

COLORSCAPES: MARKO SPALATIN 1970-2001

by

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ABSTRACT

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Artist and printmaker Marko Spalatin (b. 1945) is known for his ability to capture the transitory optical effect of color and light through the interaction of geometric forms in space. His career developed from concepts of the 1960s Op art movement, which produced a heightened viewing experience of the work of art rather than focusing on content. This movement drew on modernism's interests in breaking traditional academic definitions that viewed color as an extraneous addition, and shifted toward the depiction of color as having its own sense of form and dynamism. Spalatin established his style by creating highly colored surfaces that seem to reflect light off of dramatically telescoping shapes.

Spalatin's "colorscapes," illusionistic color landscapes, are dynamic spatial environments created through entirely abstract means. His depiction of color-reflecting forms in space was unique from the larger Op art movement, and shares concerns with late modernist painters who investigated spatial illusion through non-traditional means. A chronological exploration of Spalatin's screenprint series highlights the artist's placement within the larger modernist traditions through his use of color, light, and space and demonstrates the magnetic play between abstraction and illusion evident in his work. Spalatin's vibrant realms invite the viewer into the pictorial space to explore his exceptional skill in depicting his form of geometric abstraction.

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Introduction

Artist and printmaker Marko Spalatin (b. 1945) is known for his ability to capture the transitory optical effect of color and light through the interaction of geometric forms in space. His career developed from concepts of the 1960s Op art movement. Op art, an abbreviation of optical art, attracted artists intent on their viewers experiencing, in the words of noted Op artist Victor Vasarely (1906-1997), “the presence of a work of art, rather than understanding it.”¹ This movement developed out of modernism’s interests in breaking traditional academic definitions that viewed color as being extraneous addition, and shifted toward the depiction of color as creating a sense of form and dynamism. Spalatin focused on the printmaking process of screenprinting and applied vibrant colors to reveal the play of light on objects. Though most Op artists conveyed illusionistic forms through *trompe l’oeil*, Spalatin established his style by developing surfaces of saturated color that seem to reflect light and thus to have three-dimensional form. His depiction of geometric forms within three-dimensional landscapes of color was unique from the larger Op art movement, yet his work is often included as part of the trend. This catalog explores Spalatin’s use of color theory, and his relationship to Op art, in order to recognize his distinctive style and contextualize his contributions to modernism.

Spalatin was born in Zagreb, Croatia in 1945 and immigrated to the United States in 1963. He earned his BS in Art in 1968 and an MFA in 1971 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison). Spalatin attended UW-Madison at the same moment that the faculty’s master printers were gaining a national reputation. Spalatin subsequently learned from some of the best Wisconsin printers, such as Dean Meeker (1920-2002), which enabled him to develop his exceptional printing technique. His process involved applying separate screens for each color that the print included. These sections of color were divided by floating stencils, an innovative process that Spalatin created while at UW-Madison.² Each screen of color was meticulously laid down so that the other hues around it would interact in the precise way Spalatin wanted; placing them one at a time allowed him to control their effect. Though his

art looks almost formulaic, the artist used his sight alone to decide the tonal shifts that are so essential in his work.³ Spalatin printed his work with his own printing press throughout his career, never relying on an outside print shop, and as such, created works that are synergistic and filled with energy.

The artist's time at UW-Madison was pivotal to his printmaking interests that focused on the utilization of color and form. He realized that screenprinting would be the best printing process to use for his work because of its ability to extract "intense and vibrant color, nice clean edges."⁴ After earning his MFA, Spalatin decided to pursue his artistic career full time and has since been featured in over seventy solo exhibitions and numerous group shows around the world. Spalatin's last print series, *Cabria*, was printed in 2003. Since then, the artist, who is also a music composer, has dedicated himself to his music. His thirty-three year career as a printmaker constituted a sustained exploration of color theory and its ongoing relevance to artistic production.

Color Theory

Spalatin applies color in solid blocks of bold, vibrant hues. Through this process he creates what I will call colorscapes, or landscapes of color that are shaped into geometric forms. The intent of his work is to display the interaction of color and light, which he felt is best seen through abstracted shapes. In order to succeed in his vision, Spalatin utilized key principles of color theory that clarify the way color, light, and form can function in art.⁵ He was inspired by theorists and artists who saw the benefits of focusing on geometric forms, which in turn led him to adopt many techniques that the Op artists were applying around the same time. The work of M.E. Chevreul (1786-1889), Johannes Itten (1888-1967), and Joseph Albers (1888-1976) was particularly influential for Spalatin's conception of color and its ability to create illusive effects in three-dimensional forms.

M.E. Chevreul

French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul is often described as one of the founders of modern color theory. Though he is known for his work with animal fats in the science community, Chevreul also

founded principles of color theory that have had a lasting effect in art education.⁶ He is known for establishing the laws of simultaneous, successive, and mixed contrast of colors.⁷ Each law was an essential addition to the study of color contrast and harmony,⁸ but the law of simultaneous contrast arguably had the greatest impact on the techniques of subsequent modern artists as well as on Spalatin's work.

"Simultaneous contrast" is the name given by Chevreul to the effect that occurs when one "views two strips (of paper) of different tones of the same color, or two strips of the same tone but different colors placed side by side." As Chevreul explains, "the eye perceives certain modifications which in the first place influence the intensity of color, and in the second, the optical composition of the two juxtaposed colors."⁹ An example of this effect can be seen by placing rectangles of light and dark grays next to one another or farther apart. When the gray rectangles are further from one another they hold their true color, gray. Yet, when they are placed closer to one another, the dark gray tends to increase the lightness of the light gray, while the light gray tends to deepen the value of the dark gray.¹⁰ This effect, now called brightness contrast, is most clear when placing complementary colors next to one another—the lighter tones deepen the darker ones. When these colors are next to each other in images they create the illusion of the lighter tones coming forward and the darker ones receding.

The use of optical illusion in art was essential in the work of Op artists as their focus was on developing motion in their pieces. The simultaneous contrast that occurred through the placement of specific colors involuntarily created movement with lighter tones advancing toward the viewer and darker ones falling back. Therefore, when Op artists started experimenting with color they immediately saw the benefits of this color theory technique.

