

GARAGE

## Pat Steir Is Reinventing the Color Wheel

by Nadja Sayej  
October 20, 2019



*Her new body of work will be shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC later this month.*

All of my work is a search and an experiment," Pat Steir once said. Born in 1940 and exhibiting since the 1960s, the artist has been honing her open-form approach for six decades. As part of the downtown New York art scene of the 1970s, Steir fell in with conceptual artists like Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner while working on her own monochromes and room-scale installations. She was involved with feminist organizing during that time, co-founding the influential journal and collective *Heresies*. Steir has also taught extensively and counts David Salle and Amy Sillman among her students from her time as a professor at California Institute of the Arts and the School of Visual Arts, respectively.

Steir received another round of acclaim for her *Waterfall* paintings, which she began in the 1980s and which are influenced by Chinese painting techniques and Buddhist and Taoist philosophies. A *Waterfall* from 1992 recently sold for \$2.2 million at auction, rare for a secondary market that

at its upper reaches favors male artists. Steir has been said to remove herself from the painting process, ceding control to gravity's pull on the paint—a process reminiscent of her late friend John Cage's idea of allowing chance to play a role in artmaking.

Now she's taking her turn at the wheel—the color wheel, that is, which she'll create her own version of in a 28-painting series to be unveiled October 24 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, DC. Shown in the museum's circular inner galleries, the works take viewers on a trip through a spectrum of Steir's own making, one monochromatic painting at a time. Each painting is covered in a single color, but its opposite contrasting hue is painted with one brushstroke near the top of the painting—yellow with a purple stroke, for example. As the artist gears up for the debut of her color-wheel series, she spoke to GARAGE in her Chelsea studio on a rainy New York day about color wheels, intuition, and what it means to be a great artist.

### **What is a color wheel to you?**

There are hundreds of color wheels. This wonderful book

*Farb-systeme: 1611-2007* was my inspiration for this project: Each artist invents their own color wheel. It's not "a" color wheel. This is a book of artists who made color wheels.

**What makes your color wheel yours?**

It's my color inventions and interpretations. The canvas is the color and the mark on the canvas is the complementary color. In some cases, I make a mistake as to what the complementary color is. That's interpreted in a standard way by contemporary designers. It's also interpreted in a personal way by artists who make color wheels.

**Where did you begin with this color-wheel piece?**

When the Hirshhorn first invited me to do something, I thought, "I don't want to make *Waterfall* paintings." It's a circular space, the viewing space is round, and it's huge. There will be 28 paintings, and you can see the color progression. It goes from red to purple. It's...a wheel.

**Would you say serendipity and intuition have played a role in this work?**

Intuition plays a role in everything. If I go out the door, I intuitively turn right. Nobody can do everything by plan.

**How do you know if your intuition is leading to a mistake?**

Later, you know. But you don't know then. It's not so much intuition that guides me. I don't understand what intuition is. I set out with a plan of what I'm going to do, and I don't expect the work to follow that plan. The plan is not rigid.

**Is it a path that you're willing to deviate from? Is it freedom?**

It's not a path and it's not a sense of freedom. It's doing. When you're doing, things happen. Then you just do what happens.

**You were close with Agnes Martin. What was the greatest thing you learned from her?**

Doing.

**What about Sol LeWitt?**

Doing. In other words, no self-doubt. Do it.

**Do you still feel like it's important to get your ego out of the way of painting?**

Yes. In other words, don't say, "This is going to be a success," or, "This is going to be a failure." Just do it. Don't worry about that while you do it. The audience will figure that out.

**You've said in the past that you always wanted to be a great artist, but not necessarily a famous artist. What's the difference?**

"Great" meaning making something of value and sensibility, of deeper value, of spiritual value.

**How do you know if you connect to the soul of people?**

You don't. You could be married for 50 years and not know if you're connected to someone.

**Have you been married?**

Yes, but I'm not really talking about marriage; what I'm saying is about connecting. You may think that you're connected to another person and you aren't. You think you have connected, and they think you have, but something deep has been left out. It's the same when you put your heart and soul in a painting: You think people will connect to it, but maybe they don't. There's always that space of misconception or misunderstanding. Not going far enough in your reaching out.

**How do you know if you've gone far enough in reaching out?**

You don't know anything. You're alive and you die, that's what you know.

**What was it like being an abstract painter in the 1960s, when male painters were taken more seriously than women?**

At this point in art history, people are open to seeing an older woman as an artist. Some younger women and people of color are being included. Whether that inclusiveness is lasting, we'll see. At least you'll see.

**Your dad wanted you to be a poet, right?**

Well, if I was going to be any kind of artist, he thought being a poet would be best. Then I could be the interviewer and you could be the artist. Since he thought that being [a painter] was difficult enough for any man, he thought it would be impossible for a woman to survive as an artist. Not to be [a painter], but to survive as [a painter].

**Have you ever published your poetry?**

I've published it a little bit, a long time ago. I still write poetry.

**Do you still feel like your paintings are a feminist statement?**

I never felt my paintings were a feminist statement; I felt that my career is a feminist statement. That I do the work, that I survived this long doing painting, is my feminist statement. Survival is my statement.

**How does it feel to be a great artist?**

I don't think of it that way. I work really hard every day.

PAT STEIR



Pat Steir photographed in her studio in Chelsea, New York.

