Monochrome Multitudes

I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow.

I affirmed: It’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation.

—Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1939

Of course painting did not end when Aleksandr Rodchenko painted his 1921 triptych of primary-colored panels known as “the last painting,” nor did artists’ explorations of the monochrome. By mid-century, painting made with a single color had emerged as a fundamental if surprisingly expansive artistic practice. In New York, Robert Ryman launched his exclusive, though astonishingly diverse, occupation with white paintings. In Paris, Yves Klein patented his signature pigment, International Klein Blue, to feature in paintings, performances, and furniture. In Tokyo, Lee Ufan painted lines and dots in a single color over and over again. Monochrome painting defined modernism’s reductive thrust, whether by emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane or by fore-grounding color theories. To redress this primacy of painting, numerous other artists explored
monochromy through three dimensions, craft, and nontraditional materials, including Claire Zeisler in her large woven Triptych. More recently, Amanda Williams painted houses the colors of Flamin’ Red Hots and Pink Oil Moisturizer. In fact, multitudes of monochromes pervade twentieth- and twenty-first-century art. While not comprehensive, the exhibition revisits this notoriously hermetic art to reveal its creative possibilities and complicate its histories. Throughout the galleries, monochrome artworks articulate cultural, political, racial, or gendered meanings; reveal the significance of materials and media; and engage North American art in a global dialogue. Groupings alternate between spaces filled by a single color—yellow, white, blue, grey, black, and red—and sections arranged thematically: the explicitly self-reflexive, media and technology, urban space and walls, the body, sound, and the “colorful.”

These installations reveal that what looks alike can have conceptual or contextual differences, and what looks different may share aesthetic or historical propositions. In written or spoken words, a multitude of voices—from students and faculty to specialists including conservators, scientists, and legal scholars—provides perspectives from a variety of disciplines.
Monochrome Multitudes is curated by Orianna Cacchione, Curator of Global Contemporary Art and Lecturer in the Department of Art History, and Christine Mehring, Faculty Adjunct Curator and Mary L. Block Professor of Art History and the College. The exhibition is part of the Smart Museum’s ongoing Expanding Narratives series that mobilizes collection installations to reevaluate canonic histories and curatorial strategies.

In conjunction with Monochrome Multitudes, visitors are invited to explore related programs and a world of monochrome campus-wide through public artworks and unexpected groupings in the Booth School of Business, the Harris School of Public Policy’s Keller Center, the David Rubenstein Forum, and the Media Arts Data and Design Center.

Major support for Monochrome Multitudes has been provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Principal support has been provided by Robert J. Buford, Gay-Young Cho and Christopher Chiu, Bob and Joan Feitler, the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation, and the University of Chicago College Curricular Innovation Fund. Additional support has been provided by the University of Chicago’s Committee on Environment, Geography, and Urbanization, Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation, UChicago Arts, and the Museum’s SmartPartners.
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About the Monochrome

A stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one.

—Clement Greenberg, 1962

Artists have long made art about art. For centuries, they have turned to pictorial motifs of mirrors and reflections, self-portraiture, and canonical subjects to make art that reflects on itself, on art made before and by others, on what art is and is not. As a limit case for modernism, art made from a single color has inspired much self-reflexive art "about the monochrome."

The artworks introducing this exhibition’s multitude of monochromes foreground such self-reflection. All challenge the dominance of painting in narratives about the monochrome. Some appropriate and reconfigure towering examples of monochrome art to pay homage to, compete with, criticize, expand, or surpass what came before them. Others are reflections on what it means to reproduce an art that seems to offer so little. Indeed, many blatantly address the common sentiment provoked by encounters with monochrome art—"I can do that too!"—or
question how monochrome art can possibly lay claim to any sense of originality and invention, let alone mean anything. Surprisingly, such reflections began before the first modern monochromes were even made.
Alphonse Allais
French, 1854–1905

Album Primo-Avrilesque
(April First Album)
1897

Artist book (work on paper)
Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center

The very cover of the April First Album—its title and table of contents—announces a joke. A “spiritual” preface is followed by “seven magnificent etchings in different colors,” a “second preface nearly as spiritual as the first,” and a “funeral march … for a great deaf man.”

The images are the first to be called monochromes (monochroïdal in the French introduction by the author). Their titles spoof academic pretentiousness and Impressionist optics: an all-red Tomato Harvest by Apoplectic Cardinals is subtitled Effect of aurora borealis. The opener, exhibited by poet Paul Bilhaud at the 1882 Exhibition of Incoherent Arts, is notoriously captioned “Combat of Black Men in a Cave at Night,” repurposing the black rectangle used in earlier centuries to denote
mourning as the punchline of a racist joke. The final image, a piece of white card stock pasted into the book, reproduces an early readymade: Allais had pinned a piece of Bristol paper to the wall of an exhibition by the Incoherents, a loosely knit group of amateur artists and cabaret performers brought together by Jules Lévy, originally to raise money for charitable purposes.

If the preface proclaims the avant-garde superiority of concept over manual skill, the closer revives older associations of monochrome/monotone with grief. Historically bridging Frédéric Chopin’s romantically mournful Marche funèbre and John Cage’s silent three-movement composition 4’33”, whose name indicates its duration, Allais prints twenty-four measures of blank staves as a two-page grid. According to Allais, performers “occupy themselves counting the measures” rather than disturbing mourners with “indecent noise.”

Andrei Pop
Allan and Jean Frumkin Professor
Committee on Social Thought and
Department of Art History

On November 11, 2022 the Film Studies Center at the University of Chicago will screen Émile Cohl’s related film
Le Peintre néo-impressionniste as part of its program Color Corrections curated in conjunction with this exhibition.
Arturo Herrera
Venezuelan, born 1959

Untitled
1997–1998

Collage on paper
Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow
2006.98.4

Venezuelan artist Arturo Herrera is known for incorporating cartoons into his work across media. This collage includes recognizable Disney characters from the animated film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937). The creatures look contemplatively at a painting made up of two parts: one monochrome black and one blue, containing a white line. The image juxtaposes innocent animated animals, which are figures of childhood nostalgia, with non-representational monochromes that offer far less certainty.

This artwork evokes abstract painter Ad Reinhardt’s monochrome black paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, which he called the “last paintings that anyone can make” (and also represented in this exhibition). Along with being
an Abstract Expressionist, Reinhardt was also a cartoonist who used comics to engage in pedagogy about modern art, as with his “How to Look” series. Herrera similarly foregrounds the act of looking. But unlike Reinhardt, he does not offer a caption or key to show how the nonhuman cartoon figures from a different aesthetic regime are looking at the monochromes or what they may see.

Patrick Jagoda
Professor
Departments of English, Cinema & Media Studies, and Obstetrics and Gynecology
Allan McCollum
American, born 1944

Plaster Surrogate
6-13-1983

Plaster Surrogate
8-18-1983

Enamel on cast Hydrostone
Anne Rorimer, Chicago, IL

In creating these plaster models of framed and matted black monochromes, Allan McCollum sought a “universal sign-for-a-painting” that would explore the role of art beyond its aesthetic value. McCollum cast hundreds of these Surrogates and sold them in bulk for discounted prices, toying with the distinction between high art and mass production. But despite the fact that the Surrogates are essentially interchangeable, each one is unique. Their hand-painted surfaces shine with slight divots and imperfections, belying McCollum’s stated goal of impersonality and giving the Surrogates an undeniable aesthetic draw.
Suzanna Murawski
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Claire Zeisler
American, 1903–1991

Produced by V’soske

Triptych
1967

Knotted and tied dyed wool
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Starrels, Sr.
1973.213a–c

Tassels achieve central, sculptural presence in Claire Zeisler’s Triptych of primary monochromes. Zeisler plays off of Aleksandr Rodchenko’s red, blue, and yellow panels of 1921—since Russian theorist Nikolai Tarabukin’s 1923 discussion of the red panel known as “last painting” and long understood to be the first monochrome artwork. But here paint and canvas are usurped by plush pile rugs. Wool spills onto the floor like paint, foregrounding the drape, texture, and physicality of so much tufted and tied yarn. Diverging from the laborious manipulations seen in her other work, Zeisler commissioned a bespoke rug factory, V’soske, to make Triptych, subverting preconceptions that her artwork in the 1960s was a
necessarily feminine, homemade craft. Anticipating her later monumental, freestanding abstractions, Triptych pulls away from the wall, away from the domestic tapestry, away from the aesthetic hegemony of painting, and cheekily asserts itself in the viewer's space. Form, facture, and the self-referential quality of the monochrome propel fiber art—often dismissed as decorative—into the abstract avant-garde.

Cybele Tom
Student, PhD Program in Art History

IMAGE CAPTION: Aleksandr Rodchenko, Chistyi krasnyi tsvet, Chistyi zheltyi tsvet, Chistyi sinii tsvet (Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color), 1921, Oil on canvas, Each panel, 24 5/8 × 20 11/16 inches (62.5 x 52.5 cm). A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow.
Joe Scanlan
American, born 1961

Palermo
2018

Typeface
Licensed by Joe Scanlan, New York, NY

Joe Scanlan examines art’s entwinement with the economy. Considering themes of production and circulation, use and functionality, money and property, authenticity and alter egos, his diverse practice ventures into the realms of design, commerce, publishing, fiction, and academe.

In 2018 Scanlan launched the font, Palermo, a full set of upper- and lower-case letters designed by cutting up and reassembling the components of the eponymous German artist’s Blaue Scheibe und Stab. Reusing one full set of both forms for each letter, Scanlan engages in one of his signature transformations. The result pays tribute to aspects of Palermo’s practice that resonate with Scanlan’s own: to the German’s work under someone else’s name (that of mafioso Frank “Blinky” Palermo), to his
collaborations (with viewers and artists), and to his formal inventiveness (infusing modernist abstraction with ready-made materials and design).

Monochrome Multitudes presents Palermo consistent with Scanlan’s work along the full scale between art and design: as an art object on exhibit and as the licensed font for the exhibition’s design and marketing.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes

IMAGE CAPTION: Palermo, Blaue Scheibe und Stab (Blue Disk and Staff), 1968. Private Collection.
Yellow
Amanda Williams
American, born 1974

Safe Passage/Currency Exchange
From the series: Color(ed) Theory

Color photograph
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions and Ann E. Ziegler
2018.9.4
William Turnbull
Scottish, 1922–2012

17-1963 (Mango)
1963

Oil on canvas
Gift of Sylvia Sleigh
1991.3

Mango is a postcard, a memory, and an experiment. Stationed as a pilot for the British Royal Air Force in India during World War II, William Turnbull was inspired by the way the world looked from his plane: the landscape was flattened, but in its simplification, it did not lose the impressions of life and complexity present at the ground level. Turnbull uses simple shapes and bright colors to mimic the form and emotion of these midair experiences.

A line, perhaps a river or road, cuts through his painting and creates a dizzying effect, contrasting the verticality of the painting itself with the top-down aerial view that it portrays. “Mango” is a reference to the natural landscape of India, and to the ephemeral nature of Turnbull’s experience.
The fleeting moments of serenity in wartime appear and fade like a mango in season. By using such a striking color, Mango combines both the chaotic, tropical world of Turnbull’s wartime days and the peaceful simplicity of the world seen from above, creating an artwork that is as visceral as it is soothing.

Isabella Diefendorf
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Beauford Delaney
American, 1901–1979

Untitled
1967

Oil on canvas
Robert J. Buford

Beauford Delaney had an abiding relationship with the color yellow. Yellow blazes and haunts his 1940s streetscapes of Greenwich Village. In portraits, especially after his move to Paris in 1953, the subjects (his beloved friend James Baldwin, singer Ella Fitzgerald, Delaney himself) seem to be composed of, or to dissolve into, yellow. In his abstract work, including Untitled, 1967, Delaney worked and reworked layers of color, here using underneath a darkish gray-green, white, and rose, to arrive at an undulant flowing state of yellow. Long viewed reductively, Delaney, who was Black and queer, and who lived with societal prejudice and mental illness, is re-emerging as a central artist of the 20th century. Many people, seeking to understand his unique conceptions of landscape, portraiture, abstraction, color, and light, return to what James Baldwin wrote of Delaney’s painting in
1964: “I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in every thing, in every surface, in every face … Beauford’s work leads the inner and the outer eye, directly and inexorably, to a new confrontation with reality.”

Rachel Cohen
Professor of Practice in the Arts
Department of English and
Program in Creative Writing
Charles Eames and Ray Eames  

Manufactured by Hermann Miller, Inc.

Fiberglass Rocker
1950 (design), 1975 (manufactured)

Molded (yellow) polyester reinforced with fiberglass, metal rod legs, and wood rockers
Gift of Barry Friedman
1984.25

The earliest version of this chair won second place at the Museum of Modern Art’s Low-Cost Furniture Design Competition in 1948. A distinctly American design and product, its customizable legs, upholstery, and color soon peppered mid-century homes and schools and remain popular to this day. The material and the organic vocabulary were innovative: polyester strengthened with fiberglass is not only silky to the touch but quickly matches the temperature of its surroundings.

Resisting the muted palette common in 1930s furniture, Charles and Ray Eames created the first colored
fiberglass, experimenting and working directly with manufacturers. As one recalled, the Eameses “knew exactly what they wanted. They knew the colors exactly to the T. [They wanted] to select colors that would minimize the effect of discoloration due to the process itself.” And while they pursued neutral colors that would adapt to different interiors, they also wanted to make their monochrome expanses vibrant. The couple even insisted on making “a black with feeling.”

Teddy Sandler
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Sheila Hicks  
American, born 1934

Evolving Tapestry—Soleil  
1984

Wound, tied, and knotted dyed linen  
Gift of the artist  
1995.45a–c

By following each strand of fiber, you can imagine Sheila Hicks winding, knotting, and tying fibers into a multi-toned yellow, sculptural mass. Hicks mimics craft techniques of the Chalitlas people, in which long threads are bound and dyed, a process she learned while studying in Taxco, Mexico, from 1959 to 1964. This technique includes the rhythmic wrapping of a single fiber to hold multiple fibers in place, showcasing the medium’s natural strength.

In Taxco, traditional fiber dyeing is laborious and primarily done privately by women. Evolving Tapestry—Soleil draws attention to these unseen labor practices, but Hicks diverges from the colorful and patterned Taxco designs by working in monochrome. The range of yellow tones references the sun (soleil, in French) and her restricted
palette highlights the tactility of fiber art, emphasizing the evolution captured in the title.

Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Lyman Kipp
American, 1929–2014

Yellow Throat
1973

Painted steel
Gift of Richard and Mary L. Gray
2021.35

As a primary color, yellow can be combined with other primary colors to create colors but it cannot be divided. Lyman Kipp’s inscrutable Yellow Throat represents and plays with this indivisibility. Yellow becomes the structure—one shade evenly supports the figure across sharp angles and turning planes. In fact, these planes seem like sheets of color that make the sculpture appear to lose its dimensionality.

