

IN THE LIGHT OF NUMBERS

E. Nancy Stevens' passion is exploring pictorial space through the fundamental materials of abstract painting: colour-light and form. When you walk into a roomful of her paintings you are submerged in an experience of scintillating, vibrating colour that gives the sensation of movement but is locked in place. Despite bright colours and hard-edged compositions, this is a contemplative art, one in which colour relationships slowly pry apart space to give your eyes and mind some breathing room. Unburdened from the task of representing character, realist place or story, the paintings of *Pathways* synthesize a new kind of experience of the concrete world, an event that can absorb you, as a viewer, into a new self-perception in the field of painting.

Stevens writes of finding inspiration in the conflicting practices of Neo-Impressionism and the Minimalist art of the 1960s. However, the work of Montreal painter Guido Molinari provides a more critical context than the latter. Neo-Impressionists, such as Georges Seurat, advocated using colours seen in reality or even breaking those colours into their components. Finding that adjacent rather than mixed colours produced a more intense experience, they applied paint in small dots, leaving their mixing to viewers' perception. Since colour expresses emotion, Neo-Impressionist painters believed that pointillism provided a bridge between interior emotions and concrete reality. Minimalist artists, such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd, also aimed at synthesizing an experience of objective reality. They reduced their works to essential qualities of colour and surface, producing simplified objects stripped of internal compositional and colour relationships and relieved of artists' aesthetic choices and touch. They often used number series as a compositional guide. Although series such as prime numbers are purely abstract, the Fibonacci series describes order observable in nature while remaining a mathematical progression, thus linking abstract thought to reality.

Although Stevens shares the Minimalists' interest in numerical seriality, unlike them, she is concerned with opening rather than expurgating pictorial space. Montreal painter Guido Molinari's practice explored the same territory, especially in his "stripe" paintings of the 1960s that have an affinity with Stevens' work. Deeply involved in the Neo-plastic theories of Piet Mondrian, Molinari, like Seurat and Stella, was continuously reassessing pictorial space. In Molinari's work, space is constructed from

the spatial character of colours and their interaction according to their juxtapositions and quantities. Consequently, the value of this practice lies in the creation of space by 'colour-light.' This has social value, argued Molinari, because "[t]he main purpose of art is to relate oneself to the objectivity of reality. That is, to express adequately the numerous relations of the individual with his surroundings."¹

Like Molinari's, Stevens' paintings propose emotional experiences based on objective colour relationships. The rhythm of stripes in *Prime* intimates its basis in prime numbers (2, 3) interspersed with prime gaps (1, 4). *Earth* plays on the Fibonacci series and its compositional derivative, whirling rectangles, to suggest spiral motion. For the deep blue *Pulse*, Stevens subdivided and recombined vertical bands so that they interlock, opening new kinds of space. The vertical "stripes" of the lovely, golden *Warm* are divided into lengths according to prime numbers including 2, 3, and 5. Describing the organization of the complex horizontal bands depends on what counts as the basic unit: a single colour or a repeated combination. The colour relationships of gold and violet, salmon and green, red and white vibrate to give an intensity and warmth not found in any single or even isolated pair of colours. Optically, the paintings ripple with suggestions of wave-ordered phenomena like light, water and sound. The colour is never saturated or unbroken. Dot by dot, she intervenes with aesthetic judgement to vary colour continuously. She layers colours in depth so that warm gold next to cool violet can be underlain by the opposite values. The effect of the interlocking values is to hold the surface reasonably taught while opening it to a softer and deeper optical space than the saturated, monochromatic stripes of Molinari.

In this colour-space, you and I find our selves in a new spatial order with light as its content. As *Light* suggests, we discover this existence because, in Anne Simpson's words, "Light falls through you."

Tila Kellman

¹ G. Molinari in P. Théberge, *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)*, Ottawa, 1976: National Gallery of Canada, p. 40