

# Play of Pigment

Whether with a spray gun or a squeegee, **Dan Christensen** applied paint in a way that no label or theory could encompass.

**A work of art makes no sense in isolation.** To be intelligible it must find a place in the present. And it needs a past. It needs historical context, and that is why we can't let go of the 1960s. For the '60s provide context for just about every development in the art of the past half century. As Pop art's commercial imagery confronted the geometric forms of Minimalism, the latter's physical assertiveness challenged the *noli me tangere* "opticality" of color field painting. Disinclined to take up a challenge from a three-dimensional medium, the color field painters preferred to vie with Pop for control of painting's mainstream. Meanwhile, the easily conceptualized forms of Minimalist art inspired not only conceptual art but process art, performance art, earthworks, and more. It was a complex time but chartable, nonetheless, for the aesthetic stakes were well defined. During the 1960s, the patterns of history remained clear, from one season to the next—or so it seems until we look at the work of Dan Christensen, a painter whose astonishing versatility throws the very idea of historical clarity into question.

Christensen arrived in New York in the mid-'60s. By decade's end his use of high-keyed color prompted some critics to group him with Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and the rest of the color field crew. Others tagged him with "Lyrical Abstraction," a label nearly forgotten now but useful then as a big tent under which to gather any young painter whose abstract images showed no sign of Minimalism's straight lines and right angles. In all their variety, the Lyrical Abstractionists had one thing in common: an urge to apply pigment with anything but a brush. In 1967 Christensen began using a spray gun to cover the canvas with stacked loops of misty color. The results were lyrical, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, and certainly abstract. Nonethe-

By Carter Ratcliff





Previous spread: Dan Christensen, *Brooklyn Diamonds*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 53 x 51 inches. This page, clockwise from top left: *Untitled*, 1988, sprayed acrylic on Plexiglas, 12 x 12 inches; Dan Christensen in his studio; *Two Steps from the Blues*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 60.25 x 48 inches.

Opposite, clockwise from left: *Rhymer #2 - Yellow*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 58 x 40 inches; *Pavo*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 132 inches; *Calypso Blues*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.

less, the exuberant obviousness of his method gave him an affinity with certain process artists—Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris, for example. By 1970 another swerve led to blocks and stripes of color arranged in straight-edged, right-angled patterns of the kind that Morris left behind when he moved on from Minimalism. From the perspective of the art critic as taxonomist, Christensen looked like an artist moving fast in an attempt to evade all labels. However, art precedes criticism and it makes more sense

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to see him as a painter more than usually alive to the potential of his medium—and indifferent to the critic’s need to categorize.

Born in Cozad, Neb., in 1942, Christensen studied at the Kansas City Art Institute. Ronnie Landfield, a fellow student, remembers him as a representational painter working “in a style reminiscent of the Bay Area figurative movement shaped by David Park, Elmer Bischoff, and Richard Diebenkorn.” Nonetheless, their talk was of School of Paris modernism, abstraction, and the allure of New York. When Landfield, a native New Yorker, returned to the city after a sojourn in San Francisco, he found that Christensen had already settled into a loft in downtown Manhattan. In 1967, Landfield