Unlike the imposing Minimalist objects contemporary with this piece, Yellow Throat rejects the high modernist convention of sculpture scaled to the human body. The seminal 1966 Primary Structures exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City, which included another one of Kipp’s sculptures, directly confronted viewers with such
large-scale objects. By contrast, Yellow Throat is minuscule, forcing viewers to contort their bodies, as if to foreclose any relationship between viewer and artwork. Its independence and self-containment are compounded by its lack of support or pedestal. Yellow Throat is an unusually understated expression of presence, purity, and power.

Isabella Diefendorf
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Anne Truitt
American, 1921–2004

Sun Flower
1971/1984

Acrylic on wood
Collection of Carl & Marilynn Thoma

Anne Truitt describes her sculptures as an attempt to “take paintings off the wall, to set color free in three dimensions.” This six-foot, column-like sculpture is scaled to a human body, inviting viewers to engage with and move around a painting in three-dimensional space. At each corner of the sculpture, yellow planes meet to emphasize the ways that natural light and shadows affect our color perception: some yellows are the same tone, others are different. Truitt’s choice of monochrome flattens form into a field of yellow. As one of the few women associated with Minimalism, Truitt responds to a blind spot in contemporaneous sculptural abstraction by male artists, playing with color in relation to volume.

Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Aided by my knowledge of image multiplication, color photography, photomechanics and the different systems for printing on paper. I concluded that the perception of the chromatic phenomenon is unstable, that it is constantly evolving, that it is subject to many circumstances...

—Carlos Cruz-Diez, 1989

The monochrome has largely been defined by painting, yet throughout this exhibition examples of unconventional materials and "new media" abound. The artworks in this section complicate the primacy of paint and raise questions about how color is made. In each instance, pigments are replaced by other units of color—a pixel, a lithographed or inkjetted dot, a grain of cinnamon, a band of PVC, a piece of hard candy. Repeated hundreds or thousands of times, these units coalesce into shapes and forms that appear monochromatic but may actually be polychromatic and vice versa.

This focus on the building blocks of monochrome color seems to echo European and American modernism’s emphasis on the essential qualities of a given medium.
That historical dialogue is underscored by artworks foregrounding the dependence of our color perception on light—we see only the light waves that are reflected off an object. Yet far from autonomous, some artworks on view experiment with the nature of reproductive technologies and, however abstractly, replicate or extend into their surroundings: printings from stone plates or computers, software or hardware, mass-produced food items or plastics. As such they engage with the very world that abstraction and monochromes are often said to defy.
Carlos Cruz-Diez  
Venezuelan, 1923–2019

Physichromie No. 1006  
1975

PVC inserts, vinyl acrylic paint on aluminum, stainless steel  
Collection of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation

Over the course of a career that spanned more than half a century, Carlos Cruz-Diez remained quite singularly dedicated to the study of color. Physichromie No. 1006 comes from the artist’s signature series, begun in 1959, in which he sought to separate color from both form and material, turning it from a stable fact to an event unfolding in time and space. Colors not present in the work itself thus emerge and vanish as the viewer moves in front of it. While the science of color underlies his experiments, Cruz-Diez was more interested in the viewer’s affective and emotional experience of color.

Along with his compatriots Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto, Cruz-Diez formed part of a generation of Venezuelan artists for whom an earlier national realist art
gave way to ones about universal experiences of color, form, and movement.

Megan Sullivan
Assistant Professor
Department of Art History
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
American, 1957–1996

“Untitled” (L.A.)
1991

Green candies in clear wrappers, endless supply
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Original dimensions: approx. 192 x 14 x 1 ½ inches
Original weight: 50 lbs.
Jointly owned by Art Bridges and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

You can have something green if you want; the candies are for taking. But would you really call this sculpture “green”? Just as a bed of wrapped, round candies is only apparently flat, other of “Untitled” (L.A.’s properties fill our actual experience of “green,” here and now, with change and difference. Against uniformity Felix Gonzalez-Torres deploys a profusion of textures: a sparkling upper surface, broad, wavering outline, and surprisingly brilliant color.

Here, “green” is used and lived, not simply conceived. The artist doesn’t present green directly to the eye: crinkled clear plastic and the underlying floor or plinth both intervene, coloring the color with projected and reflected
light. Get down low and observe the packages’ wildly varied footing, the sheer amount of space within the form. Get up again and you will immediately perceive the countless facets, literal and imaginary, those real pathways contribute to the thing seen. As though nothing here is one thing—including the part we’re invited to play.

Darby English
Carl Darling Buck Professor
Department of Art History

Untitled (L.A.) is also installed in the Media Arts, Data, and Design Center (MADD) on the first floor of the Crerar Library on the University of Chicago campus. The artwork will be installed in additional locations across campus from January to December 2023.
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
American, 1957–1996

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Darby English
Carl Darling Buck Professor
Department of Art History
Wade Guyton
American, born 1972

Untitled (for TzK)
2015

Epson UltraChrome inkjet on linen
Private Collection, Chicago

When asked by Texte zur Kunst, a contemporary art magazine, for a reconsideration of the art historical canon, Wade Guyton’s response was a partially printed black band. Guyton’s process typically involves sending an image file through a commercial EPSON inkjet printer multiple times. The resulting multi-panel installations reveal a uniqueness arising from even the most mechanized techniques. For this edition, Guyton limited his palette to draft black ink, instead of the optional full black produced by the combination of CMYK—cyan, magenta, yellow, and black—and halted the printer before the pre-primed canvas was covered in ink. This stalled rectangle stands in for the unfinished project of monochromatic abstraction, ever evolving and just getting started.
Shane Rothe, MA ‘21
Curatorial Research Assistant for
Monochrome Multitudes
Haegue Yang
Born 1971, Seoul, South Korea

Produced at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Cinnamon Sheets Composition in Five Gradations – Linear Divisions

Cinnamon Sheets Composition in Four Gradations – Diagonal Divisions

Cinnamon Sheets Composition in Four Gradations – Triangular Square Divisions

Cinnamon Sheets Composition in Four Gradations – Circular Square Divisions

Cinnamon Sheets Composition in Four Gradations – Tangential Divisions
2017

Korintje Cinnamon Powder, Korintje Cinnamon Powder (organic), Ceylon Cinnamon Powder, Ground Ceylon Cinnamon Powder and Vietnamese Cinnamon Powder on
I can’t stop myself from examining the figures and events that seem significant to comprehend the elusive aspects of the colonial circumstance in which we are living today.

—Haegue Yang, 2012

Haegue Yang explores the aesthetic potential of everyday materials—cinnamon here, Venetian blinds in the lobby. Eschewing paint or pigment, geometric shapes are rendered in different varieties of cinnamon—Ceylon from Sri Lanka and Korintje from Indonesia. Yang’s patterns reference twentieth-century geometric abstraction, from Constructivism to Op Art, yet her materials point beyond modernism’s self-reflexivity, to histories of colonial domination and global trade.

Native to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka), cinnamon was one of the first spices traded in the ancient world and the most valuable, worth as much as gold and ivory. In the early sixteenth century, Portuguese traders took control over Ceylon, the largest cinnamon-producing region in the world. In the following centuries, Dutch, French, and English forces colonized the region and made the spice a
profitable commodity, often the colonizer’s most profitable. Eventually demand for Ceylon cinnamon was replaced by cheaper Korintje cinnamon harvested in Indonesian forests. Today Korintje remains the most common and least expensive variety, known for its sweet and smooth taste. Yang’s monochrome prints draw out the differences in color and smell between Ceylon and Korintje cinnamon, thus highlighting their distinct colonial histories over their culinary usage.

Orianna Cacchione
Curator of Global Contemporary Art
Lecturer, Department of Art History
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Jules Olitski
American, 1922–2007

Untitled
1970

Untitled
1970

Color lithograph
Gift of Jay Y. Roshal
1983.112 and 1983.111

Jules Olitski chose to use spray painting to create “color that hangs like a cloud, but does not lose its shape.” In these lithographs he used printmaking techniques to do the same: spray paint-like sheets of color make up a monochrome field that appears to float within the work’s surface.

Look closely at the top left corner of each one. A thin blue border snakes around the orange print and hugs blots of red, yellow, orange, and pink. In the pink print, a rectangle of mottled salmon and lime green peeks out of a field of pink and gray, which sometimes gives way to yellow or
blue. Also notice the print’s texture: Olitski has amplified
the grease used in lithographic inks to give the images
extra sheen. The seemingly dissonant colors lend the
lithographs depth, as if a cloud of spray paint really is
floating inside the print, but the greasy shine reminds us
that the lithograph remains a flat surface.

Suzanna Murawski
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Tobias Rehberger
German, born 1966

81 Years
2002

Computer program
Tobias Rehberger and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

The duration of this artwork is that of an average human lifespan in Italy, where it was first exhibited: over the course of 81 years, a computer program shows, pixel by pixel, the 3.6 million colors that a computer screen or projector can produce. No human viewer can ever see the entire work, nor really register the color changes as they happen. The work is a distinctly nonhuman time/memory system that exists alongside human viewers rather than existing for them. And yet, the colors create an atmosphere, a subtly live, vibrant, presence that humans may relate to.

The soundtrack to the artwork is The The’s 1983 song “This Is the Day,” stretched to 24 hours by means of granular synthesis. In this way, the soundtrack is literally “the day” referenced in the song title. Still, the new,
extended version undercuts the type of human memory that is encapsulated in the traditional aesthetic format of a pop song.

Ina Blom
Wigeland Visiting Professor
Department of Art History
White
From 1950 to 1954, Dorothea Rockburne studied at Black Mountain College, where her approach to art was influenced by German mathematician and faculty member Max Dehn. The displayed print brings to mind a significant contribution of Dehn’s to mathematics, his solution to one of the influential problems posed by David Hilbert for the 20th century. It was discovered in the 19th century that if two figures drawn with straight lines in a plane have the same area, then it is possible to make straight cuts on one figure and reassemble the pieces to obtain the other. Hilbert asked: is the same always possible in three-dimensional space with shapes of the same volume? Dehn proved: not always.
If Rockburne’s print were to be cut along the folds, the pieces could be reassembled into another figure, a potential for reconfiguration suggested by the different media and nuances of white embedded in this monochrome surface. In fact, any other figure of the same area can be obtained by appropriate cuts. This would be impossible with a three-dimensional sculpture.

Simion Filip, PhD ’16
Associate Professor
Department of Mathematics
Günther Uecker
German, born 1930

Spirale (Spiral)
1969

Oil and nails on canvas mounted on wood panel
Collection of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation

“In the beginning was the nail,” wrote Günther Uecker, describing his signature element, which he has hammered into patterns that appear to swirl, whirl, and even sprout from the paintings and sculptures made throughout his long career. Coming of age during Germany’s postwar reconstruction, Uecker was compelled to create new beginnings. As the artist testifies, his choice of white can be seen as “the high point of light, as a triumph over darkness.” In the artwork seen here, the monochrome plane is a surface for exploring fresh starts: it’s a playground for light and shadow, in which nature and technology join forces to create a harmonious world.

Rachel Jans, PhD ‘14
Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, San Diego Museum of Art
Mary Abbott
American, 1921–2019

Untitled
1951

Paint and charcoal on paper
Thomas McCormick and Janis Kanter, Chicago
2022.5

Within this gestural artwork, Abstract Expressionist Mary Abbott explores the idea that white is relative, variable, and even imperfect. This range of whites, some so dark they appear nearly gray, are often in stark contrast—for instance, between the warm, creamy-white ecru paper and the pure, coldly synthetic white of her chosen paint. Instead of treating the paper’s surface as mere background, it presents an additional shade of white.

As charcoal is picked up by her brush, creating the broad spectrum of white, it leaves ridged lines through the still-wet paint. Through this playful application of materials, Abbott redefines traditional painting practices—such as underdrawings and the art historical tradition of modeling lights and darks during preparatory processes—to create
a new conception of the picture plane defined by innovative, yet still traditional, layers of monochromatic mark making.

Claire Rich
Student, Master of Arts Program in the Humanities
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the U.S. Department of Justice may bring charges if it finds that a police department has engaged in a “pattern or practice” that “systemically violates people’s rights.” After Police Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Black teenager Michael Brown in 2014, the Department of Justice investigated the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department. On ninety-one blind-embossed pages, A Pattern or Practice contains almost the entire text of the resulting Department of Justice report. Collins has transformed the words of the report, which did find a pattern of discrimination under the law, into a monochromatic textural pattern suggestive of white systemic dominance. As in her larger oeuvre, Collins has
given these words tactility to suggest that texts dealing with race can have a physical impact on the body.

Farah Peterson
Professor of Law
The Law School
Kwon Young-woo
South Korean, 1926–2013

Untitled
circa 1970

Korean paper
Gay-Young Cho and Christopher Chiu

Originally trained in ink painting, Kwon Young-woo abandoned the brush and began to make artworks entirely with hanji (Korean mulberry paper) in the 1960s. These artworks were rebellious—they rejected two of the three fundamental materials of calligraphy and ink painting: brush and ink. Instead, Kwon revealed the materiality of the paper itself through subtle surface manipulations: he glued, layered, cut, scratched, and ripped the delicate, translucent hanji, allowing white to emerge from white to create stark monochromes. At the time, Kwon’s decidedly materialist white reliefs stood out from the emerging Korean abstract ink painting movement. Kwon’s abstractions rebuffed utopian calls to reconcile so-called Eastern and Western art, instead emphasizing a material that was distinctly East Asian.
Years after Kwon began working exclusively with hanji in 1981, South Korean art critic Lee Yil coined the term Dansaekhwa, Korean for mono-chrome painting, to describe the monochrome, process-based artworks of Kwon and his contemporaries.

Orianna Cacchione
Curator of Global Contemporary Art
Lecturer, Department of Art History
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Robert Ryman
American, 1930–2019

Card
2002

Oil on canvas
Lynn and Allen Turner

WHITE. The word pales compared to the complex experience that this white paint generates, as multiple shades of green veering towards yellow and blue peek through the thick paint laid over the beige canvas and pale green underpainting that is the ground. Filling the foreground, white paint is the main protagonist. In a captivating reversal of the ostensible neutrality of white gallery walls, this white is the primary subject of the painting. Here and now, where black/white social relations have likewise been hoisted from the background to the foreground, Robert Ryman’s proposal gathers new steam.

The rectilinear monochrome form, like an alphabet letter, is a widely shared human invention. The TV screen before it’s turned on, the blank piece of paper, tinted glass windows, the surfaces of tables—the human-made world
is swimming in monochrome rectangles. In comparison, Ryman’s Card is full of incident. The light catching on the physical, object-like paint makes this a very sculptural work.

