

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Pat Steir: Color Wheel

by Susan Harris
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Installation view: *Pat Steir: Color Wheel*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2019-20.
Photo: Lee Stalworth. Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Gorvy.

Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden

October 24, 2019 - September 7, 2020

Viewers are both witnesses and participants in the newest incarnation of Pat Steir's artistic project, a distillation of her distinctive 50-year journey as a painter. *Pat Steir: Color Wheel* is an installation of 30 towering canvases that line the circular perimeter wall of the inner second floor gallery at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden. Spanning nearly 400 linear feet, this body of work took ten months to realize and represents Steir's largest painting installation to date. The epic scale of the installation as a whole is juxtaposed with a more pared down and reductive painted vocabulary than Steir has ever used before. On view through September 7, 2020, the Hirshhorn show follows on the heels of another ambitious presentation that Steir made at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia from January to November of last year. Composed of eleven 7-foot-tall oil paintings spread across two walls of the Annenberg Court, Steir's *Silent Secret*

Waterfalls: The Barnes Series was the first site-specific installation of paintings ever to be commissioned for this space.

Pat Steir loves being a painter. She studied graphic design, printmaking, and painting at Pratt Institute in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Abstract Expressionism prevailed. Her teachers, Richard Lindner, a figurative painter, and Philip Guston, at that time still an Abstract Expressionist, provided opposing points of view that contributed to an artistic vision encompassing both figuration and abstraction. Steir subsequently studied philosophy and literature at Boston University before completing her studies in the fine arts department at Pratt in 1962. Throughout the early '70s, Steir amassed a vocabulary of conceptual and painterly motifs that she used to analyze, break down, and recombine the constituent elements of painting. In particular, the drip – manifested as line, mark, subject, and process – emerged early in her work and has continued to evolve as a central,

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and increasingly condensed, signifier of her practice.

During a trip to Japan in 1982, Steir became drawn to Asian art, calligraphy, and Taoism: a 2,500 year-old philosophy that seeks harmony between nature and humanity. Deeply inspired by Eastern thinking and John Cage's ego-less reliance upon chance operations, Steir appropriated Jackson Pollock's drips and pours as a jumping-off point that allowed her to detach mark-making from personal and subjective control. In 1987, she began her ongoing "Waterfall" series on canvases even larger than those used by Pollock and other famous male abstract expressionists. In these signature works, Steir taught herself to harness the properties of gravity and the liquidity of paint, whereby drips from a single thrown, poured, or brushed passage became synonymous with the images themselves. Steir explains: "What interested me about the waterfalls was that with a single brushstroke, with the economy of an entirely abstract gesture (which is the icon of American abstract painting), I can make a picture – and achieve the opposite of American abstraction. The painting paints itself, as it were, from the gravity of the flowing paint".

the nuanced grounds of Steir's 28 canvases progress from red to purple (with a black and white painting on each end), and each is juxtaposed with a single bold stroke in its complementary hue. As is typical of Steir's work, excess paint trickles down the canvas in variously expressive cadences. This boldly colored, solitary stroke is uniform throughout the series, an abridged, stripped down version of the sumptuousness found in the "Waterfall paintings", whose surfaces contain multiple, often overlapping, gestures.

As visitors walk around the Hirshhorn's circular gallery, they become part of a dynamic exchange of color and energy. Moving through the installation activates space and color in an exhilarating experience that, like Steir's practice more generally, is simultaneously visual, sensory, conceptual, and performative.



Installation view: Pat Steir: Color Wheel, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2019-20. Photo: Lee Stalworth. Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Gorvy.

Taking her cue from the Hirshhorn's distinctive circular architecture, for her most recent series Steir adopted the color wheel as her subject. An artist's tool that traditionally functions as a scientific illustration of how different colors and hues relate to each other, the color wheel has a long history that starts with Isaac Newton and Goethe. Well-versed in these scientific and artistic antecedents, Steir set out to make her own immersive, larger-than-life version of a color wheel for the Hirshhorn – actually two overlapping and opposed color wheels–based on her personal explorations and perceptions of color. Each painting features a seemingly monochromatic ground that is typically made up of five to eleven layers of color. Advancing through the installation,