Bridget Riley's (b. 1931) *Nataraja* of 1993 exemplifies Op art's experimentation with simultaneous contrast (Figure 1). The image displays tilted rectangles in hues of varying colors on the spectrum. She places complementary colors of navy blue next to fire engine red, and forest green beside

pastel pink to create the impression of motion. In these pairings, the darker colors do seem to fall back and the brighter ones to come forward, but though her image does display simultaneous contrast—so that brighter colors seem brighter next to the darker ones and vice versa—this effect does not seem to have been strong enough for Riley, and in her later works she kept experimenting with this principle more intensely. This experimentation is evidenced in *Carnival* (Figure 2). The three-dimensional shapes are in bold colors of yellow, orange, and magenta and their interaction is substantial. Here, Riley chose colors that display balance due to their relationship on the color wheel, where yellow is across from purple; the yellow does not overshadow the magenta but instead exists in harmony with it. The ability to create a simultaneous contrast that is also balanced is something Spalatin mastered early in his artistic career.

Spalatin explains that he would “use simultaneous contrast to maintain a sense of movement and disturb symmetry.”¹¹ In his *Colored Cube*, he created the illusion of a three-dimensional cube on two-dimensional paper using linear perspective and color (Figure 3). The linear perspective makes the cube’s corner in the center of the print appear closest to the viewer, with space seemingly receding in all directions. But this effect is enhanced by Spalatin’s choice of color. By utilizing simultaneous contrast through the colors of blue, green, purple, red, and yellow he gives the cube mass and presence. The square is further accentuated with the blue background that itself looks to be fading into empty space.

Colored Cube displays a larger cube shape consisting of smaller colored cubes. The print’s main focal point is the three bright yellow cubes with one red cube in the middle that make up the corner of the larger square. The red cube is part of a pattern that recedes straight back and diagonally downward to the other corners farther back in the picture plane, while the blue, green, and purple cubes surround the red and yellow cubes in no specific pattern. Spalatin understood where to place the colors of red and yellow to create a cohesive image. Had he put the yellow squares in the back of the cube, then the cube would have appeared to sink in with the yellow drawing forward, distorting the image of a perfect

cube. Spalatin knew that including too many yellow squares would be too much for the eye to take in and so balanced them with the red. He then included the greens, purples, and blues to even out the warm colors with cooler tones while displaying the illusion of some hues moving forward and others falling back. Though simultaneous contrast was a fundamental component in Spalatin's work, it wasn't the only technique he utilized. Spalatin's art, which combined numerous techniques, included those of Johannes Itten. Itten was part of the core group that founded the Bauhaus and his theories connecting art and music appealed to Spalatin.

Johannes Itten

Johannes Itten was a Swiss expressionist painter who was also a designer, teacher, and theorist associated with the Bauhaus. He taught the "preliminary course"¹² where students learned the basics of material characteristics, composition, and color.¹³ Itten is known for his book *Art of Color* that presented his "color sphere," a color wheel that consisted of twelve hues and declared his ideas on the principles of colors (Figure 4). This wheel was based on the sound-color circle of composer Josef Matthias Hauer (1883-1959) from Vienna. The composer's wheel consisted of twelve equally spaced notes on a music scale, divided into warm colors for the fifths and cool colors for the fourths.¹⁴ Itten organized his wheel in spectral order and sought to coordinate twelve equally spaced hues with a value scale of seven musical steps.¹⁵ Spalatin grew up with parents that loved music. His father was partial to the opera and his mother would buy the family weekly tickets to the opera or symphony orchestra while they lived in Croatia.¹⁶ He began to play the guitar at eight years old and learned classical guitar in his 30s. Music was an essential part of the artist's life, and his fascination with it carries over into his art.

Itten and Spalatin held similar views that music had a place in art, especially in the sensation it evokes. In his *Silba* series, Spalatin experiments with an interpretation of sensations he experienced on the island of Silba, and his forms produced, as the artist described, "a wave-like movement of light from the center of the field outward, thus creating a distinct realm that includes both shallow and deep

space.”¹⁷ Spalatin explained that this series concentrated on visual sensations that nature could produce, yet I would suggest auditory sensation captured in ink is also apparent in his work.

For example, in *Silba II* (Figure 5), the color-blocked sections radiate out from a central color and light source. They give the illusion of moving outward, toward the viewer, while also appearing to quiet as the colors change from bright orange to more subdued blues. The image viscerally recalls cymbals in an orchestra being clanged together. The initial sound is loud and harsh, yet the reverberations of the cymbals lessen as they move apart and away from that original point of impact. Though some of Spalatin’s images appear to depict musical elements, he himself has said his biggest inspirations came from nature.¹⁸ He was thus not a sound-color artist in the same way as Itten, but his work did use some components borrowed from Itten, such as the twelve-step color wheel. Spalatin created a link between visual and auditory sensation, and his work often displays an amalgamation of the two.

Josef Albers

Another of Spalatin’s inspirations is evident in the geometric forms he used to create spatial realms. Artist and instructor Josef Albers,¹⁹ a contemporary of Itten at the Bauhaus, developed a teaching program that transformed art education. His program concentrated on students understanding the basics of color and utilizing minimal means to achieve their art.²⁰ Albers and his groundbreaking book *Interaction of Color* epitomized the ideology of the Bauhaus, and his singular teaching style in regards to color influenced Spalatin’s choice to use simplified geometric shapes to display the interaction of color and light.

Both Spalatin and Albers also saw the importance of surrounding their images in a white border. Spalatin explains that:

“The white border accentuates the illusion of a window looking into some other place. Not unlike the viewfinder of a camera, this window traps forms in space and time. The white border is an

integral part of the painting itself, especially when the captured forms interact and actually break out, invading the viewer's space."²¹

When Albers was asked why he insisted on a white margin he explained that it highlights a beginning and an end.²² He further elucidated on the use of white lines in another interview in 1968.²³ Albers stated, "I discovered that when I put a white line in the right way and made the surroundings for the white line right, then the white line makes out of 1, 2, 3 colors, 1, 2, 3, 4 colors."²⁴ Albers thus understood the white line as an integral part of the work that would interact with its three colors to produce four colors.