The paint strokes capturing the movement of Ryman’s body place his personal idiosyncrasy inside the shared alphabet-like structure of the monochrome. The mall, the church, the grid of the city—these are also shared structures, which, like the framed painting, enable communication between persons.

Physical phenomena, like the complexity of the white light thrown off of Ryman’s white paint, provide opportunities for building metaphor; in this way, they also open up the possibility to share understanding. In that sense this painting is inclusive, at least for a moment.

Jessica Stockholder
Raymond W. & Martha Hilpert Gruner Distinguished Service Professor
Department of Visual Arts
Jessica Stockholder
American, born 1959

canted white
2013

Plexiglas, ceiling tile, leather, pushpins, tree root, acrylic and oil paint, beads, plumbing pipes, white designed plastic stool, wood, hardware, plastic tub, and vinyl

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Jessica Stockholder’s canted white explores boundedness: how does an artwork relate to and at times meld into the wall on which it is placed? How is its edge defined? The collision between this white sculpture and its white habitat creates space where “edge” and “boundary” seemingly fade into nonexistence against the gallery’s walls.

At the same time, the title implies a canted edge—an oblique, slanted angle that results in an ambiguous, imperfect boundary. Stockholder precariously balances on these edges: those between a singular object and an immersive artwork, and between white and non-white. She
presents white as off-white, nearly white, and even not-so-white-at-all. The presence of white seeps over, touches, alters, and invades the space of the wall; white even consumes the work itself, uniting disparate elements under its expansive monochromatic umbrella.

Claire Rich
Student, Master of Arts Program in the Humanities
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Tony Tasset  
American, born 1960

Pieta  
2007

Painted cast hydrocal  
Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund  
for Acquisitions  
2008.48

Holding a boy slumped over in his arms, a man bends his knees, bracing his feet against the floor to bear the weight. Invoking the Pietà, an iconic subject in Christian art dating to the early fourteenth century, Tony Tasset casts himself in the role of the grieving Virgin Mary and his actual son—living, healthy—in that of the dead Christ. The sculpture’s monochrome white evokes the marble used by Renaissance sculptors like Michelangelo, whose Rondanini Pietà (1564) inspired Tasset’s composition, but it does not disguise the more matte texture of Tasset’s modern, mundane material: hydrocal, a strong gypsum cement similar to plaster. The work’s surprisingly small size underscores the fragility of both father and son and heightens the intimacy of the scene.
Lauren Rooney
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Karl Wirsum
American, 1939–2021

She was Impressive
1980

Blind stamp
Gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of the artist
2001.548
Blue
Yves Klein  
French, 1928–1962

Table Bleue (Blue Table)  
Designed 1961, table made after 1963

IKB pigment, Plexiglas, glass, and steel  
Robert J. Buford

Table Bleue unabashedly marries high modernism and design. Displaying unprocessed blue pigment in a Plexiglas box, the coffee table turns Yves Klein’s signature monochromes into a tabletop. The purity of its loose raw material surpasses the purity of Klein’s paintings, which create the illusion of untreated pigments by suspending them in an invisible binder of matte resin. Klein patented this ultramarine as “International Klein Blue,” paradoxically inspiring numerous artists and artworks to use the distinct tone, including, in this exhibition, Palermo’s triangle wall-painting and Haegue Yang’s lobby installation. What is more, Klein launched his prolific, if short, career by facetiously claiming he had invented painting with a single color.
By showcasing his originality, he drew attention to and courted an increasingly lucrative postwar art market, the center of which Klein knew had moved from Paris to New York. His conception of high-end furniture toward the end of his life intensified that courtship. Two unfinished prototypes for a coffee table, featuring pigment in wooden trays that remained uncovered, led the artist’s widow to launch the posthumous production of patented tables like this one. That Klein himself was no longer involved makes this object the consequential conclusion of his career.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes

On November 11, the Film Studies Center at the University of Chicago will screen Yves Klein’s related film Bas Relief in a Forest of Sponges as part of its program Color Corrections curated in conjunction with this exhibition.
Helen Frankenthaler
American, 1928–2011

Focus on Mars
1976

Acrylic on canvas
Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York

Helen Frankenthaler’s Focus on Mars depicts the Red Planet in hues of blue. The first color image from the Martian surface was transmitted to Earth by NASA’s Viking Lander 1 on July 21, 1976. This historic image shows a rocky, orange-red surface and sky, a much harsher environment than the hints of blue skies, lush water, and flowing hills chosen by Frankenthaler.

We have learned a lot about Mars since 1976, thanks to several space missions to the Red Planet. Current scientific evidence points to underground water and subglacial lakes on contemporary Mars. A few billion years ago, the Red Planet was bluer, with vast primordial oceans covering large portions of its surface. Frankenthaler’s imagination prophesies the latest
discoveries about Mars’s distant past and what the terraforming movement dreams for Mars’s future.

Angela V. Olinto
Albert A. Michelson Distinguished Service Professor of Astronomy and Astrophysics
Dean, Physical Sciences Division

IMAGE CAPTION: Viking Lander 1 image of Mars surface July 21, 1976. NASA/JPL.
Derek Jarman
British, 1942–1994

Blue
1993

Single-channel video installation; 35mm film shown as video, high definition, color, and sound, 79 min.

Courtesy Basilisk Communications & Zeitgeist Films
© Basilisk Communications Limited

When Derek Jarman’s Blue opened in New York in 1993 as a “feature film,” employees placed a sign outside the theater that read: “Warning, this film is only the color blue.” Indeed, the film is a single static shot of International Klein Blue. What began as an homage to artist Yves Klein soon became a reflection on Jarman’s own life, and his final work. As Jarman lost his eyesight due to an AIDS-related illness, his entire world slipped into pure blue. The unchanging screen is accompanied by a musical soundtrack, as well as the artist and his former collaborators narrating a poetic and diaristic text.
Blue, like many of the other monochrome artworks gathered here, inhabits multiple forms. It is a film, a text, a performance, and a sonic experience wrapped into one artwork. At feature film length, Jarman’s vast blue invites you to make your own associations with the color, intertwining your own experiences with the artwork.

Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Ellsworth Kelly
American, 1923–2015

Dark Blue Panel
1981–1982

Acrylic lacquer on aluminum
Collection of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Foundation

I wondered, ‘Can I make a painting with just … color?’ I loved it, but I didn’t think the world would. They’d think, ‘It’s not enough.’

—Ellsworth Kelly, 1996

Devoid of facture, the subtle nuance of this blue surface demonstrates Ellsworth Kelly’s spartan visual vocabulary. Yet however minimal, the artwork’s relationship to the wall remains uncertain. It pushes into the viewer’s space as it cuts into its surroundings: a deep blue void seems to open a space beyond the wall.

Originally designed as part of a series of trapezoidal panels, Dark Blue Panel is now alone: a singular crisp and bold, and, at first sight, hard-edged form. However, the
artwork’s distorted shape, ambiguous relationship to the wall, and resulting shadows pull focus away from the edge and back to the interior mass of blue.

Claire Rich
Student, Master of Arts Program in the Humanities
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Barnett Newman
American, 1905–1970

The Moment
1966

Silkscreen, printed in color on Plexiglas, backed with rag board and mounted on wood
The Ruttenberg ’52 Collection

The Moment was part of the inaugural portfolio published by Multiples, Inc., founded by gallerist Marian Goodman in 1965. Under the title Four on Plexiglas, Newman, alongside Philip Guston, Claes Oldenburg, and Larry Rivers, experimented with expanding the materials of printmaking. Printing on Plexiglas, Newman worked both with and against the medium’s transparency, its reflective surface, and its visibility as a distinct plane, retaining the signature painterly quality of his surface. He later described this artwork as “color already in a frame and under glass.”

Plexiglas was a relatively new material in the 1960s, for Newman as an artist and in general, it had only been commercially available only since the late 1930s. Yet The
Moment was consistent with Newman’s overarching concerns and readily recalls his 1946 painting Moment. In both artworks, the “zip”—an inner, vertical band of color—operates as a unifying element. Rather than dividing the painting or print, the “zip” produces a totality by bringing together two halves of a supporting medium. As the palette shifts between medium and deep blue, The Moment is further united by an electrifying effect: the “zip” virtually vibrates underneath the subtle glassy surface.

Claire Rich
Student, Masters Program in the Humanities
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Palermo
German, 1943–1977

Blaues Dreieck (Blue Triangle)
1969

Stencil, tube with blue tempera paint, brush, instructions, and one original triangle painted on paper by the artist, in cardboard case with cut-out and colophon page
Thordis Moeller, Millerton, NY

This edition directs use of the stencil to paint “a blue triangle over a door” and “then give away the original” sample print included (along with the instructions still part of this copy but not exhibited here). The multiple thus positions its owner as collaborator, transforms part of the artwork from a commodity into a gift, and follows a logic of unlimited production (the identical German paint is still available). As such, Palermo met contemporaneous demands to democratize art; remarkably, what he makes broadly accessible here is abstract painting, long considered elitist. While all of Palermo’s signature wall-paintings increase the viewers’ perceptual and bodily awareness in space, the blue triangle proposes an even more engaging model of abstract art.
Used in a variety of media and contexts, the motif also came to function as a quasi-signature for the artist. This variation forms a characteristically informed if lighthearted response to the history of art and aesthetics. Hovering over the door like a poorly proportioned and positioned pediment, the blue triangle here makes concrete the spirituality and immateriality of its color (from Renaissance painting to German Romanticism) and its shape (from the Trinity to the art and writing of Wassily Kandinsky).

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes

IMAGE CAPTION: Instruction sheet included with contents of Blaues Dreieck edition.
John Plumb
British, 1927–2008

Untitled (Blue Abstraction)
1965

Color screenprint
Gift of Sylvia Sleigh
1991.325

I find that my own paintings are variously decoded by each spectator according to the nature of their own personality … each will pick a thread of my own identity and … contribute responses that are peculiar to themselves.

—John Plumb, 1963

John Plumb’s Untitled (Blue Abstraction) provides a means for self-exploration. His intense but not overwhelming artworks create an opportunity for introspection. Plumb hoped the deep blue of his abstract print would elicit different reactions in different people. In keeping with his search for variable, open-ended meanings, Untitled (Blue Abstraction) is also known by the title Bermuda (as in the Tate Modern collection), conjuring
Oceanic and colonial associations not readily apparent in this untitled version.

Isabella Diefendorf
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Enrico Castellani
Italian, 1930–2017

Superficie Blu (Blue Surface)
1993

Acrylic on canvas
Robert J. Buford
Gray
Alan Cohen
American, born 1943

Now (Death Camps – Auschwitz-Birkenau)
1994

Gelatin silver print
Gift of Sharon Cohen
2002.106

Until then I had never been in a place … where the earth had absorbed such pain … but there was no evidence, nothing, in the present sense.

—Alan Cohen

This photograph depicts the seemingly unrecognizable landscape that makes up the National Socialist concentration camp known as Auschwitz-Birkenau. The close-up on a patch of soil foregrounds its mundanity: the Holocaust was a genocide committed on a ground like any other, revealed by sunlight like any other. Yet the borderless nature of the photograph suggests an isolated abyss. A few stones, like the small visitation stones Jewish mourners set upon graves, attest to the permanence of memory even for lives that were cut short. Like the title
“Now,” they remind us that the photographer’s memorialization of the present is something separate from, though related to, the past he considers. The photographer, a visitor to Auschwitz, as well as the viewers of this photograph engage in a kind of witnessing that invests place, now empty of the tortured bodies that once walked it, with meaning derived from the knowledge of history. The emptiness of the monochrome photograph resists attributing meaning to the horror of the Holocaust, focusing instead on what is seen and what can’t be seen, what is remembered and what can’t be remembered.

Jessica Kirzane
Assistant Instructional Professor in Yiddish
Department of Germanic Studies
Left to right:

David Schutter
American, born 1974

After YBCA C 117x2
After YCBA C 156x2
After YBCA C 129x2
2008

Oil on canvas
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions

These paintings do not represent the world. They exist within it. However, unlike many paintings conventionally described as abstract, David Schutter’s canvases do not purport to be self-sufficient or autonomous. They explicitly live in complex relation with spatial and temporal forces outside themselves. More prosaically, in this case, they are in some sense dependent on a group of cloud studies in identical dimensions by John Constable in the collection of the Yale Center for British Art; yet, in their gray on
grayness, they do not offer the viewer serviceable copies of these originals. Instead, Schutter treats earlier artworks like Constable’s as if they are a kind of sheet music or the stage directions for a play. His painterly interpretations are wholly dependent on these earlier works, but in no way identical to them, and it is precisely this space—the space between identity and difference—that is at the heart of Schutter’s art.

Anonymous
Fred Sandback
American, 1943–2003

Study for Sculpture
1993

Cardboard with cuts and white pencil
Rhona Hoffman

The shape and material of this gray cardboard, which stands out from its white background, suggest an unfolded box or simple floor plan. Along with the collage’s title, which identifies it as a preparatory work for a sculpture, these features prompt translations into three dimensions. Fred Sandback made this study for one of his many sculptural compositions consisting of lengths of yarn spanning large, typically white-walled spaces. These modest, precise outlines trace planar shapes or cubic volumes of air that appear solid but transparent.

Rather than simply diagramming one of his installations, this collage joins Sandback’s sculpture in stimulating the spatial imagination. The cardboard’s slight projection outward from the page and the presence of cuts in its surface open up a sculptural depth within the nearly flat
plane of this gray monochrome. In juxtaposing these cuts in the cardboard with lines drawn on its surface, Sandback captures the distinction between the illusionism of drawing, in which lines appear to divide material, and the literalism of sculpture, in which material can actually be divided.

Lauren Rooney
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Avery Preesman
Dutch, born Curacao, 1968

Echo
2006

Oil, pigment, microwax on canvas and plate of sable cement
Gift of Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert
2018.16a–b

Avery Preesman creates textured relief paintings and molded sculptural objects that represent and capture the present. In this diptych, the left panel’s surface design is created using microwax, which is painted a solid silver; its striated pattern is echoed visually in the concrete relief on the right.

Preesman’s geometric abstraction overwhelms the picture plane with its rhythmic repetition and rotation of linear patterns and of his signature “P” element. The cast reproduction in concrete establishes the contemporary monochrome as an artifact. When asked why he used concrete to repeat the painting, Preesman slyly responded “So the echo will stop.”
Teddy Sandler
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Wolf Vostell
German, 1932–1998

Betonbuch (Concrete Book)
1971

Concrete and book
Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections
Research Center

For what Wolf Vostell called his “concretifications,” he encased in concrete objects ranging from an iconic 1960s chair design to a 1957 Cadillac DeVille (“parked” in the garage located just north of the museum). Here, the artist reported that he concretified the published documentation of the series to which this artwork belongs, though scientific examinations at Argonne National Laboratories have so far remained inconclusive. Unreadable in any conventional sense, the austere monochrome, sealed-off form, and twenty-pound weight of the Concrete Book suggest a language of stasis and entombment.

