

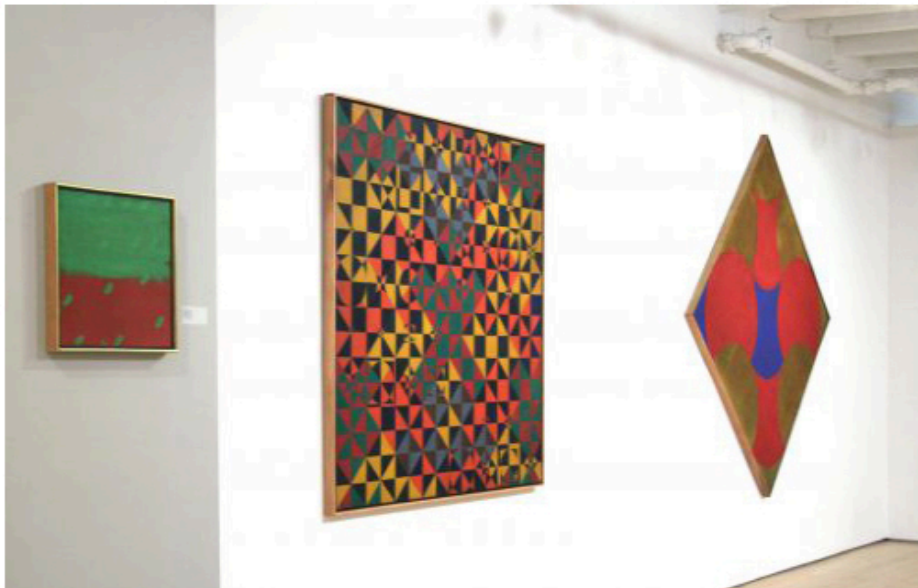
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Orchestration Transformed: Larry Poons, Early and New

by Jill Nathanson

If these shows of early and recent Larry Poons were the opening and closing rooms of a full-on career retrospective, they make a convincing case for organizing one, argues painter JILL NATHANSON



Installation shot, Larry Poons: Geometry and Dots at Loretta Howard Gallery, 2013

While each of these shows is a visual powerhouse, taken together, Loretta Howard's December showing of Larry Poons's early geometric and dot paintings and Danese/Corey's exhibition of the veteran master's latest works allow us to experience Poons' devotion to radical experimentation with color in its unique, mercurial nature

Superficially, the two shows looked so different, the grid-based, controlled, flatly painted shapes on equally flatly painted overall fields of the works from the 1950s and '60s contrasting with large recent works made entirely of small painterly finger-and-brush marks, touching, scumbling, sparking, glowing in myriad random-seeming ways. But Poons's long painting life makes sense of this, going ever deeper into the pure craziness that is working with color.

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The Dot Paintings at Loretta Howard looked fuller and more complex than I remembered after having seen them reproduced for decades as '60s icons. The show also included many Geometric Paintings that had never been shown before, a selection of preparatory pencil on graph-paper drawings and a 1964 video interview with Poons. In the video, and in conversations with me over the phone, Poons spoke of those days when he was seeking his way out of the prevalent Abstract Expressionist idiom. He had spent a couple of years at New England Conservatory studying music composition before transferring to The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

In his early days in New York City, encounters with two other artists would help him to find his direction. A show of Barnett Newman at French and Company in 1959 “blew me away...they were like Beethoven”. Poons says of these paintings that “they weren’t static, even though there were very few elements. You’re not looking at a stationary object.” They set a new standard: a pure painting space that would look vast and non-static, that would change—as Poons says all great painting does each time you look at it. Another powerful experience, in the same year, was seeing Frank Stella’s paintings in *Sixteen Americans* at MoMA. From Stella he received the sense of necessity, of how little is necessary to make a space unique to painting. Stella and Newman became his friends, helping him to secure his commitment to disciplined non-illusion.

Poons’s last geometric painting, *Florentine*, (1958) allows one to follow his path as an experimenter. It has a jagged “lightning bolt” lay out. In this flat two-color painting shapes connect points from sixty-four small grids. His planning was apparent in the nearby pencil drawings. After *Florentine*, however, he eschewed big shapes. The painting that followed used only points on the construction grids, without connecting them. The geometric shapes gave way to unconnected points set as if moving either clockwise or counter-clockwise. These points, painted on a 56” canvas in close value on a high-keyed solid ground, set up a pulsing color structure: the first ‘Dot’. “The pulsing was a door prize; it was not the point, but it didn’t bother me so I left it”. An early ‘Dot’ at this size was in the exhibition. Subsequent paintings got very big, fast.

Large Dot paintings from the mid ‘60’s at Loretta Howard had a good deal more coloristic variation among the dots. One can see how colors were repeatedly changed, like orchestration transformed, during the painting process.

Looking at The Dots from a few feet back, and given a minute or two of focus, dots hum, fields fluctuate due to simultaneous contrast and after images, ellipses zip around – their direction determined by clockwise or counter-clockwise orientation. The buzz and movement is a matter of specific color and value relationships. With all the zipping, the wholeness doesn’t give way to internal sub-plots but just keeps integrating anew.

Over the years, I’ve thought of these paintings as embodiments (not illustrations) of quantum uncertainty: paintings in which the energy of color gets to look and act (on us) as energy, getting as close to the underlying nature of matter (us included) as painting can get. On talking with Poons, I found that modern physics was not on his mind, but I maintain its significance,

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which bears on the importance of these paintings as works about color and the strangeness of painting. They're certainly not like other works of Op or Color Field paintings.



Larry Poons, *Imperfect Memento: To Ellen H. Johnson, 1965*. Acrylic on canvas, 39-3/4 x 181-3/4 inches. Courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery

Poons moved on from the “Dots. In subsequent work, pigment — material color in tension with color as light — became the way to generate movement and unity. From the 1970s to the ‘90s Poons threw paint onto walls of vertical canvas and let it cascade, color building on color, the compositions “found” afterwards through a cropping process done over weeks. The cropping rigorously avoided familiar compositional devices in favor of color’s leading role. In the 2000s, Poons left off throwing and began constructing with small marks, building the painting through color-on-color accretions.



Larry Poons, *Book of Minutes, 2013*. Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 70-1/8 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey

These new works integrate Poons’s mastery of counterpoint construction, developed through the Dots and subsequent decades of painting. I would suggest that no other painter is able to mentally/visually construct color relationships across a huge canvas and through the duration of the working process like Poons. Without relying on underlying pattern, system, design, composition or narrative, he keeps the eye’s responses to hue, scale and saturation in play using value to amplify intensity. Shape never overshadows the starring role of color as broken light.

Prior to the current show I had sometimes felt Poons’s new work to be less radical than what came before. The brush and finger

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marks seemed more familiar than the cascades or Dots. So many colors are used, including many outside the bounds of my own retro-tastefulness.

Perhaps I looked harder at this exhibition, but the works in this show all hit me as intensely pleasurable experiences of a place quite new. Each small area of color interaction seems visually crisper and more specific, while the softer modulations of color/light have become more insistent. This especially comes across in the way small marks interface against larger areas of modulating, glowing light, wrangling with randomness while integrating weight-defying, interactional dynamics. The openness to using all colors results in amazing mixtures and events.

November 7 to December 14, 2013, Loretta Howard Gallery, 525-531 West 26th Street, New York City, (212) 695-0164

January 10 to February 8, 2014, Danese/Corey, 511 West 22nd Street, New York City, (212) 223-2227