Spalatin's borders were meant to instill depth, while Albers was specifically interested in flatness. For Albers, the white of the border was another color in the image, it was there to interact with the other colors and expand the dimensions of the piece of art. Yet for Spalatin, the border worked in more traditional terms as a window into the print, which meant that the frame could be disrupted by forms breaking past it into the viewer's own space. Albers wanted his white borders to exist within the same flat plane of the picture, while Spalatin was interested in his borders existing outside of and around the picture plane. Though Albers was an inspiration to Spalatin, their different emphases on the white border was crucial to the creation of their signature artistic styles. The divergent qualities of Spalatin's work to that of Albers occurs in similar fashion when comparing his work to the art of the Op artists. These differences further display Spalatin's placement in the modernist era as a whole rather than confining him to a specific movement.

Op Art

The term 'Op art' first appeared in an unsigned *Time* article in October 1964.²⁵ It is considered a unique movement because it appealed to public imagination before critics or even artists were aware of its popularity.²⁶ Op art was founded in Europe but moved swiftly to the United States where the first American exhibition featuring Op artists, *The Responsive Eye*, took place in 1965. The exhibit was curated by William C. Seitz (1914-1974), and he remarked that the 'perceptual abstractionists', or Op

artists, stole the show.²⁷ These artists were Richard Anuszkiewicz (b. 1930), Larry Poons (b. 1937), Michael Kidner (1917-2009), Bridget Riley, and the artist credited with creating the movement, Victor Vasarely.

Op art, along with its predecessors Pop and Minimalism, resisted the Abstract Expressionism that had pervaded the art world and instead insisted on impersonalization in place of Abstract Expressionism's focus on personal variations in its shared style.²⁸ Op artists did not ask viewers to interpret their work but rather to experience its presence above understanding its content.²⁹ They developed a dynamism in their art using geometric patterns and optical illusions that simulated movement.

Op art drew on the efforts of artists in the 1920s, such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), and Naum Gabo (1890-1977) to produce optical and energized works of art.³⁰ Deemed 'Kinetic art,' Duchamp, Gabo, and Berlewi's work included sculptural pieces that actually moved or paintings that utilized optical effects to give a sense of motion and depth. Elements of motion can be seen in Berlewi's *Elements of Mechano-Facture* (1953), Gabo's *Kinetic Sculpture* (1920), and Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Rotary Glass* (1920). Each of these artists manipulated visual perspective to suit their goals, but they likely did so as an afterthought. Their real focus was on movement, and optics was a means to an end. In the early 1930s more serious explorations of optical art and phenomena were occurring, most notably at the Bauhaus under Josef Albers.³¹ Albers's experimentation with depth, motion, and color paved the way for the founder of the Op art movement, Victor Vasarely, and another equally influential artist, Bridget Riley.

Victor Vasarely was born in Pecs, Hungary in 1908 and was fascinated with grids and isobar maps from a very early age.³² This captivation led him to explore art in the form of creating posters for a competition in *La Vie Publicitaire* which introduced him to modern art. After attending classes at the Bauhaus and learning about the major artists of modernism, Vasarely moved to Paris and created his

first optical works—geometric drawings for fabric prints—between 1931 and 1932.³³ In 1955, Vasarely, together with Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005) and other artists concerned with the movement, were part of an exhibition at the Galerie Denise René in Paris where they issued a manifesto, now known as the Yellow Manifesto. Its theme was ‘plastic-kineticism’ or optical-kinetic art; thus, if we are to attach a beginning date to the Op art movement, 1955 would be the official start.³⁴

Vasarely’s early art was in black and white but he turned to color soon after.³⁵ His mastery of the intense contrast between black and white can be witnessed in his *Sol-Ut* (Figure 6). This piece utilizes a linear grid pattern and circles to display depth and motion. He used perspective to warp the circular shape to make the circle appear to be pushing towards the viewer. Along with these techniques, Vasarely incorporated different variations of the black and white hues in order to further display the intensity of the two contrasting colors. Though his black and white pieces are masterful, his work with color did not have as much success showing optical effects, which I touch on later in this section. Vasarely was one of the most influential artists of the movement because he understood the particular results that could be achieved by displaying optical and kinetic techniques. His contemporary in London, Bridget Riley, had a similar vision of manipulating forms and optics to create geometric vistas.

Riley had a singular Op style of pushing shapes to their limits in form and identity. She was born in Norwood, London in 1931 and studied at Goldsmiths College from 1949 to 1952 and the Royal College of Art between 1952 and 1955. Op art scholar Cyril Barrett argues that her most formative experiences occurred when she was an art instructor at a secondary school from 1957 to 1958. While teaching there she found the “more limited the tasks she set for her pupils, the more individual and inventive the results.”³⁶ This epiphany started to show in her own work where she attempted to convey the visual equivalence of energy, such as in her exemplary *Pink Landscape*.³⁷ In 1961 she produced her first optical work, *Movement in Squares*, which consists of black and white squares that are increasingly distorted toward the center of the image (Figure 7). The illusion produces a buckling movement which is

continually readjusting itself optically in an effort not to fall apart.³⁸

In Riley's *Fragment 7* the artist has taken a basic shape, a circle, and stretched it to its furthest limits (Figure 8). We can see the circle morphing into a straight line as she bends and twists the content of the shape. This is indicative of Riley's style as she explains that while experience told her how a given shape would behave, she refused to jump to conclusions; as such, even her finished projects were exploratory in nature.³⁹ *Fragment 7* was printed on Perspex (plexiglass), likely to give the impression of vast and bright empty space around the black circles that in themselves create their own atmosphere.⁴⁰

Space in Riley's work, according to the artist, is more American than English: "...a sort of open, shallow, non-focal space which originated with Mondrian and was first completely articulated by Pollock."⁴¹ Riley wanted her surfaces to have the impression of fluctuation—an 'active space' that would 'operate like the action of a whip.'⁴² Though Spalatin's work could not be said to 'whip', his spaces are, like Riley's, alive and active. He is also meticulous about his grids, a similarity he has in common with Vasarely and an interest that inspired him to create geometric colorscapes. Evidently, Spalatin shares defining characteristics of the Op art movement with some of its most significant artists.