Consistent with Vostell’s associations of concrete with “freezing” and “hardening,” this “book” projects skepticism about the codification of knowledge and the reproduction
of art. Yet the artist valued the deep ambivalence of his signature material, using it also to “mummify” and preserve what he considered quintessential objects of the modern era. As such, a “concrete book,” whether a mere concrete block or an actual concretified book, appears prescient of a time when the weight of printed, bound paper has been replaced by the evanescence of shimmering screens.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Ernő Berda
Hungarian, 1914–1961

Glass Abstraction
1929

Toned gelatin silver print
Gift of the Estate of Lester and Betty Guttman
2014.122
Alan Cohen
American, born 1943

Now (Berlin Wall)
1994

Gelatin silver print
Gift of Sharon Cohen
2002.108
LOTTE JACOBI
American, 1896–1990

Photogenic [Glass Rectangles]
circa 1950

Gelatin silver print, vintage impression
Gift from the Ann Meyer Rothschild
2016.3
Walls

I am not interested in painting as it has been accepted for so long—to hang on walls of houses as pictures. To hell with pictures—they should be the wall—even better—on the outside wall—of large buildings. Or stood up as billboards or a kind of modern icon.

—Ellsworth Kelly, 1950

The monochrome stands in tense relation to the wall. The reduction to a single color is often considered the logical conclusion of abstract painting, but pure monochromy risks becoming a banal appendage on the wall, a decoration or accessory. Against this background, the artworks in this section unabashedly feature the wall as their subject, medium, or material.

Entire walls, roofs, and even houses become the pregnant grounds for the colors of building supplies, foods, and sundries—rust-preventive undercoating, bones, and hair products. Some of the artworks here thematize the wall qua wall, whether as a construction material contributing to global warming, or as a boundary between the public and private, indoors and outdoors. Walls not only are
fitting support for single-colored planes but themselves become giant freestanding monochromes—approaching the detached, reusable walls defining this display and used in this museum going forward.
The reason my photographs are so dark is that I take photographs everywhere, light or not.

—Roy DeCarava, 1990

Roy DeCarava photographed this hallway using its own light, without the aid of a flash. By embracing the actual light of a space in his photography, he questioned the essential qualities of light and how it was reproduced and represented on film. He skillfully restricted the development of the image to a dynamic range of tones, evidenced in the amplified grays on the gelatin silver print. By taking light as photography’s central element DeCarava shifted the emphasis of photography from portraying a subject to illuminating the material conditions in which a subject lives—the city, the tenement, the
home—and the way a sense of self reflects in photographic representations, ultimately capturing Harlem as itself.

Shane Rothe, MA ’21
Curatorial Research Assistant for
Monochrome Multitudes
David Hartt
Canadian, born 1967

Untitled
2015

Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond and framed
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund
for Acquisitions
2015.87

David Hartt uses photography to investigate what he describes as the “singularity” of architectural sites, designed as microcosms of specific world views that appear more complex and wayward in his images than their founding ideologies suggest. In this work, commissioned by the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago, Hartt photographed the department’s physical location since 1971, the Cochrane-Woods Art Center across the courtyard from this museum. Designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, the building evokes the “white box” style of modernism, marked by clean geometries and large-scale blanched gallery walls.
Here, Hartt captures the coarser face of this design archetype by photographing the building’s largely unseen roof, which hosts some of its unsightly mechanical elements. The photograph reveals both the extent of Barnes’ design commitment—monochromatic modernist design reigns even here—but also the literal seams and weathering of this aesthetic. This image attests to both the endurance of modernism but also its inevitable aging and transformation, as the building’s white surfaces disclose every nick, warp, and discoloration.

The material lesson about modernism on offer here further reflects the ongoing reevaluation of modernism and its legacies taking place inside this building and across the field of art history writ large.

Adrienne Brown
Associate Professor
Department of English Language and Literature
Marilyn Lenkowsky
American, born 1947

Member
1976

Oil on canvas
Gift of Maxine and Jerry Silberman
1985.38

The word “member” is defined as someone belonging to a particular group or structure; Marilyn Lenkowsky’s Member accordingly molds itself to the physical space it occupies. Hanging vertically in the corner of the room, Member disrupts the conventions of a rectangular framed canvas hung flat against a single wall. The piece instead appears to be floating, even as it remains pressed between the walls. This floating effect is increased by the artwork’s tapering shape: Lenkowsky was interested in how the elongated triangle moves the viewer’s eyes from the bottom to the top. Rather than depending on a single hue, Lenkowsky’s monochrome emerges from layered paints of different colors. Together these colors create the final grayish-maroon shade you see here. The artist embraces modulated, even broken textures by varying matte and
glossy brushstrokes. Member fluctuates between appearing sculptural and painterly, minimal and expressive, drawing out questions of physical space and texture in art.

Carla Nunez-Hernandez, MA ’22
Palermo
German, 1943–1977

Mappe zur Wandmalerei Hamburger Kunstverein (Portfolio for Wall-Painting Hamburger Kunstverein)
1973

1 silkscreen and 2 lithographs, each on laid paper
Thordis Moeller, Millerton, NY

For his exhibition at the Kunstverein Hamburg, Palermo painted in a reddish brown the freestanding, central formation of walls that defined the galleries. The fitting culmination of a five-year series of abstract wall-paintings, Palermo collapsed the distinction between mere painted walls and imposing monochrome object, the banal everyday and modernist abstraction, design and art.

In this trio of prints accompanying the Hamburg exhibition, Palermo documents his temporary artwork—such as the ground plan of the wall configuration—but also reflects on the cultural and formal significance of its color. The silkscreened sample captures the exact reddish brown the artist “had seen in a brewery and bar on the Rhine in
Düsseldorf” and translated into the rust-preventive undercoating familiar to locals from Hamburg’s ship industry. Yet the monochrome expanse also echoes its role on the walls; reaching all the way to the edges, it transforms the paper itself into an additional site of collapsing pictorial and materialized color.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Dan Peterman
American, born 1960

Corridor (Sulfur Cycle)
2022

Part 1: Gypsum drywall, wood, straps, build agreement with South Side Chicago housing developer
Part 2: Assembly of synthetic gypsum drywall samples removed from the Museum of Contemporary Art gallery walls Courtesy of the artist

Dan Peterman envisions this artwork in stages. It began with Sulfur Cycle (1994) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. That installation presented six stacks of drywall that utilized sulfur-captured synthetic gypsum, subsequently used in the construction of the museum’s new building. Peterman revisited the artwork as Sulfur Cycle 2.0 in 2021, excavating strips from the MCA walls to expose a substratum of the built-in material. Both instantiations foregrounded the long-term environmental impact of contemporary building practices and fossil fuel dependence.

A new stage of the artwork’s cycle for this exhibition began with sourcing drywall and lumber from standardized
construction material streams. The raw unmodified material—in the amount used for a local three-bedroom apartment—may be reconfigured into a new sculptural installation elsewhere on the University of Chicago campus before eventually being used by a developer and home builder active on the South Side. For this exhibition, the drywall is stacked as one large mass and strapped as if to be shipped. The deliberately excessive volume makes visible a material that typically becomes invisible, whether installed in a home or museum.

Peterman implicates the complete architecture of the museum as a material space worthy of investigation and reinvention. The artist cites as a reference point Bruce Nauman’s Performance Corridor (1969), a narrow passageway constructed from wallboard as a performance prop. Here, a relic from Sulfur Cycle 2.0—excavated drywall strips from the MCA walls assembled in the form of a “painting”—frames the space between wall and stack as a corridor. A pressurized physicality meets a diachronic material engagement performed between artist, museum, and supply chain.

Corridor further enfolds the workings of the museum by serving as an outsized pedestal for additional art. Presenting the drywall needed for a domestic space as sculptural mass and functional support, Peterman invites a
direct, somatic experience of the waste routinely produced by museums and construction demolition. At the same time, he engages with the history of modernist painting, which, pushed to its conclusion of a monochrome surface, negotiates the difference between “mere” wall and meaningful art.

Shane Rothe, MA ’21
Curatorial Research Assistant for Monochrome Multitudes
On sulfur cycles

Within the context of the monochrome, Dan Peterman challenges us to think about one of the least colorful objects I can imagine: ordinary drywall. By peering inside the pale gray of the drywall all the way down to the atomic multitudes it contains, Peterman points us to the sulfur atoms inside. These sulfur atoms reveal the challenges we face in producing even the most basic of human-made materials. He focuses our attention particularly on the cycle, or absence thereof, for the element—where the sulfur atoms come from and where they will go.

The best-known example of a complete chemical cycle is the carbon cycle in biology, wherein carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is captured by plants with the aid of energy from the sun and converted to sugars and other energy-rich molecules that drive the many chemical processes of life. For a chemist, what is so beautiful is that evolution has resulted in a complete cycle: the energy-rich molecules produced by photosynthesis ultimately power the chemical reactions of life and become carbon dioxide again. Nature offers us an important lesson on sustainability at scale. An incomplete cycle at very large scales cannot persist and evolve over long periods of time.
A complete cycle is required for any planetary-scale chemical system. Without such a cycle, net products will accumulate with unintended consequences. For example, when we combust fossil fuels, the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increases. The product of this half-cycle, carbon dioxide, is slowly accumulating in our atmosphere and raising the temperature of the planet, acidifying the oceans, and more. Even if we cease to emit carbon dioxide in the coming decades, it will take tens of millennia for the gas to find its way from the atmosphere back into rocks.

Chemical cycles can seem quite abstract and remote from our everyday lives. To bring it home, Peterman has focused on a particular aspect of humankind’s expansive use of sulfur. Fossil fuels often contain sulfur species that, when burned, become gaseous oxides of sulfur. If released into the atmosphere, these oxides of sulfur have deleterious effects, from producing acid rain to contributing to the ozone hole. This is why coal plants are required to have scrubbers to capture the emitted oxides of sulfur. Sulfur atoms derived from these captured gaseous oxides of sulfur can be reacted with calcium carbonate and converted into calcium sulfate, or gypsum, which is the principal component of drywall. Sulfur from the burning of fossil fuels is quite literally the stuff of the walls of nearly every room we occupy. Peterman invites us to consider
what happens to that sulfur when the walls are
demolished. Only a fraction of the drywall is recycled—
most ends up in landfills.

Now that human activity has reached planetary scale, we
are far behind in a race to develop artificial chemical
cycles modeled on the natural cycles of living systems.
For instance, chemists will one day find a way to emulate
nature’s carbon cycle via artificial photosynthesis. Their
goal is to use energy captured from the sun to convert
carbon dioxide to a fuel with high efficiency, closing the
carbon cycle just like plants. This would establish a
complete carbon cycle for human energy use. Absent
such cycles, we create one problem after another.
Peterman reminds us that it is not just the carbon cycle we
have to consider, but the cycles associated with many
other elements of the periodic table. Like it or not, we are
becoming climate system engineers. We had better learn
to emulate nature.

Paul Alivisatos BA ’81
John D. MacArthur Distinguished Service Professor
Department of Chemistry and Pritzker School of Molecular
Engineering
President of the University of Chicago
Top row:

Amanda Williams
American, born 1974

Harold’s Chicken Shack
Ultrasheen
Pink Oil Moisturizer

Bottom row:

Crown Royal Bag
Flamin’ Red Hots
Loose Squares/Newport 100s

From the series Color(ed) Theory
2014–16, printed 2017, edition of 10

Color photographs
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for
Acquisitions and Ann E. Ziegler
Seven abandoned buildings in Chicago’s South Side compose the canvas of Amanda Williams’s artistic and urban intervention, Color(ed) Theory (six are on display here and the seventh is in the opening gallery of this exhibition). The houses were located in zones of historic “redlining,” a form of institutionalized racism in which government agencies used discriminatory criteria to exclude Black communities from access to federal mortgage funding. (Such neighborhoods were marked with the color red on the lending agencies’ maps.) In a defiant, joyful counterpoint to the redliner’s racist vision, the artist painted the houses in the vibrant colors associated with popular consumer products in the Black community of the South Side—the bright yellow of Harold’s Chicken Shack, the brilliant orange of Flamin’ Red Hots, or the deep blue of a Crown Royal whiskey bag. A space of devalorization is thus fleetingly transformed into a testament to the everyday cultural practices that sustained Black lives under conditions of state-mandated urban apartheid. While the project did not prevent all the buildings’ subsequent demolition, it did catalyze public discussion of the deep social, cultural, and environmental harms.
produced through racialized dispossession and disinvestment in South Chicago and beyond.

Neil Brenner, MA ’94, PhD ’99
Lucy Flower Professor
Department of Sociology and Committee on Environment, Geography, and Urbanization
Black
Lynda Benglis
American, born 1941

Untitled (Double-page spread from Artforum 13 [November 1974])
1974

Magazine
Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center

Lynda Benglis’s Artforum “ad” has entered the history books and surveys for many reasons—the artist posing nude, donning a dildo; for the artist brazenly taking on a male-dominated art world and Minimalist Robert Morris, who had appeared in S&M gear for a solo show ad in the same magazine; for the ensuing controversy that polarized that very art world, including Artforum’s editors; for conflating advertising, editorial content, and art; for ingeniously collapsing newly emergent performance art and documentation; and for displaying impatience with more agreeable feminism and feminist art.

The black—covering a page and a third—remains all but forgotten. But this even, glossy, full-bleed expanse
suffices as its own monochrome. It appears as a presence—the material page emerging from the spine, defying modernist flatness, a column of reflected light letting the world in, an exquisite sheen and even printing registering every touch and dust particle. As such, this monochrome points to what deserves more attention: Benglis’s lifelong engagement with abstraction, form, color, materials, and their significance beyond her female identity.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Mark Bradford
American, born 1961

Raidne
2017

Mixed media on canvas
Private Collection

By coating endpapers—tissue strips used to protect hair from heat during a permanent wave—in dye and gridding them to the canvas, Mark Bradford creates rippling layers of light that emanate from a sea of inky earth tones. The rhythmic pulsations of the surface take on sonic dimensions through the title, Raidne, the name of one of the sirens from Greek mythology. Possessed of voices so beautiful that they could take hold of whoever heard them, sirens were considered as dangerous as they were enchanting, wielding their musicality to draw their audience toward death. In concert with the artwork’s title, the subtle surface effects seduce not only our eyes but also our ears, the canvas’s vastness overwhelming our bodies as a whole. In the process, the hairdresser’s toolkit is transformed from a means to beautify the painting into an act of empowering it with a distinctly feminine authority.
When I fell in love with black, it contained all color. It wasn’t a negation of color. It was an acceptance.

