

Synaesthesia: Art and the Mind
McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton
September 18-December 20, 2008

Presented in collaboration with McMaster's Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behavior, the exhibition *Synaesthesia: Art and the Mind* aims to contextualize artists and their works in terms of this half-understood term referring to the joining of the senses. The paintings and drawings gathered for the show – some by known synaesthetes, others by artists tangentially linked to the phenomenon – are united by visual commonalities outlined in the scientist Heinrich Klüver's assessment of "Form Constants": a specific set of recurring shapes and lines.

While Klüver's documented efforts to pin down synaesthetic symptoms in concrete terms are included in this show, *Synaesthesia* remains an open project, one that invites the viewer to freely associate the myriad curving gestures and affinities for landscape present in the works while highlighting the difficulty of identifying synaesthesia at a time when the scale and nature of the phenomenon remains uncertain.

This search for legitimacy is an acknowledgement that the possible motives for diagnosing artists as synaesthetes are not entirely clear. Questions arise around the status of the synaesthetic painting as opposed to a work that engages in a merely metaphoric use of colour, and whether such distinctions necessarily set synaesthetic work apart from abstraction as a whole. In an essay in the exhibition catalogue, Daphne Maurer proposes that the unique cortical connections observed in synaesthetes are pathways that date from birth but are otherwise pruned during typical human development; if so, artworks' depictions of these interconnected sensory experiences are capable of speaking to early memory in the non-synaesthetic viewer.

Maurer, along with the art historian Greta Bermen and the artist Carol Steen, have, in surveying synaesthesia, laid out a largely historical canon that includes van Gogh and Kandinsky; the work of the latter, in particular, seems to follow Klüver's form constants virtually point by point. Tom Thomson's *Clouds* ("*The Zeppelins*") is an especially striking inclusion; in this painting the sky is broken into physically threatening, almost architectural fragments of air. This transformation of open space into a site of cacophony is also discernible in the American painter Charles

Burchfield's sketches and vibrant watercolours; both attest to his unique receptivity to nature and ability to generate startling visual spectacles from his observations.

Contemporary synaesthetic practices are represented in the show too, in the work of the painter Carol Steen (also a co-curator of the show) and Marcia Smilack, whose abstract photographs read as scientific documents of an experience that lies beyond reason; they are layered with frenetic bursts of light and are uncannily alive with sound. *Synaesthesia* represents a remarkable joining of lively visions and much spirited noise, undercut by an analyst's need for the hard edge of meaning.

Stephanie Vegh
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