Marko Spalatin has been consistently linked to the Op art movement through his geometric abstractions that create a sense of space and movement, yet, whether that connection is tenable has yet to be scrutinized. An analysis of the Op art ideology in regards to Spalatin's work reveals that there are significant differences alongside obvious similarities. By understanding Spalatin's focus on color and illusionistic techniques it becomes clear whether or not he falls within the Op art spectrum.

Spalatin has explained that color and the reflection of light are his foremost priorities. In the artist's interview with Geofom, a curatorial resource website, Spalatin explains that he is "intrigued by both the relativity of color and the mystery of light, and I am constantly challenged to explore their potentials."⁴³ He goes on to state that in his art he uses geometric forms in order to develop variegated

color surfaces that capture light.⁴⁴ Spalatin creates the illusion of a single light source in his prints, which have areas of light and shadow. In contrast, the lighting in Op art is more flat and constant, with understated highlights and lowlights. The way Spalatin utilizes light is distinctive and an essential part of his printmaking process. Color, like light, is also a mainstay of his art; he has been known to include ten to twenty colors in one piece of art while his most ambitious print has over 700 colors in it.⁴⁵

The type of color he incorporated was an important part of his printmaking. Each color is vibrant and pure and chosen for maximum contrast with surrounding colors, so that the colors are not subtle or subdued. This high contrast was enhanced by Spalatin's printing technique, which became a crucial element of his creative process. Spalatin states, "Each individual shade of color is painted or printed separately. In this manner, I can control the character of each shade and preserve its maximum saturation."⁴⁶ He meticulously excluded any brushstrokes or surface markings to fortify the idea of an interplay of pure form, color, and light.⁴⁷ This interaction, after all, was his end goal in every piece of art. His technique consisted of applying precisely defined areas of flat, opaque color against one another in such a way that the colors seem to create three-dimensional forms.⁴⁸ They, in turn, became perfect objects on which to reflect light and instill motion in the art. As Spalatin explains, the saturated, matte colors are essential to the overall piece.

The connection between these flat colors can be easily seen in the pairing of purple and yellow in *Module XXI* (Figure 9). The tonal shift of light purple to dark purple is further illuminated by the large blocks of yellow surrounding it on both sides. Spalatin understood the harmonious nature of pairing a cool tone with a warm one, especially these two, as they are traditionally placed opposite one another on a standard color wheel. The incorporation of yellow creates a strong reflection that bounces and shifts off the violet center of the column. Had this color been substituted with blue or red, it is likely that the image would not have as strong of a presence and would have been more subdued. By choosing yellow and purple, Spalatin clearly demonstrates the interplay of color and light in the brightest and

purest possible way. In turn, the simulated movement is easy to see between these contrasting colors. Op artists had experimented with the ability of color to depict light and motion, but, I would argue, not to the degree that Spalatin took it.

Op art utilizes optical phenomena in order to confuse the normal processes of perception.⁴⁹ These phenomena are displayed through precise geometric patterns in black and white, or in juxtapositions of high-keyed colors.⁵⁰ Op art scholar Cyril Barrett states that Op art is concerned with form and structure as well as color application; however, he feels that color is an afterthought for Op artists as they are more concerned with optical effects.⁵¹ Indeed, most Op art scholars agree that visual effects, including depth and illusion of space, are better displayed when using black and white, rather than diverse color. This effect is due to there being no color interference, which the contradictory hues of black and white convey through ultimate contrast.⁵² Yet, that does not mean that Op artists have not successfully displayed color in their images to produce optical illusions.

Color in Op art is a dynamic element because no two people see color the same way.⁵³ Which, in a sense, is the perfect entity for tricking the eye. Once Vasarely realized this unique characteristic of color he began incorporating it into his work. One of the artist's main concerns was with what could be called the 'plastic unity of form-color'; essentially he wanted to explore the flexibility of harmonious colors that could create forms of their own volition.⁵⁴ In his *Homage to the Hexagon* (Figure 10), Vasarely has taken two complementary colors, red and blue, and combined them in a cube-like colorscape that displays the harmony between the colors alongside the interaction of light on the objects. He included both light and dark areas to depict contrast and the use of reflected light creates motion in the piece. The work shows his interest in experimenting with color, yet despite the tones that change from navy to cerulean and scarlet to burgundy, Vasarely's application of color looks markedly different from Spalatin's, which jumps off the picture while Vasarely's floats on the surface. Why might this be? I would suggest the two artists' use of color is divergent because of their different uses of space. Vasarely

painted color fields, which take up the entire picture plane and convey occupied space. In contrast, Spalatin's telescoping forms are suspended in space, they do not take up the full pictorial surface like Vasarely's do. Vasarely successfully depicted optical depth in his art, yet Spalatin enhanced and intensified the illusion of depth through his use of seemingly empty space, something Vasarely only subtly incorporated, if at all.

The comparison between Vasarely's spatial field and Spalatin's work is most obviously seen in Spalatin's *Cube Field V* (Figure 11).⁵⁵ Here, Spalatin has taken the basic shape of a square set in a vacant background and added depth in a way that makes the viewer feel like they can walk out onto those precariously placed cubes balancing in empty space. He does not include primary colors but instead violet for the background and salmon for the cube field. Only the top half of the violet background is seen with the majority of the print displaying orange cubes that tilt toward the background in the picture plane. Despite avoiding the primary colors used by Vasarely, this piece of art, when set alongside *Homage*, stands out in its incredible depth and intensity. Spalatin made use of the reflection of light and the three-dimensionality of the cubes to evoke a geometric landscape while *Homage* appears almost flattened or just barely floating off the surface.

Geometric abstraction was a central component in Op art, and as such artists found differing ways to display optical prowess, yet, many did not utilize negative space in the same context that Spalatin did. Louis A. Zona, director at the Butler Institute of American Art, argues that "while geometric abstraction is not an American innovation, it has been the American artist who has carried the genre to its greatest heights."⁵⁶ When viewing Vasarely next to Spalatin, I am inclined to agree with Zona's statement, and I might add that it is Spalatin's understanding of the dynamics of light that elevates him to this position of significance in American art.