—Louise Nevelson, 1976

Louise Nevelson’s black consumes the material it covers. Alchemical, it transforms disparate elements into a whole object: remnants, scraps, odds and ends are united. In this sculpture, their bond is reinforced by a small-scale and compact composition.

Nevelson’s homogenizing, monochromatic black paint holds multiple, at times contradictory, meanings; she has discussed blackness in terms of “sorrow,” “joy,” “peace,” “greatness,” “quietness,” and “excitement.” This little box,
with its shadowed, hidden spaces, thus implicates much more than a uniform totality of obfuscating blackness.

Claire Rich
Student, Master of Arts Program in the Humanities
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Richard Serra
American, born 1939

Artaud
2009

Oil stick on paper
Art Bridges

Like the giant metal sculptures for which he is best known, Serra’s 2009 drawing Artaud is physically imposing. It is taller than most viewers, and the weight and texture of its thick, black circle—created by pressing heated oil-paint sticks onto handmade paper—lend the piece a sculptural presence. The surprising allusion to Antonin Artaud suggests a buried kinship between Serra and the idiosyncratic French theater maker and theorist. Both reject illusion in favor of a disorienting immediacy that overwhelms the senses. Both push against the perceived boundaries of their medium to explore what Artaud called “the truthful precipitates of dreams.” The hostile igneous planet of Serra’s drawing recalls Artaud’s insistence that artists must pursue the analogy between “a gesture made in painting or the theater, and a gesture made by lava in a volcanic explosion.” It also echoes the
existential cruelty of Artaud’s message: “We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads.”

John H. Muse
Associate Professor
Department of English and Committee on Theater and Performance Studies
Francis Newton Souza
Indian, 1924–2002

Still Life in Black
1965

Oil on canvas
Shireen and Afzal Ahmad, Hundal Collection, Chicago

Born in Portuguese Goa, trained in British Bombay, and active in Paris and London, Francis Newton Souza was a leading artist of his generation. Conversant with the dominant color theories of his time, he aimed to reposition black as a color—rather than an absence of color—while also probing its relationship with race and colonialism. Still Life in Black illustrates these concerns. In spite of its title, this hallucinatory painting reveals no easily discernible still life. Outlines of commonplace objects—a bottle, a bouquet of flowers—begin to emerge before retreating into dark abstractions. At the same time, letters and words jump out from the canvas, including the artist’s signature in the lower left corner.

Souza subverts the historical genre of still life by obscuring the image and rendering it all black; here, he is aware that
anti-colonial artistic movements, such as the Negritude, sought to reclaim the value of black and blackness. The painting’s color and opacity become the tool through which Souza stages a resistance to a normative (white) European convention of still life. The canvas invites viewers to meditate on the tension between image and text, light and darkness, the tangible and the ephemeral.

Mohit Manohar
Provost’s Postdoctoral Fellow
Department of Art History
Hiroshi Sugimoto
Japanese, born 1948

Gulf of St. Lawrence, Cape Breton Island
1996

Gelatin silver print, ed. 6/25
Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy, New York

The eye detects a slight difference in tone between the upper and lower halves of this austere photographic monochrome, distinguished by a faint horizon line: it is the night sea, primal and mysterious.

In each of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s Seascapes, the horizon cuts across the middle of a visual field with no particular cultural or geographic features. Still, each abstraction is tied to a specific place and time. For more than 30 years, Sugimoto photographed the sea across the globe with his large format 8 × 10 camera, setting exposure times of up to three hours to allow light reflecting from the sea and sky to form images.

In daylight, the long exposure time causes the waves to look unusually fixed and clear, while the overexposed sky
might appear white. Here, the light’s reflection generates a silvery tone in the lower half, beneath a dark charcoal sky. Each motif registers the particularities of its exposure details, location, atmosphere, and time of day, yielding a range of dark to white monochromes, and distinct to indistinct horizons.

The photographs are both specific and universal, presenting the simple meeting of sea and sky as an Ur-picture, common to all yet transcending human existence.

Chelsea Foxwell
Associate Professor
Departments of Art History and East Asian Languages and Civilizations
H. C. Westermann
American, 1922–1981

Ghost (Death Ship)
1964–1965

Wood, enamel, wire, nails, and brass
The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann
2002.121

One morning early off the coast of Japan, I was on my gun, on watch, on the pot side of the ship and was watching the Franklin which was about a thousand feet off our port beam. … Suddenly I watched in fascination this little plane coming …. The plane didn’t look familiar … and suddenly I saw it release its very little bomb and then the Franklin was engulfed in flames, smoke and explosions from stem to stern. It went dead in the water and I counted thirty-six tremendous explosions before we finally moved way ahead and out of sight—I think there were seven hundred survivors out of a crew of three thousand and every Marine aboard was killed. Weeks later we saw the Franklin in Eniwetok atoll. It was still smoking and had a terrific list and the smell of death from her was horrible.
—H. C. Westermann, 1966

Derived from his haunting experiences aboard American naval ships in the Pacific Ocean during World War II and the Korean War, the motif of an inky black death ship sails through H. C. Westermann’s oeuvre. Opening this box reveals a cavity inscribed with the phrase “For My Love Joanna,” a dedication to the artist’s wife. The black paint in contrast with the warm wood tones delineates the boundary between the two sides of the artist’s identity: the death ship exterior points to his veteran status while the interior shows a loving husband. They coexist rather than blur.

Ellis LeBlanc, MA ’22
Josef Albers  
German, 1888–1976

Structural Constellation  
circa 1955–1957

Machine-engraved plastic laminate  
Gift of John A. and Andrea L. Weil  
2009.1

The quintessential Modernist teacher and theorist of color and perception, Josef Albers’s interest in “perceptual ambiguity” manifests in the Structural Constellations. Cubic shapes join but allow structure to be read only sequentially and in fragments. As our focal point shifts, open volumes (the ones at top left and bottom right) pop forward and backward, and simple planes (in the center) recede only to protrude again.

While the Structural Constellations series features many conventional drawings and prints, Albers also turned to urban contexts and vernacular materials, such as architectural reliefs and engravings in plastic. First in 1950 with Cincinnati’s Formica Company, soon after in Ulm, Germany with the German equivalent Resopal, Albers
worked with skilled machinists to have a pantograph incise his designs into the laminates that defined period kitchens and office signage alike. As a result, this black monochrome reveals itself as a mere surface appearance with an off-white plastic underlayer. What is often understood as Modernism’s exclusive concern with visuality surprises with worldly reference and relevance amid postwar consumption and reconstruction. Whether on the continent or stateside, formalist “purity” is but an illusion.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Theaster Gates  
American, born 1973

Black Seam Formal Practice
2016

Courtesy of the Artist’s studio

Theaster Gates began ‘painting’ with roof tar in 2012, working with his father, suturing social history to art history, most notably the post-war history of black painting…work by Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ad Reinhardt, for instance, who described himself relentlessly pursuing “a pure, abstract, non-objective” painting “aware of no thing but art.” No less relentlessly, Gates both evokes and contaminates that purity. He does so through the conceptual work of materials: in this case rubber, bitumen, galvanized metal, and copper (the rubber sealed with a propane torch). The seam across the construction exhibits the aesthetic dimension of industrial products and manual labor. And the work might be said to serve as a seam between the formal and the socioeconomic, between black painting and Black painting, positioning the artist himself at the seam, in the seam, as the seam.
Bill Brown
Karla Scherer Distinguished Service Professor in
American Culture
Department of English Language and Literature
Irena Haiduk
Serbian, born 1982

Produced by Yugoexport, Photo by Tom Van Eynde

Proof of Siren(s)
2016

Ash-inkjet print with powder-coated aluminum hood
In the collection of Trissa Babrowski and Sundeep Mullangi

Darkness is a peripheral effect, but blindness is a major concept. In blindness one cannot tell the difference between an inanimate thing and a living thing. This contrasts with the regime of Western images, in which you can always tell, because you can see, if something is dead or alive.

—Irena Haiduk, 2015

This dark image of a figure against a black wall beckons as a visual siren song. The desire to see the figure becomes utterly irresistible, mimicking the magnetic sirens of Greek myth who lure sailors with a seductive call.
Camouflaged by the monochromatic black wall and a carefully constructed hood, this hidden siren practices being alive in the promised agency of portraiture. Haiduk does not differentiate between what we consider animate and inanimate, and this work slowly loads a proof that there is more life to an image than what can be seen.

Shane Rothe, MA ‘21
Curatorial Research Assistant for Monochrome Multitudes
In his From Point series, Lee Ufan developed a process-based approach to painting. Lee mixed his own pigment with an animal glue binder, similar to how paint is made in nihonga (Japanese ink painting). He then loaded this wet pigment onto his brush and dabbed it on the canvas repetitively. Emphasizing the materiality of the pigment, each impression is different from the last; some areas protrude with thick spots of pigment while it is applied so lightly in other areas that individual specks of pigment are revealed.

Originally trained in ink painting, Lee’s repeated brushstrokes and the title of the series relate to the basic structures of East Asian ink painting and calligraphy,
which rely on the “point” and the “line” to create words and images. Here he rejects the possibility of representation in favor of emphasizing the process he uses. Further still, Lee reduces the palette, abandoning in the multiple colors used to create representational nihonga in favor of a single color to create a monochrome.

Orianna Cacchione
Curator of Global Contemporary Art
Lecturer, Department of Art History
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Mun Pyung  
South Korean, born 1975

Moon Jar  
2016

Ceramic  
Gay-Young Cho and Christopher Chiu

Moon jars are an iconic form in Korean ceramics. Dating to the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) the unadorned vessels are made by fusing two semispherical white porcelain forms together creating a large, moon-like shape. These jars demonstrate aesthetic simplicity and elegance that characterized Confucian art and are unique to Korea. As such, they have been aligned with indigenous Korean identity and inspired new contemporary reinterpretations of the form. Here contemporary artist Mun Pyung transforms the traditionally white jars by using a deep monochrome black glaze.

Orianna Cacchione  
Curator of Global Contemporary Art  
Lecturer, Department of Art History  
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Ad Reinhardt  
American, 1913–1967

Number 24  
1959

Oil on canvas  
Lynn and Allen Turner

It’s the negativeness of black, or darkness particularly, in painting which interests me.

—Ad Reinhardt, 1967

Although Ad Reinhardt exclusively made black paintings during the last decade of his life, he was not interested in black as a color. He rejected the symbolism of black across cultures—black as evil, sin, formlessness, origin, redemption. Reinhardt’s black is “non-color” and “absence of color.”

His was a radically autonomous art separate from our world. Woven patterns reject a compositional balancing of parts that would suggest movement or space. The utterly matte surface shuns light and reflections. Shades of black,
sometimes mixed with blue or red, absorb viewers and evade the strict monochrome that might no longer be art—too ready-made, too much a part of our world. This autonomy of Reinhardt’s painting was aesthetic but also, given its moral import, political, asserting a separation from the worlds of commerce and profit that the artist detested.

Indeed, Reinhardt was far from apolitical. His commitments manifested more concretely in his activism, ranging from efforts to unionize artists to serving as a US Navy photographer during World War II to selling his art to benefit Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War efforts.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Günter Umberg
German, born 1942

Untitled
1990

Pigment damar on wood
Rhona Hoffman

Günter Umberg’s black paintings are objects in their own right and exist in relation to the beholder. By brushing dry pigment into a layer of moist damar resin applied to wood, the painter created an utter matteness that sucks up light and asserts a stark sense of separation. Our eyes are absorbed in the ensuing subtle, visual variations in the velvety black hue. The unpainted and tapered edges of the thick wooden support, however, make unmistakably clear that the paper-thin paint surface is wholly physical, part of the here and now. As Umberg states, “my picture is related to our physical presence. It isn’t a thing in itself.”

As such, Umberg’s picture crystallizes like few others the foundational questions posed by abstract art. Is an artwork removed from this world or part of it? By extension, is a painting a flat plane proposing its own world or an object in
relief continuous with ours? Artists have long wrestled with these ontological questions, especially when it comes to monochrome paintings, where seemingly negligible decisions, such as the manner of paint application or the treatment of the edges, tip an artwork's identity this way or the other.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Yang Jiechang
Chinese, born 1956

100 Layers of Ink
1992–1994
Ink and mixed media on canvas
Private Collection

Yang Jiechang began to make ink abstractions before moving to France in 1989. In Paris he reconceived traditional Chinese ink painting as conceptual art, obsessively applying layer upon layer of dark ink to make his 100 Layers of Ink series (1989–1998). The unfathomable “black holes” that resulted from this process betray a notion of absolutism, reminiscent of the Taoist idea of a primordial chaos (huntn). This example contrasts two different kinds of ink surfaces: floating above a smooth, muted dark background are two irregular shapes with a metallic, nearly reflective appearance resulting from excessive layering of ink. To Yang, this type of painting “is a conceptual work related to time, space, and the material of ink. An important factor is repetition, the aspect of multiple layers.”
Red
Josef Albers
American, born in Germany, 1888–1976

Formulation: Articulation
1972

Serigraph images on Mohawk 140 lb. superfine specially made paper
Gift of Gaylord Donnelley
1984.4.110, 1984.4.111, 1984.4.112, 1984.4.113,

Josef Albers’s art and teaching were deeply intertwined. Formulation: Articulation—specifically designed to stimulate visual experience—connects our experience of the tactile world with the miracle of vision. The two folios on view—what Albers referred to as his “living creations”—are dazzling invitations to participate in the magic of visual transformation.

Begin anywhere. Allow your eyes to rest on a given Articulation. Spend time with it. For Albers, looking is paramount; it is all about devoting time to absorbing what we encounter visually. Gently scan this image and its neighbor, alternating your gaze back and forth. Notice how
these images come alive: visually moving, jiggling around, oscillating. Albers was all about fluctuating visual relationships, unresolvable geometries, film-like illusions, the relative unpredictability of color relationships and their spatial ambiguity. Squares of equal size appear otherwise? Yes. Concentric squares appear to recede or advance? Welcome to our visual world, Albers seems to be saying—there is no right or wrong, only the truth of experience.

Katherine Desjardins
Instructional Professor
Department of Visual Arts
Lucio Fontana
Italian, 1899–1968

Concetto Spaziale, Attese
(Spatial Concept, Expectations)
1960

Water-based paint on slashed canvas
Family of Irving Stenn, Jr.

With this formula [the cuts] I was able to deliver to those looking at my work a sense of spatial calm, of cosmic rigor, of serenity within the infinite.

