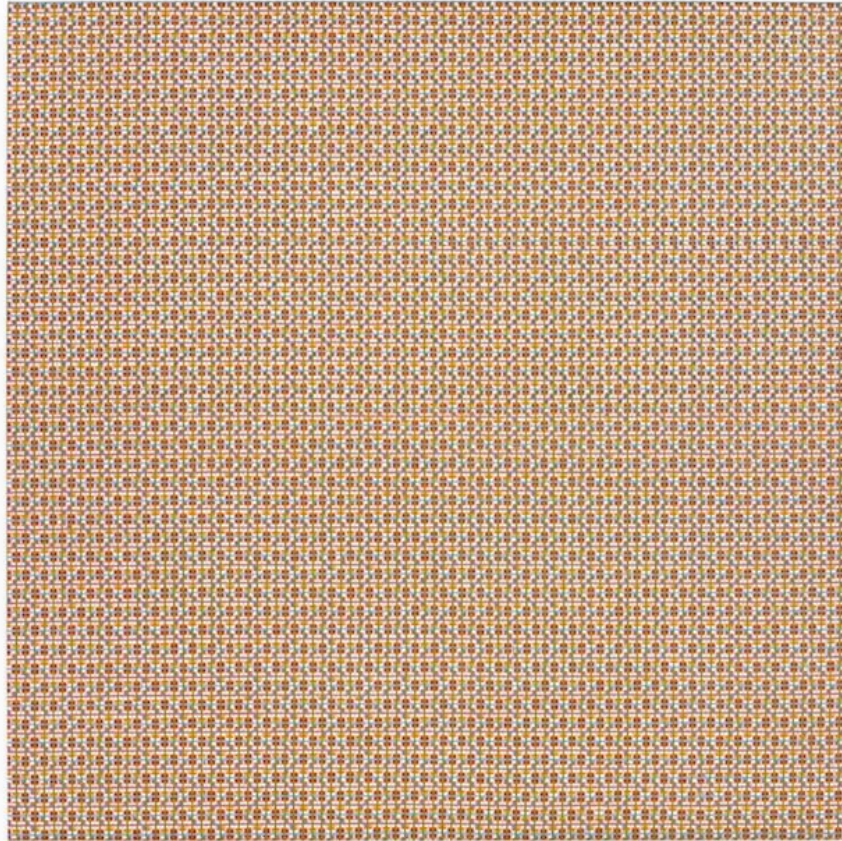


HYPERALLERGIC

Are We Ready for the News that Peter Young Delivers Us?

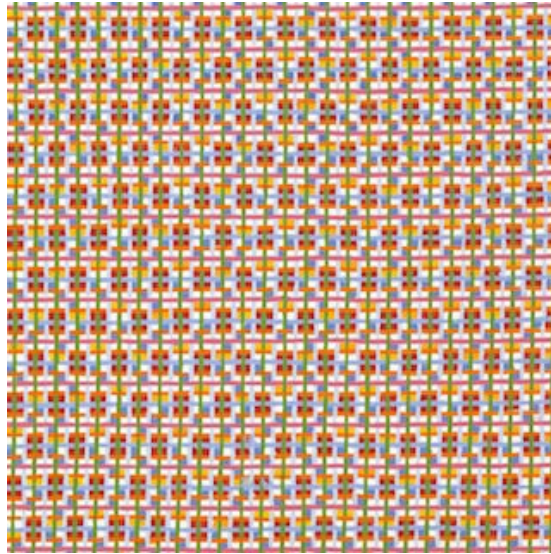
by John Yau on November 24, 2013



Peter Young, "#5-1977" (1977), acrylic on canvas (all images courtesy Albus Greenspon)

In the summer of 1969, Peter Young left New York — and his studio on the Bowery — and set off for the American West, where he drifted around for nearly two years before settling down in Bisbee, Arizona, where he still resides.

Young's decision to remove himself from the New York art world at a time when his paintings were included in such exhibitions as the Corcoran Biennial, *Nine Young Artists/ Theodoron Award* at the Guggenheim, and a two-person show with David Diao at Leo Castelli, was the opposite of anyone who wished to embrace the limelight. In fact, when Castelli offered to represent him, which included the possibility of a stipend, Young turned him down in favor of his then dealer, the famously disorganized Richard Bellamy.