Spalatin is known for his understanding of the play of light on objects. Indeed, Geofom interviewer Julie Karabenick states that his work "has consistently been concerned with how color and

light reveal the interaction of geometric forms in space.”⁵⁷ It is precisely this reaction between light and form that creates the optical illusion of three-dimensional depth and space which gives Spalatin’s work a sense of presence. In Op art, the incorporation of light meant different things to different artists: Vasarely understood the effect of light reflecting on forms but did not include strong highlights and lowlights while Bridget Riley had a focus on space, which needed light to display depth and expanse, yet she was not as concerned with the interaction of light on her objects.

Light, too, is a pivotal element in depicting motion. Riley kept her colors subdued in order to enhance their luminous appearance. Yet, Spalatin achieves an incandescent effect with dramatic color contrasts that have not been restrained. Riley’s luminescence was tactical; her images jump out at the viewer rather than inviting them into the pictorial space in the way that Spalatin’s do. The inclusion of light in these two artist’s cases was a matter of preference: Riley was interested in the illusions that could be created through light while Spalatin concentrated on what forms were produced from light captured in surfaces.

Spalatin also uses depth as an optical element; he bends and distorts perspective by placing his objects in empty space that folds inward, which draws the viewer into the image. The illusion of space is evident in his *Hexagon I* (Figure 12) in which the hexagonal forms bend inward and outward within a window-like border. The simplicity of extensive space coupled with reflections and deceptive depth were popular effects for many Op artists. In contrast, Spalatin’s work displays intensive space, where forms do not fill the entire pictorial surface but instead exist within a frame. This information then begs the question, can Spalatin be considered an Op artist?

Spalatin consistently states that one of his biggest influences is color and rhythm in nature, which is a far cry from the mechanized emphasis in the Op art ideology. Nevertheless, Spalatin and Op artists have had many of the same influences, such as Josef Albers’s color philosophy. Spalatin worked near the movement’s peak period, and some of Vasarely and Spalatin’s work was completed only one

year apart. Clearly, Spalatin understood and borrowed from the ideas of Op art, but he took that information and created his own singular style by using color to create an illusionistic landscape of space. Spalatin did utilize optical effects similar to the Op artists, but when asked if he considered himself an Op artist, Spalatin gave a resounding “no.” As he explains, Op art and Victor Vasarely opened the door for him to follow his own artistic path.⁵⁸

Modernist Traditions

Art critic Willard Huntington Wright declared in his *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* from 1915 that the history of modern art is considered the history of the development of form by means of color. He elucidates that modern art tends toward the purification of painting.⁵⁹ This “purification” meant that modern painters focused, many times exclusively, on color, with the ultimate goal of creating art where color could stand as its own representation. This was only part of the modernist ideology, but it was a major part; and Spalatin continued this thought process in his work where color stands alone. Spalatin is considered to be a printmaker and a painter, and he understood the dynamics of both processes, with the result that he conveyed color masterfully in both mediums.

Spalatin’s *Akumal* series from 2001 displays his adept use of color tones to create forms solely comprised of color. In his *Akumal IV* (Figure 13) we can see the form of a fish created from shapes of solid color. Though this print could easily be seen as color filling in the lines of the fish, I would argue that for Spalatin, it was the other way around. He used color to create contour, as seen through the variegated color surfaces and subtle shifts in tone. There is the illusion of contour where it does not really exist, or exists as an afterthought—the color is always the dominant element in his pieces. This concept is present in the works from each stage of Spalatin’s career, *Akumal’s* color may have shifted in tone compared to some of his more vibrant earlier works, but it is still bold, still precise, and still draws the viewer in. Though most modernists worked toward the shared goal of color as its own form, Op art scholar Rene Parola argues that it was during the Op art movement that color was proclaimed as its own

entity.⁶⁰ Modern artists were consistently working toward this achievement, but Op artists understood that they could gain favorable audience reaction by incorporating optical techniques to enhance their images where only color and forms dominated. Spalatin's work conveys a similar crowd-pleasing effect that delights through optical artifice, yet the use of illusionistic depth is actually a departure from modernism.

Modernism saw the renewal of an emphasis on the picture plane. Modernist artist and art educator Hans Hoffman (1880-1966) stated that the Impressionists rediscovered the significance of the picture plane as a two-dimensional entity.⁶¹ He explained in his influential essay, "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts" (1983), that this rediscovery occurred due to "a search for the entity of light, expressed through color, which resulted in reestablishing the two dimensionality of the picture plane."⁶² Thus, modern artists became focused on displaying the flatness of the pictorial surface in their art, a discussion I will return to in more depth. Hoffman goes on to say that displaying depth is possible without destroying the two-dimensionality of the picture plane.⁶³ However, displaying illusion, and more specifically illusionistic depth, was a rejection of the two-dimensional essence, and instead strove for three-dimensionality. Op artists broke past the modernist notion of flatness through the incorporation of deceptive optical effects, and Spalatin's prints did the same with their specific utilization of light and bold color. Ironically, the very elements of modernism that place Spalatin in the movement, are also the components that set him apart from it.

Spalatin consistently explains how the interplay of color, light, and space are pivotal in his art. He states, "Ultimately, it is the light that unifies these opposing forces (absolute and arbitrary, stationary and mobile) and allows them to coexist."⁶⁴ It is the reflective component of the light—how it bounces off one form's surface onto another, spills into the crevices of sharp edged objects—that defines Spalatin's art. Spalatin's depiction of light created and equalized forms in space, it generated mass and depth in his entities. His ability to shape solid forms out of color was entirely dependent on his

incorporation of light on their surface. Without the reflectiveness, shadow, and tonal shifts, Spalatin's work would have none of the dynamism and vibrancy it possesses. His knowledge of light's properties, and his capacity to depict them in his art, provides the images with their own energy, a sense of being their own world with their own life forces and physicality. Spalatin essentially succeeded in depicting modernism's goals of color, light, and form becoming their own representations. This accomplishment marks Spalatin as a contributor to the movement and places him in the modernist tradition. That being said, Spalatin was creating art when the traditional academic art canon, the standard by which so many past artists had judged their art, was in a state of transition. So that while Spalatin is indeed a modernist, his art incorporates aspects of other movements as well.

