
Sum of Parts

by Kathryn Hargreaves

Can artworks affect us the way, say, singing certain types of songs can measurably shift our brain activity from one hemisphere (namely, the left) to the other (the right), with consequent mood and creativity enhancement (among plenty of other great things)? The "songs" in said experiments are simply repetitions of certain elemental sounds using a certain rhythm. In other words, they are chants. Is there anything in the way an artwork can be structured that would similarly affect us? We're not talking content here. Most people don't need the Ayurvedics to tell them that certain images will elevate their mood (and others will decidedly not). So, is there a (silent) visual equivalent to chanting, a "visual music," as it were? Tibetan monks contend that their sand mandalas, depictions of entities enmeshed in specific geometric structures, evolve the spirit of their viewers. Aside from studies in how color and value affect mood, it seems little scientific research has been done on "how patterns of changing shape and colour affect our mood," to quote British mathematician/programmer/molecular biologist/ animator James Crook. However, being an animator, he's probably talking about repetition in time, not across a two-dimensional surface. Chladni plates are proof that certain sounds affect physical objects in certain ways. However, gazing upon them probably will not affect you in the way, say, the producing sound (or producing the sound) might. On the other hand, researchers have noted that the Jackson Pollack works deemed masterpieces are the ones with a fractal measure (level of complexity) closest to that of nature. It's not quite a case of non-time-based repetition of elemental visual elements shifting our metabolism. Or is it? At the very least, we are attracted to things that mimic nature in some parameters, most likely because we first adapted to a milieu of a certain visual complexity. Would that certain abstract images could evoke a mental sound current that could transform us!

Irene Abraham used to be a research biologist. Her work is, not surprisingly, often analytical. Her drawings look like maps, and some of her grid paintings look like histograms or 2D Fourier Transforms. She consciously presents mappings between logical systems. As with the algorist group OuPeinPo, she enjoys the problem solving necessary from imposing constraints. In her Sudoku-based paintings, she uses the structure of such puzzles to evoke "questions about how we perceive and read image and pattern." Besides this cultural decoding, her drawings and her grid paintings (both the free-form and the systematic ones) seem to visually create rhythms in the brain: the grids are the pulse and the foregrounds the overlaid rhythm.

Lisa Adams puts the tendrils to good use with images from the subconscious that sometimes evoke mortised typography ornaments devoid of their copy and sometimes dream catchers, among other things. Some nice visual jokes aside, her content is nearly Ayurvedic-proof: it makes you feel better for looking at it. Her birds seem happy, her objects fly through dreamy skies. Hers is a contemplative landscape that offers a visual sanctuary.

Hollis Cooper does paintings right at the edge of control, with the medium flying about with Pollack-like fractal measure close to nature's. In her acrylic-on-PVC installations, she constructs virtual environments with an infinite number of vanishing points, twisting and folding geometric interpretations of chat rooms onto themselves. Suddenly, the multiple perspectives are melded into one, all the conversations overlap, in a visual atonalism. Illusion of depth flattens and vice versa. She perturbs this even further when she installs the resulting images so they visually morph the architecture. What we have is a metaphor for what space might be like if the Many melded into One, or the illusion of time disappeared and we could see everything at once.

Rebecca Hamm of course gets very close to nature's pleasing fractal measure, because she is working directly from it. She does watercolors that from far away hint at the earlier work of watercolor uber-master Joseph Raffael. Often her content is nature taking over what she calls "human constructs." What could be more

Virginia Katz sometimes collages with string instead of glue, Annette Messenger style. The nodes are cut-up paper detritus, but Katz has pooled the fragments by color, so you get what looks like a topographical map or a nebula. This and her other work invoke images of real things, most often as satellite views of the planet. Though her working process is much more complicated (e.g., multi-layered mono-printing and dry pigments, for starters) than the mere rendition of nature, we feel perfectly at home with her images.

Rebecca Niederlander is the master of creating work with sophisticated detail hierarchies and visual movement. In her plastic-coated wire pieces, she puts in twists and turns that make your eyes want to follow them, stimulating (or satisfying) your natural urge to move. Sometimes they are also delightful "toys" with jumping-jack mechanisms that secretly store their own latent movement. That said, pretty much all her pieces are a visual score that makes you hear their music synesthesia-style, and it's euphoric music!

Coleen Sterritt makes sculpture by concocting a brew of naturally grown objects and human-constructed ones, with intact and scrap instances of both. She manipulates the materials minimally to skillfully construct unexpected objects. They are most delightful when they mimic natural proliferation; then they have all the satisfying size hierarchies found in nature. Best of all, they are ebullient: they make hay out of the mishmash of human and natural constructions with which we currently live. As for the drawings, they have similar properties, looking like what Richard Artschwager might do (although he doesn't draw like that at all).

As all artists know, it's one thing to look at art and another to make it. With the chanting effect described at the beginning, the physical act of making the sound helps produce the outcome. It may be the case that with visual art making, the kinesthetics of marking, mousing, or building is what enhances the spirit, working a sort of EMDR meditation that pushes things through neural networks and/or that balances the brain hemispheric functioning. Perhaps this is the "movement of the spirit" that the curator saw in these artists' work: the act of summing together parts to make whole both artist and viewer.

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