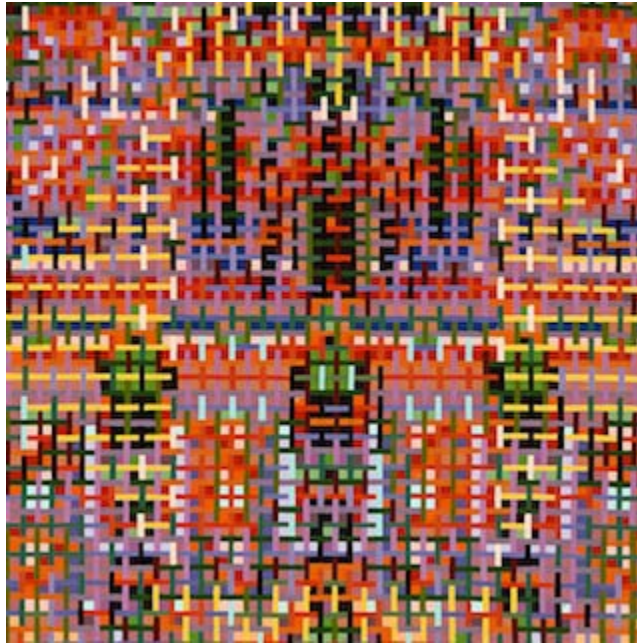
Detail of Peter Young, “#5-1977” (1977), acrylic on canvas

According to Ben La Rocco, in an article published in the *Brooklyn Rail* (September 2007): “[Young] later wrote to Bellamy that, ‘The best thing you can do for me as my dealer is to do nothing for me.’” For Young, it seems, no stipend equaled freedom. La Rocco went on say that, in the process of dropping out, Young “became a model for a younger generation in search of independent thought and maverick dedication.” For them, Young is an artist to refer to, resort to, align oneself with, address, engage with, and take on — to use terms that, in the estimation of Michael Baxandall, don’t impoverish the relationship between older and younger artists, as does the term “influence.” Fortunately, Young’s work has been included in the recent exhibitions *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, assembled by Katy Siegel in consultation with David Reed, and *Peter Young: 1963–1977* at MoMA PS1 (June 24–September 24, 2007), which was accompanied by a monograph containing an introduction by David Deutsch, and illuminating essays by Alanna Heiss, Klaus Kertess and Ellen H, Johnson, the latter previously published in *Artforum* (April 1971). In his current solo show, *Peter Young: Linear Weave (Vertical Fold) Paintings: 1980–1983*, at Albus Greenspon (November 2–December 21, 2013), we get another chance to see nine paintings from the series, Linear Weave, which was first shown at Bellamy’s gallery, Oil and Steel, in 1984.



Peter Young, "#18-1981" (1981), acrylic on canvas

That exhibition, which was also titled *Linear Weave*, appeared at the height of Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo, and received almost no critical attention. No one, myself included, seems to have been bowled over by these paintings, which should serve as a cautionary note that there is an occult or shadow history, which is not a chronicle of rave reviews, glitzy museum exhibitions and news-making auction records, paralleling the conventional one.



Detail of Peter Young, "#18-1981" (1981), acrylic on canvas

It is a history that seems to be growing in importance. In this history one notices without bitterness the glaring absences and repeated oversights — the fact that Katherine Bradford, Judith Linhares, Melissa Meyer, Thomas Nozkowski, Joyce Pensato and Stanley Whitney have never been in a Whitney Biennial comes to mind — which amount to a more damning institutional critique than the ones museums and galleries are proud of celebrating. (Might it be time for a Salon des Refusés?)

At the height of minimalism, which Frank Stella famously characterized as “what you see is what you see,” “Young,” as Klaus Kertess astutely pointed out, “preferred to practice a kind of what you see is what you don’t see.”

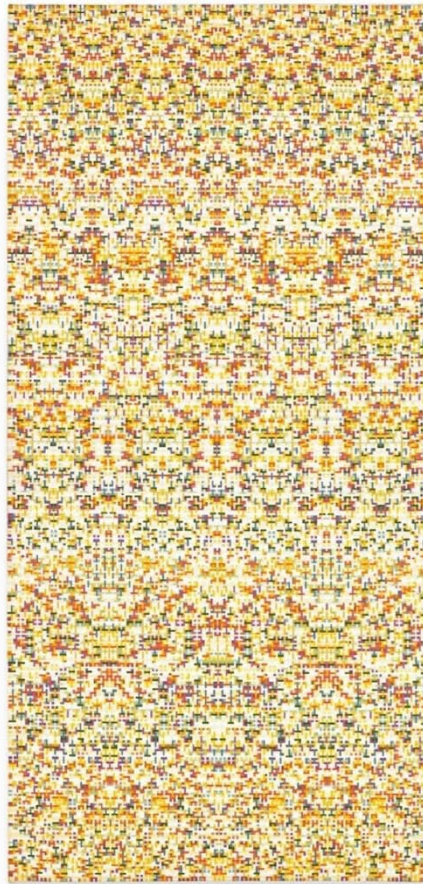
The difference isn’t purely formal. Stella aligned himself with a reductive, materialist view of art, where paint is paint on a surface, while Young was interested in tumult, playfulness and the threshold of the ineffable. Here, we might remember that the roots of abstraction go back to Hilma Af Klint and the relationship between materiality and immateriality, between finiteness and infinity.