The academic canon was in flux as the academy decided how to include modern practices in its instruction at the time Spalatin began creating art, and possibly because of this there were still remnants of the traditional artistic style that could be seen in the works of many modernists. Though Spalatin does separate himself from more classical composition, his work, like that of many of the modernists, offers glimpses of traditional components. For one thing, his focus of light and shade has always been a marker of academic instruction. Though Spalatin's work displays a new modernist concept in art, that of geometric abstraction, it is still familiar because it also has classical elements such as chiaroscuro, color balance, and precise line work. Besides incorporating modern and classical components in his work, Spalatin was also successful by including contemporary ideas through his use of layered patterns that gave the illusion that his colorsapes were transitory in nature. His work implicitly acknowledged that the world is undergoing permanent transition, it is continually becoming something else.⁶⁵ Similarly, the academic art standard is constantly adapting its instruction to fit the major art movements.

Spalatin's work was part of the time period that saw the transition away from modernism towards postmodern and contemporary paradigms. His work, like that of the modernists, was evolving

due to the changing viewpoints that asked the ever present conundrum: How do we continue to stretch the possibilities of abstract art? Spalatin explains that in his art he “felt that it was important to create an illusion of palpable space while still retaining a degree of an overall abstract feel.”⁶⁶ His work places him in a peculiar position where he wanted to remain part of the modernist abstract tradition yet was interested in the illusion of three-dimensional space, which rejects the flatness found in modernism.

The notion of flatness is first discussed by the visual art critic Clement Greenberg (1904-1994) in the 1960s through various essays. His writings stated that modernism had a unique and transcendent emphasis on showing the flatness of the pictorial space, whereas traditional artists instead focused on illusion.⁶⁷ Art critic Leo Steinberg (1920-2011) challenged Greenberg’s argument in his *Other Criteria* (1972). He explained that Greenberg wanted all “Old Masters and modernist painters to reduce their differences to a single criterion... either illusionistic or flat. But what significant art is that simple?”⁶⁸ According to Steinberg, Greenberg’s view discounted the fact that both types of movements and artists had merit and had contributed tremendously to the history of art. Spalatin is concerned with both abstraction and illusion. He has successfully incorporated both elements in his art, and it is one of the things that set him apart from others. It also points out the line he is skirting between modernism and a more traditional concept of art as a window into another world.

Spalatin’s art incorporates abstract objects, which are meant to be seen as their own representations. Artist Michael Fried (b. 1939) explored the concept of art and nonart in his essay “Art and Objecthood” from 1967. “Objecthood” as he describes it, is “the condition of nonart” that is applied to an object.⁶⁹ Fried argued that, “modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to *painting*—it must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal.”⁷⁰ Modernist art was meant to be non-objective, it was meant to be seen as art and not as an object or have any connection to nonart.

This non-objectivity was achieved through the utilization of pictorial shapes, or shapes that could be seen as art, not as objects.

The shapes Spalatin uses are meant to be seen as art, they are non-objective, yet his inclusion of illusion was not considered a modernist tendency, as most artists strove to display flatness. Fried argued that painting was on the verge of exhaustion and it only made sense for artists to once again explore three-dimensional space.⁷¹ Spalatin achieves a combination of flat pictorial shapes with illusive effects, he effectively demonstrated that art can have elements of both optical effects and non-objectivity. The path Spalatin took in developing his signature style is fascinating because he successfully incorporates tendencies of both modernism and traditional art, signaling an exhaustion of modernist flatness and a return to three-dimensional illusionism, while remaining within modernism's call for rigorously abstract, non-objective art.

Spalatin's work has clearly enveloped him within modernist traditions, this can be seen in his color that represents itself as form, his focus on controlling and manipulating light in his work, and his position in a transitioning academic canon that steered him toward minimalist, hard-edged art. Yet, he departs from modernist ideology with the incorporation of illusionistic space in his art. Most audiences would agree that Spalatin's work presents newer, more utopic colorscales that have been shaped through the placement of precise hues. Spalatin used a hard-edge printmaking technique to convey depth and motion in his work, yet his deepest inspirations were the forms he found in nature. So, though he clearly displays modernist thinking, Spalatin also incorporated traditional ideology in his work in that he created illusionistic colorscales out of the sensations and colors found in the natural world. In essence, Spalatin is both traditional and modern, and it is this duality that breathes life into his art and resonates with audiences, both of his time and contemporaneously.

Endnotes

1. Quote by Victor Vasarely. Amy Dempsey, *Art in the Modern Era: A Guide to Styles, Schools, and Movements 1860 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 230.
2. Marko Spalatin, Interview with the author, Milwaukee, Wisc., 16, November 2015.
3. Spalatin, Interview with the author, 16 November 2015.
4. Ibid.
5. For a complete description on the laws of contrast please see Chevreul's *Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors and their Applications to the Arts*.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid., 57.
8. Ibid.
9. Marko Spalatin, "An Interview with Artist Marko Spalatin" in *Geoform*: curated by Julie Karabenick. Interview by Julie Karabenick, December 2007.
10. The preliminary courses are described as being "the most original and most influential of the Bauhaus's innovations, they were to become obligatory for all students, no matter what their workshop specialization came to be." From John Gage's, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*. First North American ed. (Berkeley, Cali.: University of California Press, 1993), 260.
11. Kenneth Frampton, "The Bauhaus: the evolution of an idea 1919-32". *Modern Architecture: a critical history*, 4th ed (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1992), 124.
12. D. Bogner, 'Musik und bildende Kunst in Wien' in von Maur, 350-2. Found in John Gage's *Color and Culture*, 242.
13. D. Bogner, Diary, July 1920 in Rotzler 1972, Ibid., 72.
14. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 4.
15. Quote by Spalatin. Ibid., 7.
16. Marko Spalatin, Vladimir P Goss, Louis Zona, John Yau, and Butler Institute of American Art. *Marko Spalatin, a Retrospective, 1970-1995: The Butler Institute of American Art, September 10-November 12, 1995; Foreword by Vladimir P. Goss; Introduction by Louis A. Zona; Essay by John Yau* (Youngstown, Ohio: Butler Institute of American Art, 1995), 81.
17. Josef Albers (1888-1976) was still a force to be reckoned with when Spalatin burst onto the arts scene in the 1970s. Albers *Homage to the Square* was exhibited in 1965, right around the time Spalatin had garnered a name for himself.