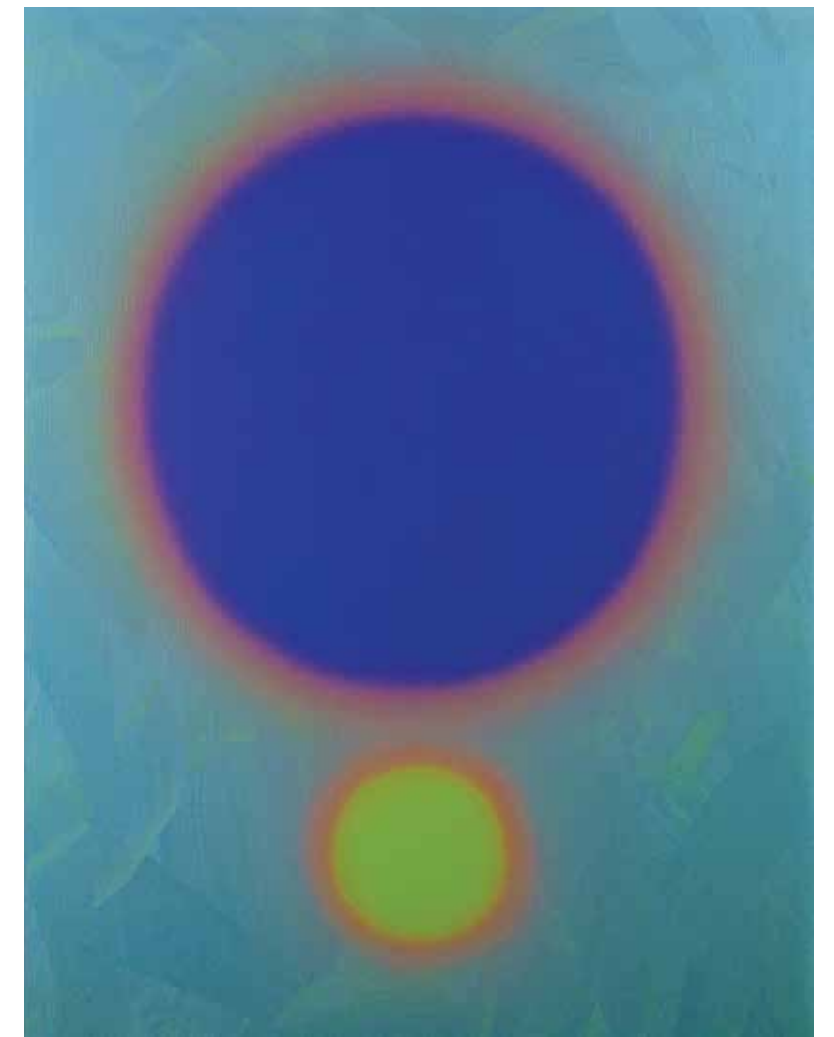
included him in a four-person show he co-curated with Dorothy Lichtenstein for the uptown Bianchini Gallery. The prescient Richard Bellamy was impressed by Christensen’s work; later that year Bellamy’s partner, Noah Goldowsky, gave the painter his first solo show. His next was at the Andre Emmerich Gallery, then a stronghold of the color field painters that the critic Clement Greenberg was describing as the legitimate heirs of Jackson Pollock and thus the era’s only historically significant practitioners of the pictorial art.

According to the doctrines of Greenbergian formalism, painting progresses through self-criticism, reducing itself to its “purely optical” essence. In every era, a few painters take crucial steps toward the revelation of that purity. Sometimes Greenberg and his



acolytes seemed to say that the goal had already been reached; the truth of painting there to be seen, in the work of this or that color fielder. On other occasions, they said that the truth was about to be revealed—just another step or two and it would be visible. This was art criticism as prophecy, and it focused its hopes on just a few anointed figures. In 1990 Greenberg said, “Dan Christensen is one of the painters on whom the course of American art depends.”

It’s odd, the idea that there is only one true path to painting’s future; moreover, that the medium will go astray unless the right painter makes the right formal move at just the right moment. Christensen didn’t buy any of it. Several years after his death, in 2007, his widow, Elaine Grove told the historian Lisa N. Peters, “Dan liked



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pictorial energies.

Indifferent not only to theory but also to the market's demand for signature styles, Christensen often borrowed images from other painters. The title of *Blues for Kenny*, 1997, evokes a track on a jazz album. More to the art-world point, it also refers to Kenneth Noland's circle paintings of the 1958–61—the so-called “Targets,” which *Blues for Kenny* refashions in shades of blue and faint pink. In defiance of color field doctrine, Christensen applied these colors with

Clem very much and had enormous respect for his eye, but he did not consider himself a strict Greenbergian formalist.” For all his virtuosic use of the bright, airy colors Greenberg tended to admire, Christensen was not in any degree a formalist. A look at his entire career makes it impossible to assimilate him to the color field orthodoxy. Working in a region prior to language, he ensured that no label is adequate to his oeuvre, nor can any theory encompass it. His paintings demand only that we look at them attentively enough to feel their thoroughly

an Abstract Expressionist bravura that Noland had tried to render obsolete with the stained-in colors of those early canvases. Christensen seems not to have believed in obsolescence. All pictorial possibilities remained alive for him, even the ones realized by other painters.