In 1965, Young began his first group of linear weave paintings based on a grid, which he stopped using for a decade after seeing paintings by Agnes Martin. In the ones on exhibition at Albus Greenspon, he seems to have upped the requirements and ultimately the stakes, becoming both more meticulous and more rigorous; there is no other way he could have made the linear weave paintings he did between 1980 and '83 without such intense concentration. In retrospect, it seems as if Young has always done exactly the opposite of what was expected of him. As the art world’s

appreciation for expressionist gesture and theatrical imagery grew by leaps and bounds, Young became increasingly introspective and methodical.

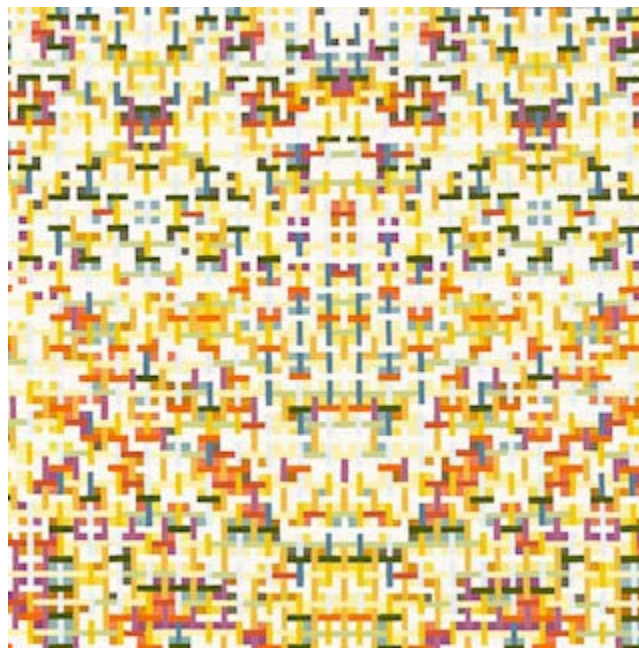
Starting in the mid-1960s, Young primarily worked with a vocabulary made of the smallest unit (the dot) and the next step up (the line). He did this not to be reductive but as a means to compose increasingly complex pictures, many made only of dots, which are apt to induce a near-hallucinatory state in the viewer. While he worked with a simplified vocabulary, he never seemed to repeat himself and always kept moving. By 1980, which is the date of the earliest “Linear Weave (Vertical Fold)” in the exhibition, he completed at least five distinct, ambitious bodies of work.

Looking at the eight “Linear Weave (Vertical Fold)” paintings in his current Albus Greenspon exhibition, I find it hard to imagine that Young could have pushed their complexity much further without clogging up the surface. He seems to have unerring sense of when to stop.



Peter Young, “#20-1981” (1981), acrylic on canvas

Done in acrylic, the paintings usually contain one dominant color (green, red), and they are all the same dimensions (82 1/2 x 39 1/4 inches), symmetrically composed along a vertical axis. The paint is applied in short vertical and horizontal strokes of equal widths, each of which is a single color. The paintings convey a take-it-or-leave-it-matter-of-factness that is utterly without charm. At different moments, while looking at them, it seems as if the configurations and patterns are on the brink of hardening into fixed images, but they never do. Instead, they fluctuate between a fictional weave and an image within a field buzzing with abstract configurations and patterns, none of which are able to supersede their vocabulary of short horizontal and vertical strokes. At most, they become a series of stacked horizontal sections whose borders dissolve, shift, reappear.



Detail of Peter Young, "#20-1981" (1981), acrylic on canvas

The "Linear Weave (Vertical Fold)" paintings are not in the least pictorial. They are dense, non-hierarchical, informational fields made up of a simple abstract language, whose geometric combinations are elevated to an intense, almost irritating optical pitch. At the same time –and this is what I find rather staggering – Young enables each precise yet unfussy stroke to maintain its identity within an incredibly complex, vibrating optical field. The result is an exquisitely calibrated tension that the artist first articulated in the dot paintings, where a curving row of brown or blue dots never denies the individuality of each mark.

Seeing veers between inclusion and exclusion, between trying to take in the entire painting and breaking it down to what we initially think is a visually manageable area, but soon discovering that it is not. The geometric configurations seem to spread out and withdraw, like the tide, while the

carefully defined surface pulses, teems, throbs and buzzes. Imagine a piece of player piano music that could cause the piano to spontaneously combust, and you get an inkling of how much power these paintings both acknowledge and control. In their inner dynamics, scrupulous order seamlessly coincides with a potentially anarchic unruliness.

Although they were painted more than thirty years ago, years before the rise of the personal computer and the Internet, they look like they were done yesterday. They evoke the underside of carpets, circuit boards, intricate mazes with no possibility of escape, an alien language, a secret computer code or a highly evolved video game for math whizzes. They are hypnotic and subversive, enthralling and repellant. It is as if Young wanted to see how much visual information a painting could hold and yet still be porous, as if the wind could blow through it. Young's paintings have always been about seeing rather than about being seen, not unlike their maker.

Peter Young: Linear Weave (Vertical Fold) Paintings: 1980–1983 *continues at Albus Greenspon (71 Morton Street, West Village, Manhattan) through December 21.*