18. See Frederick Horowitz's *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes: The Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and Yale* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2006) for a comprehensive analysis of Albers's distinct teaching style. Horowitz's exploration includes details on the artist's style, his specific courses and color studies, and interaction with his students.
19. Quote by Spalatin. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 5.
20. Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 20.
21. Josef Albers. "Oral history interview with Josef Albers." Interview by Sevim Fesci, June 22-July 5 1968. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
22. Ibid.
23. Dempsey, *Modern Era*, 230.
24. Cyril Barrett, *An Introduction to Optical Art* (London: Studio Vista/Dutton Pictureback, 1971) 6.
25. Dempsey, *Modern Era*, 230.
26. Ibid.
27. Quote by Vasarely. Ibid.
28. Michael Compton, and Tate Gallery, *Optical and Kinetic Art*, (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1967) 163.
29. Barrett, *Introduction*, 38.
30. Cyril Barrett, *Op Art*, (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 147.
31. Ibid., 148.
32. Barrett, *Introduction*, 56.
33. Ibid.
34. Barrett, *Op Art*, 171.
35. Barrett, *Op Art*, 170.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Maurice De Sausmarez, *Bridget Riley* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 48.
39. Karsten Schubert and Lynn MacRitchie, *Bridget Riley Complete Prints 1962-2005*, (London: Ridinghouse Editions, 2005), 6.
40. Barrett, *Op Art*, 171.
41. Ibid.
42. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 1.

43. Ibid.
44. Marko Spalatin, *Graphic Work, 1968-1978*, (Madison, Wisc.: Madison Art Center, 1979), 11.
45. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 4.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Dempsey, *Modern Era*, 230.
49. Ibid.
50. Barrett, *Op Art*, 38.
51. Rene Parola, *Optical Art: Theory and Practice* (New York: Reinhold Book Corp, 1969), 113.
52. Ibid.
53. Barrett, *Op Art*, 150.
54. It is interesting to note that Vasarely and Spalatin's pieces were completed only one year apart and both were screenprinted. Yet, they are incredibly different in their focus and it shows – Vasarely chose to concentrate on depicting movement while Spalatin chose color.
55. Vladimir Goss, *Retrospective*, 10.
56. Karabenick, *Geoform*, 1.
57. Spalatin, Interview with the author, 16 November 2015.
58. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York: John Lane Company, 1915), 30-31.
59. Parola, *Op Art*, 117.
60. Hans Hoffman, "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts," edited by James Yohe, 2002 (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 48.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 46.
63. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 4.
64. Vladimir Gross, *Retrospective*, 93.
65. Ibid.
66. Spalatin, *Geoform*, 7.
67. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.
68. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 74.

69. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 152.

70. *Ibid.*, 151.

71. *Ibid.*, 149.

Figures



Figure 1 Bridget Riley, *Nataraja*, 1993, Oil paint on canvas, Support: 65 x 89 inches, Tate Gallery Collection. © Bridget Riley 2015. All rights reserved, courtesy Karsten Schubert, London.



Figure 2 Bridget Riley, *Carnival*, 2000, Screenprint, Sheet: 28 3/4 x 36 inches, Karsten Schubert Collection. © Bridget Riley 2015. All rights reserved, courtesy Karsten Schubert, London.

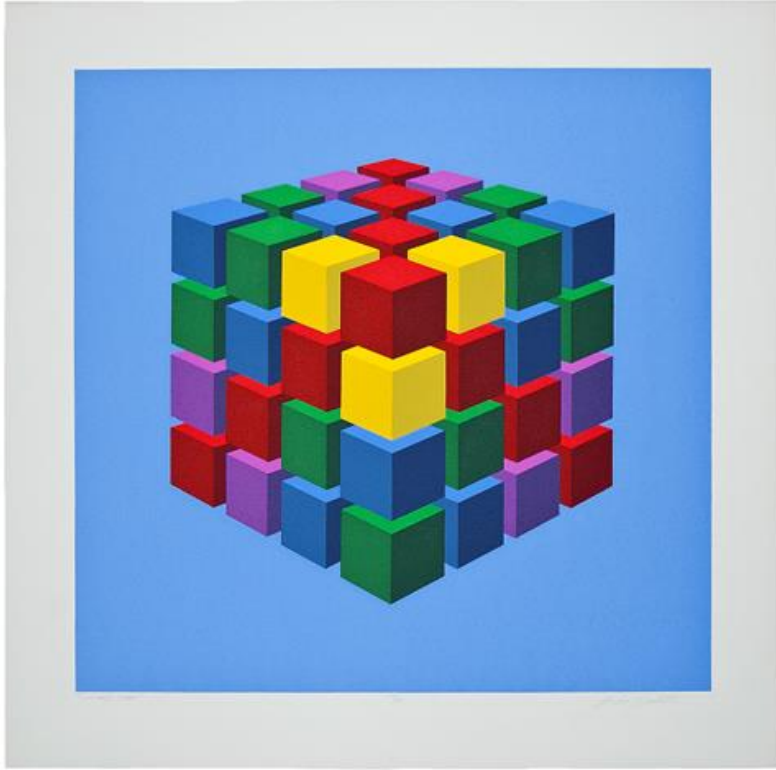


Figure 3 Marko Spalatin, *Colored Cube*, 1970, Screenprint, Sheet: 22 1/4 x 22 1/8 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Emile H. Mathis II, 2012.002.1348.



Figure 4 Johannes Itten, *Farbkreis*, 1961. Found on <http://www.wikiart.org/en/search/johannes%20itten/1>.