—Lucio Fontana, 1966

Lucio Fontana’s cuts on this monochromatic red surface, part of a series subtitled Attese (waiting in anticipation), are the outcome of a performance: while the paint was still wet, the artist slashed his canvas with a Stanley utility knife and then stabilized the reverse of the incisions with strips of thick black gauze.

In the spaces between those dark strips on the verso, Fontana signed and labeled the artwork, added arrows to
indicate its orientation (even if it was never definitive), and included a cryptic combination of letters and numbers (1+1 77ES). The latter was meant to deter forgers who, shortly after the successful 1958 debut of his signature “cut” paintings known as tagli, were hard at work to imitate them.

Fontana’s legitimizing inscriptions often included personal anecdotes (“in 1906, when I first arrived in Milan, there were trams and horses”) and profound thoughts (“what’s fantasy in art”). The rich markings on his versos stand in stark contrast with the monochromatic austerity of his rectos.

Silvia Beltrametti, J.S.D. ’17

IMAGE CAPTION: Verso of Concetto Spaziale, Attese (Spatial Concept, Expectations), 1960.
Carmen Herrera
Cuban, 1915–2022

Rojo Tres (Red Three)
1971/2016

Acrylic and aluminum
 Loaned courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Carmen Herrera’s Rojo Tres comes from a series of three-dimensional works she called Estructuras (Structures). Herrera intended for these structures to interact with their environment, forming a composition beyond the physical bounds of the artwork itself. As the red rectangle protrudes at the top here, the white wall constitutes a negative space integral to the artwork. In fact, this white space becomes a second color and challenges the monochrome palette of these structures, recalling the dichromatic paintings for which Herrera is known.

Primarily a painter, Herrera developed this series after receiving a grant in 1969 from the CINTAS Foundation, an organization supporting Cuban artists working outside of Cuba. After the carpenter she worked with to make the sculptures passed away, Herrera abandoned the project.
In 2016, with the help of a new assistant, she returned to the structures modeled on sketches from 1971.

Regina Gallardo
Student, Wellesley College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Hiroyuki Tajima
Japanese, 1911–1984

Emotional Red
1974

Color woodblock print
Gift of Chuck Thurow
2016.98

The painstaking superimposition of multiple layers of texture over broader monochrome fields invites the viewer to reflect on human emotional life as a gradual process of accretion and development. The planes of red, orange, and brown suggest Freud’s structural division of the mind into id, ego, and superego, evoking the possibility of a universal human emotional foundation on which specific memories and experiences accumulate over a lifetime to create the unique individual. The filigree-like openings, appearing most prominently in the upper layers of the work, suggest that emotions will always be filtered through individual experience.

Anne Beal
Senior Lecturer and Co-Chair of the
Self, Culture, and Society Core
Social Sciences Collegiate Division
Rashid Johnson
American, born 1977

Untitled Anxious Red Drawing
2022

Oil stick on cotton rag paper
Gift of an anonymous donor in honor of the artist
2022.7

Created during the COVID-19 pandemic, this drawing’s intense color and energetic design evoke the experience of anxiety and fear characteristic of that period’s stay-at-home orders. In contrast to Rashid Johnson’s earlier series, Anxious Men, widely viewed as a response to police brutality within communities of color, the abstract elements of this artwork invite the viewer to reflect on anxiety more broadly as a universal human response to uncertainty. In an era in which fear of disease jostles with concerns over racial injustice, assaults on individual freedoms, political polarization, gun violence, war, economic precarity, and climate crisis, this work on paper echoes a collective feeling of instability. The juxtaposition of horizontal and oval elements suggests the enclosure of human figures within the tangled barbed wire of a prison.
or detention center, a striking visual metaphor encapsulating anxiety’s power to entrap us all within a space of inaction and despair.

Anne Beal
Senior Lecturer and Co-Chair of the Self, Culture, and Society Core
Social Sciences Collegiate Division
Francis Picabia
French, 1879–1953

Le salaire est la raison du travail
(The Salary Is the Reason for Work)
1949

Oil on paperboard
Gift of Stanley G. Harris, Jr.
1972.1

“Modernity? What a joke, modern painting as a method is a complete failure.” So wrote the aging Francis Picabia in July 1948. Painted amid the post-World War II emergence of abstract, gestural Art Informel, which some critics have associated with the artist and the iconoclastic Dada movement of the 1910s and 1920s, Picabia’s own forays into abstraction appear to parody those of his contemporaries.

With their sloppily slathered monochrome surfaces, broken only by small, imperfect circles and prominent signatures, the forty-one paintings from Picabia’s Points series offered viewers the bare minimum of figure and ground when he exhibited them in Paris in 1949. Their
titles, like Picabia’s poems, often quote or paraphrase from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Gay Science; The Salary [or Money] Is the Reason for Work, for instance, recalls a passage in which Nietzsche laments, “In civilized countries all men are alike now in that they look for work for the sake of the salary; for all of them, work is a means and not an end in itself…” This blazing red painting acerbically suggests ulterior motives, supplied in plenty by the booming postwar art market, lurking behind technically basic, repetitive abstract painting undertaken in the name of authentic expression through art.

Lauren Rooney
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Lately, I’ve been painting human skin color because its content is so loaded, and especially because formalist critiques of painting love to refer to the painting’s skin. I believe there is a gold mine of irony lying at the intersection of the formalist painting skin and human skin itself.

—Byron Kim, 1992

The monochrome is not necessarily purely abstract, nonrepresentational, or nonfigurative. Color itself is broadly associated with the body. Colors are often used to describe feelings and emotions—such as "red with anger" or "in a blue mood." Colors define gender stereotypes. Colors are similarly used as shorthand to reductively describe people’s race or skin tone. This exhibition resists simplistic equations, locating monochromes inside and outside the discourse around the body.

The monochromes assembled here instead ascribe different registers to color and the body. Some represent the body through nontraditional portraiture, distorted scale, or minimal outlines. Others act as a stand-in for the body
or suggest the body through its absence; hanging coats, an empty wrestling "mat," cuffs, and a vacant chair evoke a body missing. Still others feature colored materials—pantyhose and footballs—as surrogates for bodies that have been racialized, gendered, or stereotyped. Many complicate conceptions of the body through emotional, spiritual, or vernacular clichés of hypostatized color.
Ma Qiusha  
Chinese, born 1982

Wonderland: Black Square  
2016

Cement, nylon stockings, plywood, resin, and iron  
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions

Hidden beneath the stretched nylon skin of Wonderland: Black Square lay thick shards of rough gray cement. They fit together to create something between a mosaic and a tapestry, both fabric and stone, in varying shades and sheens of black.

The title references both the massive Wonderland Amusement Park, once located at the outskirts of Ma Qiusha’s hometown of Beijing, and Russian artist Kazimir Malevich’s 1915 painting Black Square. Begun during Ma’s childhood in the 1990s, construction of the park was never completed due to financial issues; it was quietly demolished two decades later. One of the first monochromes made in Europe, Malevich’s painting of a single black square on a white ground is considered a
symbol for the dreams and failures of the Russian Revolution. Ma connects the incomplete project of post-Mao economic and urban development in China to political revolution in Russia and suggests the unfinished or fragmentary transmission of the monochrome in China. Further heightening the sense of uneven development and transformation, Ma’s use of different types of pantyhose alludes to the successive generations of women in China: the thick, flesh-colored hose that her mother and grandmother wore contrasts with the multi-hued pantyhose younger generations could buy.

Orianna Cacchione
Curator of Global Contemporary Art
Lecturer, Department of Art History
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes

and

Simone Levine MA ’19
Former Curatorial Research Assistant
IMAGE CAPTION: Kazimir Malevich, Black Square, 1915, Oil on linen. 31 5/15 × 31 5/16 inches (79.5 × 79.5 cm). Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
Frank Gehry
Canadian, born 1929

Cross Check™ Armchair
1991

Bent laminated maple with dark green finish
Gift of Neil Harris and Teri J. Edelstein
2009.6

Architect Frank Gehry is best known for his convention-shattering Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (built 1997). Chicagoans enjoy his bandshell in Millennium Park. But alongside his earliest commissions, Gehry was also designing chairs. His “Contour” chair, designed in 1970, molds layers of cardboard, a quotidian material, like those he then deployed in buildings.

Cross Check™ belongs to a suite of chairs designed for prominent design firm Knoll and first manufactured in 1990. Referencing the national pastime of his native Canada, the names, such as Hat Trick™, all allude to ice hockey. (A cross-check is an illegal obstruction of an opponent holding a stick horizontally in both hands.) Gehry said that he drew his inspiration from childhood
memories of apple crates. But bending maple to create dynamic forms also invokes furniture invented by the German-Austrian cabinet maker Michael Thonet in 1836 and popularized throughout the nineteenth century up to today.

I purchased the chair soon after its release, choosing the limitless depth of the monochrome dark green over the natural finish. After use, however, the slats came unglued, and the chair became striped—green alternating with unfinished wood. Repeated unsuccessful visits to a furniture conservator suggested the chair was more appropriate as sculpture than for seating. And so my husband and I donated it to the Smart Museum.

Teri J. Edelstein
Former Director,
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art
Wolf Vostell
German, 1932–1998

Untitled (Betonmanschette Arm)
[Concrete Cuff Arm]

Untitled (Betonmanschette Bein)
[Concrete Cuff Leg]
1972

Concrete
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions and The James M. Wells Curatorial Discretion Acquisition Fund 2016.19 and 2016.20

Wolf Vostell’s Manschetten, or cuffs, viscerally alter the human body. Simultaneously concealing and revealing its vulnerability, these appendages manifest the invisible constraints of daily life that put pressure on or strain the body. The cuffs are performance artifacts made of molded concrete and held together by an internal armature of nails, visible here. They were to be placed on a leg and arm respectively of nude participants in what was billed as a “10-hour exhibition” in a train wagon in preparation for
the film Desastres (Disasters) (a reference to Spanish artist Francisco de Goya’s eponymous print series Los desastres de la guerra [The Disasters of War]).

Those who accepted Vostell’s invitation to be “concretified” with these cuffs would have entered a cramped train car featuring bowls of animal brains and listened to their own EEG, which detects electrical brain activity. The sound of heartbeats and EEGs also provides the unsettling audio layer for the film, articulating this otherwise inaudible (and invisible) reaction of the human body to its environment. The film shows similar cuffs, further cemented along the edges and placed on different exposed body parts of a performer credited as “Sarah Ormigon”—a pseudonymous play on the Spanish word for concrete, hormigón.

Caroline Lillian Schopp, PhD ’17
Assistant Professor of Art History
Johns Hopkins University
Magdalena Abakanowicz
Polish, 1930–2017

Structure Black
1971–1972

Woven dyed sisal
Gift of John Deere and Company
1981.93

The gigantic, protruding phallus at the center of Structure Black may shock and appear confrontational. The work might repulse or invite curiosity; its large scale beckons closer observation of its distinct textures and intricate shapes.

Up close, Structure Black’s coherent shape breaks down into raw form and material. Magdalena Abakanowicz hand-dyed sisal plant fibers in muted tones of black, with the occasional streak of maroon or dark brown, resembling the natural coloring of dark hair or soil. She then wove, braided, and layered the sisal into organic black structures. These uncannily familiar yet abstract forms stand in contrast to the apparent phallus. As viewers move between the small and large scale of this work,
Abakanowicz questions what the title Structure Black refers to.

Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Barbara Crane
American, 1928–2019

Human Form
1964–1966

Gelatin silver print
Gift of the Estate of Lester and Betty Guttman
2014.237

Inspired by Matisse’s drawings of female forms, the Human Form series is one of Barbara Crane’s first experiments in abstraction. The Chicago-based artist studied with Aaron Siskind, a pioneer in abstract photography, at the Illinois Institute of Technology’s Institute of Design. Crane’s minimalist lines both capture and abstract the organic forms of the human body. Space and depth of field dissolve as the corporeal forms are overexposed and rendered invisible. The body is flattened into a white monochrome, blending into the edges of the frame. The thin, undulating shadows that define the physical form are the only visible trace of the subject.

Crane explores the limits of photographic reproduction, showing that documentation and representation are only
part of photography’s capacity. She is known for her experimental and innovative approaches that incorporate sequencing, layered negatives, and repeated frames. In this work, by reducing human body parts to bare yet elegant lines, the artist redefines the relationship between portraiture, abstraction, and photography.

Sindy Chen, MA ‘22
LIDL Sport Ringmatte (Wrestling Mat)
1969

Hand stamped kraft paper
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions
2015.103.17

LIDL, Jörg Immendorff explained, “originated in baby talk. Lidl-lidl-lidl-lidl etc. The sound of a baby rattle.” It became an attitude: a provocation of the status quo, a commitment to open-ended, collective processes, a desire for socially and politically effective art. Between 1968 and 1972, LIDL functioned as the organizing principle for a quasi-bureaucratic organization-cum-artistic practice that included participating peers, a progressive art academy, alternative exhibition spaces, impromptu performances, and even organized sports.

Unlike art, sports appealed to broad audiences, established transparent rules, and balanced competition with building communities. LIDL SPORT
events included a swim meet, athletic games, and a soccer match as art performances of sorts. In this multiple, the artist dares someone—to be determined who, presumably the owner or viewer—to a wrestling match: “Herewith I challenge Mr. ___ to a wrestling match,” reads the printed card accompanying the makeshift wrestling mat. The cheap and readily available material, highly tear-resistant kraft paper designed for packaging purposes, is in keeping with LIDL’s democratizing impulse. Yet it also serves as a witty reference to established forms of art making. Complete with a folded grid, it evokes the grounds for preparatory drawings transferred to canvases. The blank paper is also a ready-made. And a monochrome.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Left to right:

Byron Kim
American, born 1961

Synecdoche: Adayalise Caraballo
Synecdoche: Dong Wook Kim
Synecdoche: Gleb Yetnus
Synecdoche: Tyrone McCallum
1992

Oil and wax on lauan plywood, birch plywood, and plywood
Helyn Goldenberg and Michael Alper

Byron Kim painted these skin-toned “portraits” from life, with a sitter in front of the easel. Kim has produced hundreds of these portraits since the early nineties, often captured in the span of twenty minutes and always displayed in clusters to emphasize the differences in shade. The definition of synecdoche—a part that stands in for a whole or vice versa—indicates a representational threshold between a rectangle of skin tone and the
corresponding sitter. By isolating skin tone as a provocative formal investigation, the artist bridges the material qualities of the sitter’s skin and paint as the skin of the canvas. Kim’s mimetic paintings emphasize and challenge the representational capacity of skin tone as color, portrait, and social abstraction.