Laden with vigorous marks of the squeegee, his monochrome *Slabs* of the early '70s frankly declare a cousinly relationship with Olitski's paintings from those years. Next came Christensen's *Scrapes*. The layers of pigment covering these canvases are still



This page, clockwise from top left: *Five or Six P.M.*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 99 inches; *Vanilla Blue*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 67 x 55 1/2 inches; *Mercer Street*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 50 inches. Opposite, from left: *CV-2*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 44 inches; *Untitled 396M4*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 29 x 30 inches.




monochrome, still thick, but subject to sudden swipes of the squeegee that reveal underlying layers of sharply contrasting color. In a survey of the artist's career, Karen Wilkin argues that his use of hot, commercial hues give him a distant kinship with the Pop artists. She suggests further that he commandeered graffiti's improvisatory bravura at least a decade before New York's graffitiists displaced their tags and logos from the streets to the art galleries. This latter remark applies with particular aptness to *Two Steps from the Blues*, a *Calligraphic Scrape* painting from 1985. Here a sizzling variety of marks—some incised in wet paint and others laid on with spray gun or palette knife—lay claim to a maroon surface as imperatively as if Christensen were an outlaw tagger and his canvas were the side of a building in a previously gloomy industrial zone.

In certain *Calligraphic Scrape* paintings, each long, sinuous line finds its way to its own, distinct configuration. In others, Christensen used a pronged instrument—possibly, in certain instances, a rake—to generate parallel streaks of color. The verticality of *Yotone*, 1987, is acknowledged or, better, celebrated by a set of long, slightly shimmery lines that stretch from the top of the canvas nearly to the bottom. And horizontal lines reach from side to side. Ranging in color from off-white to incandescent blue, the resulting crisscrossed pattern is almost as high-keyed as the underlying field of hot yellow-orange. Stretching over most of the surface, this pattern looks like a web of paint dripped by Pollock with its streaks of color disentangled and straightened out. Christensen paid tribute to this precedent by spraying a pair of curvy lines across the space left empty along the lower edge of the canvas.

Having transposed Pollock's allover field into a linear mode with *Yotone*, Christensen transposed it once again, in the *Multiple Spot* paintings of 1992–94. Now the elements of the image are sprayed circles and ovals of color. In *Five or Six pm*, an expansively

horizontal canvas from 1994, some of these shapes are large and Jupiter-like. Others look like satellites of their nearby neighbors. Each boasts its own hue, and none makes an easy match with the field of red against which they all float in serene orbit around one another. Yet it would be wrong to say that the colors of *Five or Six pm* clash. Rather, Christensen proposes new ideas of what it is for colors to match. Combinations that habit tells us are dissonant suddenly seem, in his more audacious paintings, harmonious.

The series called *Rhymers*, 2002–03, and the *Last Loops*, 2004–06, reprise with variations the looping images of the late 1980s, which reprise in their turn the loops of two decades earlier. With circling images, Christensen circled back on himself, not to repeat earlier triumphs but to subject them to the kind of questioning that provides new starting points. He didn't revise his past so much as reimagine its various stages as forever preliminary, an array of beginnings rife with possibilities. Each of his paintings looks fully realized and yet poised on the verge of a transformative future. These works are as rich temporally as they are visually—and it is impossible to say with any precision how they manage this exhilarating complexity.

Christensen's images leave criticism so decisively in the dust of its own generalities that one is tempted to call him a pure painter. But “purity” has implications of detachment and pretension that do not comport well with his offhand elegance and an inventiveness so surprising that it counts on occasion as wit. And, anyway, there isn't much need for pure painters. What we need—and, in Christensen, we got—is a painter who uses the medium's necessarily restricted means to bring us alive to the full, often disorderly range of our feelings, memories, and quasi-cosmological intuitions about space, light and the ultimate interconnectedness of all things. 

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