Figure 5 Marko Spalatin, (American, b. 1945), *Silba II*, 1975, Screenprint, Sheet: 30 5/8 x 25 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Emile H. Mathis II, 2012.002.1364.

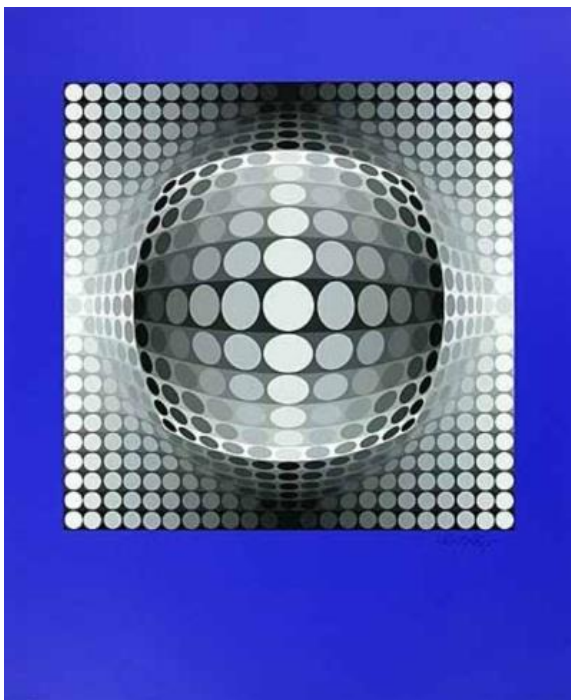


Figure 6 Victor Vasarely, *Sol-Ut*, 1973, Color silkscreen, Size: 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches. Found on <http://www.vasarely.com/site/site.htm>.

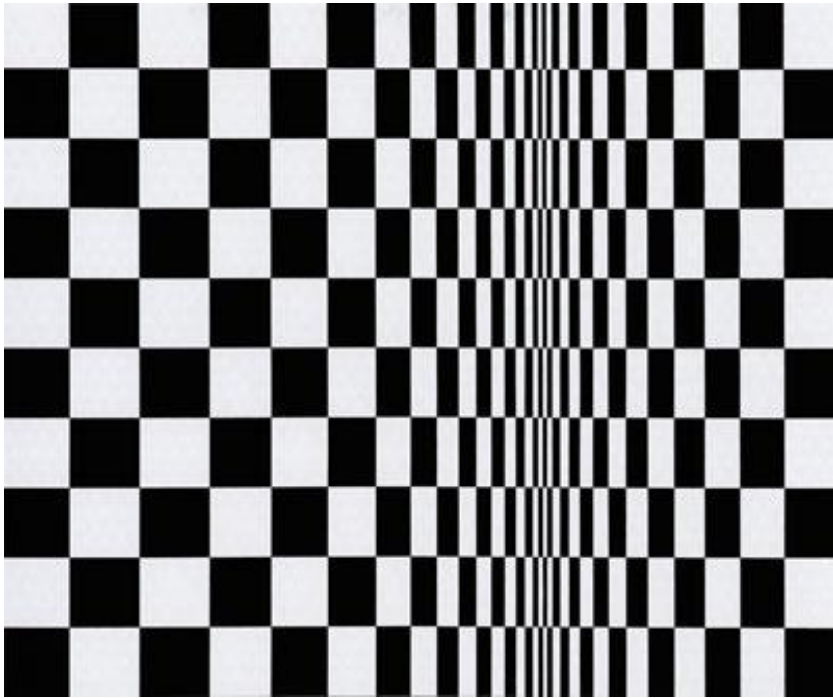


Figure 7 Bridget Riley, *Untitled (Based on Movement in Squares)*, 1962, Screenprint, Sheet: 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches. Found on <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/prints-multiples/bridget-riley-untitled-based-on-movement-in-5597074-details.aspx>. Original: tempera on hardboard, dimensions unknown.

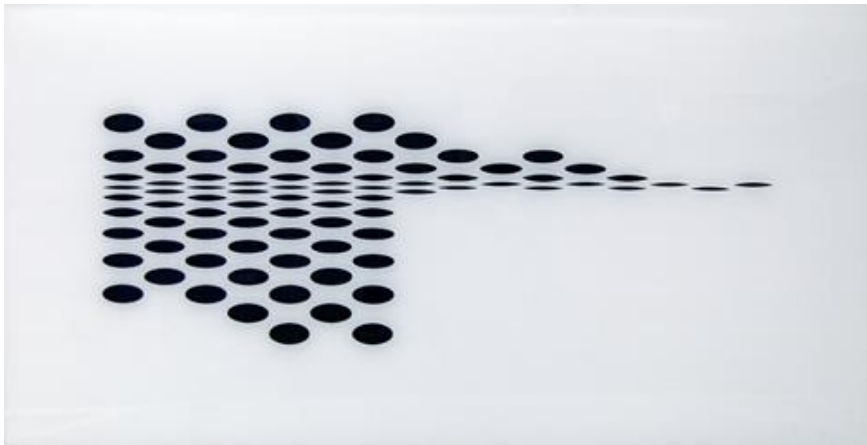


Figure 8 Bridget Riley, *Fragment 7*, 1965, Screenprint, Sheet: 20 x 39 inches, UWM Art Collection, 1972.237.



Figure 9 Marko Spalatin, *Module XXI*, 1973, Screenprint, Sheet: 30 5/8 x 25 1/2 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Emile H. Mathis II, 2012.002.1373.



Figure 10 Victor Vasarely, *Homage to the Hexagon*, 1969, Screenprint, Image size: 26 3/4 x 26 3/4 inches, UWM Art Collection, 1974.282.



Figure 11 Marko Spalatin, *Cube Field V*, 1970, Screenprint, Sheet: 30 1/2 x 25 inches, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Emile H. Mathis II, 2012.002.1369.



Figure 12 Marko Spalatin, *Hexagon I*, 1984, Screenprint, Sheet: 23 x 29 inches, Collection of the artist.



Figure 13 Marko Spalatin, *Akumal IV*, 2001, Screenprint, Sheet: 28 1/2 x 25 inches, Collection of the artist.

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