Shane Rothe, MA ’21
Curatorial Research Assistant for Monochrome Multitudes
Yayoi Kusama
Japanese, born 1929

Untitled
1976

Sewn stuffed fabric, silver paint, and shoe
Robert J. Buford

Lumps protrude from the surfaces of Yayoi Kusama’s Accumulations, a series of sculptures begun in 1961. The artist reduced common objects from her life—dressers, sofas, suitcases, and shoes—to a surface that she covered in soft, phallic, hand-sewn bulges to elicit sexual and psychological resonances. The sculptural works from this period are painted monochromatically.

Here the organic growths extend from a shoe, and everything is painted silver as though it were cheaply mirrored or falsely adorned. Against the seemingly reductive thrust of most monochrome art, Kusama’s sculptures are much too much—too many lumps, overfull, uncontrollable. Their excess obliterates the monochrome’s reductiveness and proposes a form for the feral and uncontrollable experiences of the body, inside and out.
Shane Rothe, MA ‘21
Curatorial Research Assistant for
Monochrome Multitudes
Samuel Levi Jones
American, born 1978

Black Artist
2018

Deconstructed footballs and asphaltum on canvas
Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund
for Acquisitions
2018.13

Samuel Levi Jones uses abstraction, monochromy, and the deconstruction of familiar objects to address systemic racism. He has used encyclopedias and law books in his works, and here unsews the thick leather panels of footballs to restitch them in a horizontal, layered pattern. The artist then covers his new canvas in asphaltum, a tar-like substance. Levi Jones was inspired by NFL player Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in 2016 to protest American police brutality, as well as by his own experiences as a college football player at a predominantly white institution. The black material and the title Black Artist offer two intertwined meanings of “black:” a formalist reading referring to the color, and a symbolic use of Black as an identity.
Sarahl Rincon Molina
Student, The College
Sally Mann
American, born 1951

The Bath
1989

Gelatin silver print
Gift of the Estate of Lester and Betty Guttman
2014.549

Sally Mann intentionally reduces visual information to transform the childhood ritual of her two daughters taking a bath into an ethereal sight/site where bodies fade into water, and water fades into air. Photographed from above, these partially identifiable figures appear to float within a nebulous white background. A limited tonal range, comprised primarily of midtones and highlights, softens the waterline, which is almost completely removed from the right side of the image. Visual clues typical of how this everyday scene has been pictured in so many family photo albums, such as the faces of her children or the horizon line of the bathtub, are kept out of frame, and the viewer is left with only a bracelet and black nail polish to provide temporal context. The lax position of each child’s hands creates tension between youth and death,
harkening to the uncanny practice of early postmortem photography.

Elisabeth Hogeman, MFA ’16
Lecturer
Department of Visual Arts
Linda Montano
American, born 1942

7 Years of Living Art, and Another 7 Years of Living Art = 14 Years of Living Art
1984–1998

Performance relics, seven colored coats, seven pairs of shoes
Volatile [redux], Cincinnati, Ohio

Linda Montano left the nunnery she lived in for two years and turned to Hinduism to navigate her complicated relationship with Catholicism. Her performance 7 Years of Living Art draws from the Hindu chakra energy systems: in 1984 she began to dress in only one color annually and spent several hours per day living in a room painted the same color. Each color corresponds to a section of the body and psychic state. For example, red symbolizes the “Muladharā” (or “root”) chakra connected to the base of the spine, which represents stability.

These seven coats used in Montano’s performance are like a monochromatic skin she shed annually. As she blurred the boundaries between art and life, performance
became her vehicle to express her new spiritual consciousness. She harnessed seemingly mundane fashion and interior design to transform her body into a relic of her sacred performance.

Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes

On November 11, the Film Studies Center at the University of Chicago will screen the related film Seven Years of Living with Art as part of its program Color Corrections curated in conjunction with this exhibition.
Raoul Ubac  
Belgian, 1910–1985  

Untitled (Nudes)  
1938  

Gelatin silver print, possibly solarized  
Gift of the Estate of Lester and Betty Guttman  
2014.809  

With its white monochrome tonality, rare in Raoul Ubac’s photographs, and its figures who seem to stand out from a rough-hewn background, Untitled (Nudes) looks more like a sculpted marble bas-relief than the photograph it is. This work is from Ubac’s Combat of Penthesilea series (1936–39) series, which drew inspiration from an 1808 play by Heinrich von Kleist. The play dramatizes the mythical ill-fated love between the Amazonian queen Penthesilea and the Greek hero Achilles. Ubac first photographed two women in various poses, then assembled the photographs in collages and montages, which he transformed through chemical and optical manipulations, such as the bas-relief technique seen here. This experimental photograph reflects a fascination with the properties of stone: its ability to preserve an image by fossilizing organic matter and its
susceptibility to erosion. This interest in stone persisted in Ubac’s work and, following World War II, he turned from photography to painting and sculpture.

Lauren Rooney
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Sound

It’s so strange because I would thump it. I always thumped the canvas. So there’s this little tiny foreshadowing of my sound work, this idea that not only is the canvas an object and not exclusively a picture plane, but it’s also something that is like a drum surface, something that resonates.

—Jennie C. Jones, 2022

Despite a supposed focus on "eyesight alone" or a culture of the "spectacle," modern art, including monochrome art, has long looked beyond the visual. Beginning with Alphonse Allais’s 1897 Album Primo-Avrile, displayed in this exhibition’s first gallery, the monochrome has been aligned with silence. That album concludes with a score for a funerary march composed of two pages of blank staff lines. In 1949, Yves Klein composed his "Monotone Symphony" for an orchestra to play a D major chord for twenty straight minutes and then remain silent for another twenty.

Yet the monochrome’s marriage to sound goes beyond the monotone and silence. The artworks in this section riff on the ways in which color might sound and sound might
be colored. Some draw out different associations of color with specific sounds beyond synesthesia—the ring of the telephone, the red light of a recording studio, white noise. Others are connected to the monochromatic materials used to create or dampen sound—the clang of aluminum and the thud of felt.
Palermo and
Gerhard Richter
German, 1943–1977; German, born 1932

Telefon (Telephone)
1971

Four color letterpress and screenprint
Thordis Moeller, Millerton, NY

This print marks the end of an intense two-year artistic collaboration between friends. A saturated yellow expanse, pristinely silk screened by Palermo, frames two small, stacked images. The blurred photo of a telephone and another of a light bulb, which is derived from one of their collaborative diptychs, are printed in four-color letterpress by Gerhard Richter.

Telefon compresses everything these two artists had worked on together. That included the conjunction of the traditional and up-to-date, exemplified by the two printing techniques and by the perspectival space around the telephone set into a flat plane. It also included the framing field’s decorative vocabulary, monochrome expanses, and
vernacular color, in this case the signature yellow of the German postal and telephone service.

Sharing a commitment to painting and abstraction widely considered outmoded at the time, Palermo and Richter frequently turned to strategies of framing and juxtaposition that both preserved and joined their individual practices. theirs was an elective affinity and a communication without words, a pregnant silence captured in the receiver on the hook.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Known mostly for his Land Art, Walter De Maria also produced a group of artworks in steel and aluminum—shiny, monochrome industrial metals that define the image of 1960s sculpture to this day. Additionally, De Maria was a composer and musician (and was the drummer for an early iteration of The Velvet Underground). At the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1950s, he befriended the avant-garde composer La Monte Young, who would become well known for his work with sustained tones, as in his Trio for Strings and Compositions 1960.

In this object, made for Young, the sound of a ball rolling left and right is amplified by hidden contact microphones. Young never allowed the ball to hit the ends of the container, so the sound was continuous—a choice
emphasized by the shallow channel running through the center of the piece.

Simultaneously a sculpture and an instrument, its visual and auditory experiences align with each other (in contrast to a piano, for example, where the hammers producing sounds are invisible). De Maria described his plan to exhibit the artwork at Documenta 4 in 1968: “I will get a photograph of La Monte and try to get it blown up to maybe 8 × 10 ft and place the photograph behind the instrument.”

Leo Mehring-Keller
Student, The College

IMAGE CAPTION: La Monte Young playing Instrument for La Monte Young, 1968.
Manfred Mohr
German, born 1938

P-036 G/White Noise
1971

Computer generated algorithmic plotter drawing
Collection of Carl & Marilynn Thoma

What do you think about aesthetic research done with the help of a computer?
—Manfred Mohr, 1971

Manfred Mohr, a pioneer of digital art who began his creative career as a jazz musician, created White Noise as an artist-in-residence at the national meteorological laboratory in Paris, France. He used a CDC mainframe computer and a Benson 1284 flatbed plotter, nicknamed a “drawing machine” because it used a mechanical arm that held a pen, not unlike a human hand.

While Mohr’s image shares the black-and-white monochrome of a typical white noise image, his composition is more structured and his reference to static
sound is more theoretical, perhaps pointing to the basis for some pseudorandom number generators (PRNGs) used in computing. This program—number thirty-six, referenced in his title—instructs the plotter pen to move across the page from left to right in a series of parallel, horizontal lines. Like a roll of dice, a PRNG picks a random integer between 0 and 7, determining how many line segments, if any, are drawn from that point. The horizontal lines are thus punctuated with zigzags and polygons that read like characters in an invented language. Mohr calls the result an “abstract text,” written from an “alphabet” of lines.

Zsofi Valyi-Nagy, AB ’13, AM ’18
Student, PhD Program in Art History
Naama Tsabar
Israeli, born 1982

Work On Felt (Variation 18) Black
2017

Work On Felt (Variation 21) Purple
2020

Felt, carbon fiber, epoxy, wood, archival PVA, bass guitar tuner, piano string, piezo microphone, guitar amplifier
Kasmin Gallery, New York

For the Work on Felt series, begun in 2012, Naama Tsabar uses instrument components and felt to make geometric abstractions. Raw felt cuts, folds, hangs, and stacks easily. These are all legible sculptural processes familiar from the language of minimalism. Yet Tsabar expands on, even moves beyond, this minimalist tradition: the felt panels come in monochrome colors, they are stiffened with carbon fiber, they make noise like a deconstructed guitar. These qualities also expand the history of the monochrome by invoking feminist histories of
touch, sensuality, and collaborative performance. Tsabar’s Work on Felt series invites audience interaction: you may play this instrument sculpture by plucking the wire and manipulating the felt.

Shane Rothe, MA ’21
Curatorial Research Assistant for
Monochrome Multitudes
Bunt

The soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly with a strained sound Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. “They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, 1925

The German word bunt translates to "colorful" but its meaning goes beyond the English word’s: bunt captures a colorful multitude as a whole as well as the coexistence of distinct units of color. Paradoxically, modern monochromy was born from multitudes. Whether in Alphonse Allais’s 1897 Album Primo-Avrilesque or Aleksandr Rodchenko’s 1921 triptych, the first monochrome art combined multiple, materially discrete fields of color. Ever since, the coexistence of multiple colors, especially of the primaries, has both amplified and compensated for the reductive abyss of the monochrome. The term bunt is often used figuratively, and here the multitude of monochromes gives
rise to allegories, where essence turns excessive, difference shapes identity, and a palette defines a period.
James Turrell
American, born 1943

Bullwinkle
2001

Monitor set in wall with aperture, two chairs
Suzanne Deal Booth, Austin, TX: Napa, CA

On air from 1959 to 1964, the popular American cartoon The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends televised the zany pursuits of a moose named Bullwinkle. One storyline wryly narrated Bullwinkle’s meteoric rise as a monochrome painter: mistaking stolen masterworks, such as the Mona Lisa, for wallpaper samples, Bullwinkle decides to whitewash the pictures, coating the colored canvases in strokes of white paint.

In Bullwinkle, James Turrell broadcasts a similar abstraction of the image. Comprised of seating and a small aperture cut into the wall, the installation frames the ambient glow of light emanating from a CRT monitor, which screens the eponymous children’s cartoon. As with many works by Turrell—known as a key figure in the West Coast Light and Space movement that emerged in the
1960s—light is a vehicle for transmitting meaning. Reducing already unadorned cartoon cels to flashes of color, Turrell redirects attention to the act of viewing, with emphasis on the precise mechanics of how we understand our surroundings. This artwork isolates the intake of information. Breaking down the moving image into a gestural pulse, from one hue to another, Turrell sharpens our perceptions in the blink of a single color.

Alexandra Drexelius, AB ’18
Attributed to
Alexander Calder
American, 1898–1976

Untitled
n.d.

Painted metal and wire
The Brooks McCormick Jr. Bequest
2015.1409

Alexander Calder is best known for inventing the mobile. These suspended kinetic objects invigorated sculpture, giving an entirely static medium a revolutionary potential for movement and continuity with everyday experience.

This mobile in the Smart Museum of Art’s collection is suspended from an intricate network of fine vermilion red wires, sending a constellation of vividly painted metal elements cascading from the ceiling. In response to the movement of air, these balanced pieces appear to float weightlessly and elliptically, evoking a sense of orbit. The object is consistent with Calder’s signature combination of discrete monochrome elements and their transformation into dynamic, chromatic multitudes.
Museums rarely acknowledge uncertain provenance, an artwork’s record of ownership that can attest to its history of ethical and legitimate acquisition as well as to its authenticity, namely the definitive attribution of an artwork to its maker. In an effort to expand understandings of art historical narratives and practices, the curators chose to display this artwork, which came into the collection without provenance, as “attributed to Alexander Calder.”

Leading up to this exhibition, this mobile’s history was the subject of intensive investigation, including art historical research (reviewing comparable artworks and historical records in digitized archives and at local museums, libraries, and galleries) and spectroscopic analysis (examining the layers of paint on a material sample). In addition to these archival and scientific inquiries, the tangible aspects of the mobile are central to ascertaining the identity of its creator. Details such as the subtle paint handling, the twisting indentations of the wire junctures, and the fanlike abstract shapes suggest that the mobile is most likely an example of the vibrant work of Alexander Calder.

Rachel Duffy, MA ’22
Research Assistant for Collections and Conservation
Jaime Davidovich  
Argentine, 1936–2016  

Blue, Red, Yellow  
1974  

Single-channel color video, no sound; 34 min. 
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York  

… for me videotape was similar to packing tape. 
The reel, going on and on, the sense of time … I got involved in video because of the tape.  
—Jaime Davidovich, 2015  

Jaime Davidovich first started using tape in the late 1960s as an alternative to frames, taping paintings directly onto the wall. Eventually, tape replaced paint altogether and Davidovich turned to site-specific installations in which he covered gallery walls with tape.  

In Blue, Red, Yellow, Davidovich recorded himself covering a staticky television screen with commercial adhesive tape. His choice of primary colors echoes Soviet artist Aleksandr Rodchenko’s monochromatic 1921
triptych that renounced painting in favor of an art merged with everyday life.

