construction of a coherent view of external reality requires the brain to go to extraordinary lengths in order to fill in the blanks of perceived reality. Monet explored that area between thought and perception. The outside world doesn't need to be completely seen in order for us to make the correct decisions as to how to stand up, drive a car, or exit a room. Perceptual gaps are very easy to overlook as long as you can function around them. Since it is terrifying to realize that much of what you think you are responding to is in fact "made up," we choose to overlook it. But over the last century the melding of perceptual psychology and modern art has repeatedly reminded us that the exterior world is largely a creation of what is between our ears.

There was a profound anxiety after World War II that new technologies were emerging so rapidly that evolution was much too slow a mechanism to adapt in time. Luckily some great thinkers focused on solving this problem. I was privileged to be a curator at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for close to a decade, where the legacy of two visionary artists was still pervasive many years after their deaths — György Kepes and Dr. Harold Edgerton, the two key founding figures for the visual arts at the legendary institute of science and technology. Edgerton used his skills as a trained engineer to change the frontier of humankind's visual reality by inventing new technologies for seeing, such as stroboscopic photography.

In the practical-minded atmosphere of MIT, in which busy scientists were solving some very real problems, Kepes decided to record the courses that he was developing there so that they would be available in perpetuity for the education of anyone who was

interested. Kepes, through his pedagogy and publishing, trained men and women to use their senses in order to increase their ability to face the great moral and ethical challenges of the day—such as *not* destroying the world through technological hubris.

Kepes, imported from the Chicago iteration of the Bauhaus (where the practical application of higher-level perception was hybridized with mainstream American practical business sense), was in the business of teaching brilliant minds who did not consider themselves artists, but who needed to employ perceptual skills to better envision solutions to problems. He did so by editing a series of groundbreaking books called *Vision + Value* in which artists and scientists could read challenging texts in each other's disciplines to make them work better in their own field.

Kepes felt that artists were crucial in this endeavor:

Artists, too, see what they see by means of assumptions. Their vision, if it is sensitive and true, becomes ours also: They teach us how to see and how to enjoy. We rely on them to make our perceptual grasp of the world functional, meaningful, satisfying and communicable—even though there is often a considerable time lag between the artist's grasp of the world and ours, for the artist's high degree of sensitivity tends to make him something of a prophet.¹

One of his primary lessons was simply to denaturalize vision, to make us aware that seeing is an acquired skill, and that visual experiences as simple as seeing a 3D rendering as a representation of real space or comprehending a montage sequence in a film were not intuitive but required previous exposure and training.

Another Bauhausler artist, Josef Albers, laid out color combinations in his *Homage to the Square* series and his ghost too hovered over the prints in Ms. Shepherd's studio. However, in his steadfast and somewhat grim determination that we should learn what effect color combinations have on our retinas, Albers has always seemed somewhat allergic to pleasure, as if adding pleasure to the equation of looking would short-circuit all potential visual learning experiences. Shepherd has no such fear. I left her studio aware that my optic nerves were evolutionary byproducts, a result of ancient proto-human ancestors searching for food, and that the nature-based colors affected me in profound ways, as loud, rhythmic music or a perfect kiss might—both emotional and sensual.

I was also aware of the history of counter-cultural forces pushing human senses past their nature-based limits with optical effects and hyper-saturated paints, trying to find in sensory limit-experiences the keys to consciousness and the sacred. I became aware that my ability to name a color combination made it easier to keep it in my memory. When I found a corollary for a color relationship, I was much better able to keep it in memory, as well as to talk about it with the artist. And too, I was reminded of the limits of all received color languages.

What I was most aware of was the interiority of my experience, the ways in which it was something I could not share with another through language, leaving me fundamentally alone with my sensations. This knowledge may seem minor, but how many real world disputes start from two parties assuming that their own worldview is “right” and therefore the other’s is nonsensical or insane. I embraced my unique visual apprehension of Shepherd’s wild offerings, but was keenly aware that my interpretations were not better than any other.

Does one need this awareness to enjoy Shepherd’s prints? Of course not. When they are installed in living situations, we can all relax and enjoy their beauty as a simple gift. This awareness is merely one really captivating potentiality inherent in the artist’s explorations, a joyous frosting on a very sensual cake.

¹ György Kepes, *The Visual Arts Today* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press), 6.