By the 1970s, that everyday life was defined by television, including the Argentinian television the artist watched as a child during Juan Perón’s presidency in the early 1950s. Perón had used television as a means of mass communication and political messaging. By videotaping himself covering television static with patterns echoing a distorted broadcast, Davidovich spreads his own message about the manipulative and staged nature of television.

Regina Gallardo
Student, Wellesley College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
José de Rivera
American, 1904–1985

Untitled Painted Aluminum, Red, Black, Yellow
circa 1950

Painted aluminum
Mr. Charles H. Mottier

José de Rivera worked as a machinist and blacksmith before studying art at Chicago’s Studio School in 1924. Drawing inspiration from this industrial background, de Rivera hammered these metal sheets to achieve a dynamic interplay of curved surfaces. Color and form flow together; they define and complicate one another. Each shape is articulated and enhanced by a discrete monochrome color. At the same time, the shadows cast on the bent aluminum disrupt the integrity of these shapes by producing varying shades of color.

Regina Gallardo
Student, Wellesley College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Top row:

H. C. Westermann
American, 1922–1981

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: The Arctic Death Ship

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: Deserted Airport N.M.

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: The Dance of Death
1975–1976

Bottom row:

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: Popeye and Pinocchio

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: Popeye and Pinocchio

Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: Deserted Airport N.M.
Trial color proof for The Connecticut Ballroom: The Dance of Death
1975–1976

Color inks on Natsume #4007 Japanese wove paper
The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann

H. C. Westermann took the mass-produced stuff of postwar America as his subject and medium. Displayed here are color tests made with inks “right out of the tube,” as his handwritten notes suggest. Each color is mass-produced, therefore the artist deemed it worthy of attention. Standardized paints had already gained popularity with artists in the nineteenth century; gone were the days of hand-mulling pigments and binders to create a unique hue. In Westermann’s years, the paints came like Coke, Chevrolets, and comics; ubiquitously stacked on shelves. These manufactured colors embody a central question of the monochrome: is a form of artistic work required to transform the available colors on any given shelf into a meaningful expression? Grouped together, these swatches exude the vivacious funk that characterizes the imagery printed in The Connecticut
Ballroom Suite, a woodblock print series that used these inks. The resulting works depict an American landscape filled with Westermann’s artistic vocabulary of cartoons and local color.

Shane Rothe, MA ‘21
Curatorial Research Assistant for
Monochrome Multitudes
From 1948 to 1954, the GI Bill allowed Ellsworth Kelly to work and travel in France, where he had participated in the allied invasion of Normandy. During these formative years the young artist wrestled with the stunning originality of European modernism. Picasso and company seemed to have done it all, so Kelly instead devised ways of not inventing, several of which are captured in this collage. Colors found in the world and monochrome fields limited and even eliminated the arbitrary or subjective choices that had defined early abstraction.

Instead of choosing from an infinite set of colors, Kelly resorted to a ready-made palette of gummed craft papers fabricated industrially and used in French kindergartens. He used chance procedures (colors found in a gutter or
picked up randomly from a pile) or preexisting color schemes (here the primaries plus black and white) to determine a given palette for a preparatory collage. Kelly then transferred each single color onto a discrete canvas, combining multiple monochromes into a multitude of colors. Kelly’s many strategies for not inventing proved quite inventive, inspiring an entire vocabulary for postwar American abstraction.

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes
Tadaaki Kuwayama
Japanese, born 1932

Fabricated by Benjamin Birillo, Sr.

Untitled: Red, White, and Blue
circa 1965
Porcelainized enamel on steel, ed. 5/10
Benjamin Birillo, Jr., New York

Since his move to New York in 1958, Tadaaki Kuwayama has systematically explored the monochrome through a variety of media. “Complete abstraction was my starting point,” he said of his early work, which gradually transitioned from powdered Japanese colorants affixed to Japanese paper (washi) to sprayed metallic pigments and acrylic paint on board, washi, or canvas, and, from 1980, to oil paint applied in a variety of ways.

Kuwayama’s experiments with material within the framework of the monochrome have extended to artworks like this one, made of baked enamels on three separate steel plates. Fabricated by a third party according to the artist’s specifications, the panels are bounded by the artist’s signature aluminum frames. This artwork ushered
in Kuwayama’s period of exploring the phenomenological effects of relatively small monochrome units, attending to color changes in response to lighting, the movements of the viewer, and the interaction with adjacent artworks and the surrounding gallery space.

Chelsea Foxwell
Associate Professor
Departments of Art History and East Asian Languages and Civilizations
Ugo Rondinone
Swiss, born 1964

Six Small Mountains
2016

Painted stones on concrete base
Robert J. Buford

Everyone can relate to colors.

—Ugo Rondinone

By painting stones in DayGlo colors, Ugo Rondinone explores the relationship between the natural and the artificial. DayGlo is a daylight fluorescent pigment used commercially since World War II, when the US military deployed it for troop safety in Allied territories. The pigment converts ultraviolet energy into wavelengths that are visible to the human eye. The resulting vibrant neons fundamentally enhance the work’s materiality: the bright, cheerful colors do not hide nature, but proudly adorn it.

Six Small Mountains belongs to Rondinone’s series of stone sculptures, which includes large-scale public art
installations in the Nevada desert, as well as Miami and Liverpool. The series is inspired by the 1960s Land Art movement, natural geological formations, and the meditative art of rock balancing.

Vivian Li
Student, The College
Left to right:

Ted Stamm
American, 1944–1984

PW-13 (Ply Wooster)
PW-14 (Ply Wooster)
PW-17 (Ply Wooster)
PW-19 (Ply Wooster)
PW-46 (Ply Wooster)
1978

Oil on wood
Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy, New York

The Woosters series began when Ted Stamm spotted this irregular shape on Wooster Street in Manhattan. Each panel here, a square with a shorter triangle extending from the left side, is a separate painting in the series, which repeats this form using media from oil paint to car bumper stickers. The structure of these monochromes derives from their shape rather than an image painted on them,
but their abstraction does not stop the Wooster from being strangely familiar. Their varicolored repetition evokes motion even as the panels remain static. Perhaps we are seeing cars traveling down a street or heads visible through a crowd—Stamm only provides this enigmatic form as a remnant of the bustling city he lived and worked in.

Suzanna Murawski
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Lobby
Haegue Yang: Quasi-Legit

Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.


Often defying convention, South Korean artist Haegue Yang explores the aesthetics of everyday objects and materials—such as drying racks, turbine vents, spices, and bells—to unlock their formal potential and, on occasion, to reconfigure iconic works of North American and European modernism. Here venetian blinds are dislodged from their typical function as window coverings. Instead, Yang uses her signature material to construct a monumental grid that domesticates the white, open cube sculptures of American artist Sol LeWitt. This installation joins a larger series that "traces" the modular compositions the conceptual artist started in the 1960s: expands or reduces their size, upends their orientation, suspends them from the ceiling or mounts them on the wall. Filling the spaces LeWitt had left open in his sculptures, the sterile white blinds become a permeable monochrome that plays with density and lightness, opacity and transparency. Yang’s blind structures channel these
canonic examples of conceptual art, but the artist seeks to restore that movement’s "spiritual aspect" by striving for what she considers a "freedom within a narrative freighted with symbolism."

Mounted on the wall in the Smart Museum’s lobby, Sol LeWitt Upside Down onto Wall—Modular Wall Structure, Expanded 20 Times is particularly poignant given the rectangular shape of the modular structure—it stays the same even when placed upside down. The arrangement of the blinds is contingent and fleeting as they simultaneously reveal and obscure the bright blue wall behind. Per the artist’s specifications for this installation of the artwork, the museum’s exhibition team voted on a selection of blues available at our local paint supplier to choose the shade most similar to French artist Yves Klein’s patented International Klein Blue. Centered on what Yang calls "quasi-Yves Klein Blue," the quasi-empirical survey—both absurd and precarious—contests Klein’s individualistic legacy to offer a more collective set of relations between artists, museum professionals, and the history of art. Complicating notions of originality, "quasi" is an art-istic strategy to relativize the Western canon, to turn it "upside down." Yang’s layers of citation, expansion, and overturning at once oppose and honor the art historical narratives the West long took for granted.
Sol LeWitt Upside Down onto Wall–Modular Wall Structure, Expanded 20 Times was commissioned for the Monochrome Multitudes exhibition as part of the Smart Museum of Art’s ongoing Threshold series.

The exhibition is curated by Orianna Cacchione, Curator of Global Contemporary Art and Lecturer in the Department of Art History, and Christine Mehring, Faculty Adjunct Curator and Mary L. Block Professor of Art History and the College.

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Haegue Yang
Seoul, South Korean, born 1971

Sol LeWitt Upside Down onto Wall – Modular Wall Structure, Expanded 20 Times 2022

Aluminum Venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminum hanging structure, steel wire rope, LED tubes, cable

Commissioned by the Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago
Courtesy of Greene Naftali, New York
Laddie John Dill
American, born 1943

Magma from Light Sentence series
1971

Argon, mercury, hand-colored glass tubing
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Valverde

Inspired by his stepfather, a mathematician and the inventor of night vision technologies, Laddie John Dill blurs the boundaries between fluorescent lights and the spatial and architectural environments in which they are installed. Neon has been used widely in popular culture and outdoor advertising since the 1920s, but it emerged as a new artistic material in the 1960s and 1970s to create immersive colored light environments.

Dill’s Magma from Light Sentence series connects the bright red light to semantics, with each glowing tube arranged in a specific order to form a longer “sentence.” As such, the artist asks how color, especially vernacular color, comes to have meaning. As you view this artwork, how do you read this light sentence?
Arnie Campa
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Satellite
Sarah Canright
American, born 1941

Untitled
1975

Cut, woven, and scored Arches paper with graphite and sprayed and diluted inks
Booth School of Business

After a trip to Europe in 1980, Sarah Canright said: “Everything I had seen had been a male projection into the world, and … the way in which I was going to have to continue would be to continue as a woman.” This artwork features woven paper to draw attention to weaving and sewing, practices traditionally reserved for women and the domestic sphere. The soft white monochrome rejects the bright colors and eye-catching forms of Canright’s contemporary peers, the mostly male Chicago Imagists. She instead allows the woven paper to speak for itself, using the cast shadows and highlights to create visual interest. Her process and her references to woven baskets and bags evoke the strength and unity of women’s history.
Canright’s work reflects her involvement with the feminist movement of her time, which emphasized the difference between men and women and held that feminine skills and qualities must not be devalued simply because they connote femininity. As she took in the historical marvels of Europe and saw an outsized male impact, she sought in her practice to draw the eye to the historical contributions of women—and to the patience and meticulousness of women that formed the backbone of many premodern and modern societies.

Isabella Diefendorf
Student, The College
Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Eduardo Consuegra
Colombian, born 1974

85%
2012
Framed matte-board, wood, latex paint

90%
2012
Framed matte-board, wood, latex paint

98%
2012
Framed matte-board, wood, latex paint

In making this series of paintings, Eduardo Consuegra partially dipped each piece of gray matte-board in gray latex paint, mixed to match by a local hardware store. While the artist has offered different explanations for the percentages that constitute the titles, they suggest an approximate ratio of paint to ground at the time the artworks were completed. Once on display, the matte-
board fades more quickly than the paint, presenting two different shades that will contrast more starkly over time. When will these paintings no longer be monochromes?

Typically, matte-board is used in service of protecting and framing artworks; here, Consuegra employs the material to call into question the permanence of any artwork. In the artist’s other works, advertisements found in magazines from his childhood home of Columbia are juxtaposed with visually similar ones he found in the United States, where he currently resides. In 85%, 90%, and 98%, then, the continual change of materials and color evokes not only the general passing of time and material instability of art but also the ever-fading memory of Consuegra’s immigrant past.

Teddy Sandler
Student, The College Intern for Monochrome Multitudes
Willie Doherty
Northern Irish, born 1959

Extracts from a File, Series B
2001

C-prints

To observe Willie Doherty’s “Extracts from a File, Series B” is to look at observation itself: the images suggest that it’s not so much what we see that matters, but that we see. And here we see hazily, suggestively, elusively. These black and white images are anything but black and white. As such, we may ask how the monochrome might be understood as a practice of observation rather than, or in addition to, a practice of production. That is, Doherty’s photographs are suggestively monochromatic not just in tone and coloration: to my eyes they document and educe the mystery of observing in a singular but nonetheless volatile space between black and white.

David J. Levin
Alice H. and Stanley G. Harris, Jr. Distinguished Service Professor
Departments of Germanic Studies and Cinema and
Media Studies, and Committee on Theater and Performance Studies
Jene Highstein
American, 1942–2013

Black Sphere
1976

Painted cement over steel
Donated to the University by Betsy and Andy Rosenfield in honor of Lindy and Edwin Bergman (former Chairman of the Board of Trustees)

Jene Highstein’s Black Sphere is a lesson in perception. We see it as a perfect geometrical globe, even though the sculpture’s base actually flattens the bottom—and even though we know that nothing, especially hand-sculpted form, is an ideal sphere. At a glance, we perceive the sphere as all black. But the sphere is Orwellian, with some parts more black than other parts. When bright light bounces off the surface, we perceive a silvery white color. Rounding out our perceptual experience is the smoothness of the sphere. This too crumbles under close examination. No part of the sphere is as smooth as a freshly laid road or plaster wall. Running our hand over the surface, we feel the unevenness that our vision smooths over. Altogether, the sphere reminds us that we are not
sensory automatons. We are biological beings with perceptual systems just good enough to allow us to survive through evolutionary time. With Black Sphere, Highstein hit our perceptual sweet spots to render a smooth-black-orb experience that exists only in our minds.

Peggy Mason
Professor
Department of Neurobiology
Amid a revolutionary May 1968, Charlotte Posenenske struggled to reconcile her artistic practice with her political ambitions: “I find it difficult to accept that art cannot contribute to the solution of pressing social problems.” Soon thereafter, she quit: quit making art, quit looking at it and talking about it, quit socializing in art circles. Her political aspirations indeed appeared at odds with the abstract art she had made up to that point. Yet her signature reliefs, such as this one, were conceived by her as socially relevant.

Driven by a desire to make art accessible, participatory, and public, Posenenske couched her democratic values in material and economic terms. Objects like Relief (Series B) were planned and structured in programatically unlimited series (“not unique pieces for unique people”); forged from industrial metals (here aluminum) and coated in commercial colors (“RAL red”); sold at cost (of production plus over-head, afforded by Posenenske’s
inheritance); and for an audience not of viewers but of “consumers.” Her estate, in the hands of her husband and collaborator in her second career as a sociologist, followed these principles. With his passing in 2021, will market dynamics grant this posthumous Relief (Series B) the rarity the artist defied?

Christine Mehring
Mary L. Block Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty Adjunct Curator
Co-Curator of Monochrome Multitudes