

# Reaching for the Sky: 4 Artists Working with COLOR!

An exhibition presented by the HUTSON GALLERY, 432 Commercial Street Provincetown, MA

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Curated and with an essay by Philip Gerstein

**ELEANOR STEINADLER**, *photography*; **LUANNE E WITKOWSKI**, *photography, painting*;  
**PHILIP GERSTEIN**, *painting*; **ROSE OLSON**, *painting*.

Kandinsky: “*Color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key.*” –  
“Concerning the Spiritual in Art”, Munich, 1911

**Beauty in art comes in so many forms; art of color is a special case of it.**

After all, it was the considerations of color theorists and practitioners of the late 19c. that ultimately divorced color from form – dissolving form for the sake of capturing color -- and leading directly to the emergence of abstract painting. Consider the apocryphal moment, described so vividly by **Kandinsky**. It is about 1909; revolution in the arts is in the air – France, Italy, Russia... . Kandinsky opens the door to his studio near Munich – and sees an unfamiliar painting by the wall... the colors sing, it is an unknown thing of beauty... and it turns out to be one of his paintings turned on its side – transforming it magically into the abstracted realm! With this very personal revelation begins his conscious, daring and unprecedented journey into the realm of the non-objective (*gegenstandslöse*). Kandinsky’s pivotal paintings and accompanying theoretical writings then tie this abstracted – liberated! -- color to emotion and symbol, and pave the way to the modern art of spiritual transcendence, while setting the stage for many of the ‘isms of 20c.

Yet as we follow this development across the ocean →

This excitingly new and complex coloristic challenge from the brushes of Kandinsky and Mondrian, of Matisse and Bonnard, confronted the younger American artists with an example they were mostly unprepared to follow. (They may have been heeding the advice of that iconic master colorist, Matisse, who cautioned in his “Notes of a Painter”, 1908, that using color in particular calls for a certain maturity: “*It is only after years of preparation that the young [artist] should touch color — not color used descriptively, that is, but as a means of personal expression*”.) But it was not only their inexperience in this demanding new idiom that steered the young Americans on a different route. While Albers transmitted his teaching experiments in color, initially to a few, many more paid rapt attention to Picasso’s liberating lessons in form and volume and to Surrealists’ dissolution of cause-and-effect storytelling into paradox.

Indeed, color is somewhat unreliable when called upon to hold a narrative or describe a volume. It is too dependent on the trickery of ambient light, on the eye of the viewer, on every surrounding color, on everything that surrounds the work of art itself. (Colors can even permanently change or fade under direct daylight, e.g.: “fugitive colors”). Consider for instance the highly variable results of different quality color reproductions of the works of art. (We may here recall Albert Barnes’ vehement insistence on reproducing his famous collection in b/w only, lest anyone mistakes for reality these misplaced attempts at conveying true colors!)

Color is the most evanescent physical quality in art. However, when it is used with skill and sensitivity, and as Matisse notes in the quote above, not descriptively but “as a means of personal expression”, color can be supremely effective -- emotional and direct, sensual and transcendent, subliminal and transformative. These effects of color hold for both figurative and purely abstract strands of pictorial art, cutting right across that familiar archetypal 20c. divide. But whether disembodied or not -- in Rothko or Milton Avery, Ad Reinhardt or Dan Flavin, in Joan Mitchell’s or Lucas Samaras’ pastels -- color as primary vehicle of expression remains a vital, but still an underrepresented choice in American art.

Why is color ordinarily not the chosen primary means of expression? As time passes, it becomes increasingly clear that there are traditional (cultural), experiential and even deeper physiological reasons.

For one, our learned preoccupation with storytelling, narrative, illustrational function of art, calls to be expressed primarily with tonal art – the more reliable art based on forms, on light & dark perception of shapes and boundaries, in the service of dependable description.

Historically, it wasn’t until the 1950’s that the lessons of Bauhaus teachers on color truly took hold, employed actively in Abstract Expressionism, and then captivating the general public with irresistible experiments of Op Art in the later 1960’s. Still, those who followed the siren call of the coloristic tradition were frequently written out of the mainstream of art history & criticism, or presented as secondary figures who added less to the onward march of modernist innovation. Here much of the responsibility lies with the leading art critics. One only needs to recall the infamous treatment by Clement Greenberg of the colored sculptures of David Smith, whose estate he oversaw after the artist’s death. (He had the artist’s colors removed, and changed to dull monochrome.) Thus, while the color tradition in America is important and well-developed, it remains less understood – and practiced.

Physiologically speaking, color versus light & dark (shape, boundary) are received in the eye by two different structures -- cones and rods -- and perceived and processed by the brain from two separate neural pathways. In fact, it has been shown experimentally that **color is a quality constructed by the visual brain** and not a property of objects as such. In dim or too bright light, the eye/brain concentrates on the perception of boundaries (i.e.: light–dark/shape) at the expense of color.

And yet, our brain reconstructs and uses colors extensively, to orient itself in space and time...  
...Which is how the artists discovered color perspective.

**Color perspective** is an enhanced interaction between colors, which in addition to the overlap and the light-&-dark of tonal painting, can employ the contrasts of warm/cool, and those of saturation, hue, intensity, transparency, opacity, and complementarity (i.e.: contrasting positions on the color wheel, such as blue against orange).

For example in painting, we are talking of something different from simply outlining and then vividly coloring forms and shapes -- cf. later paintings of David Hockney. (This is now a task that is so easy to do on a computer, where the software usually calls for defining boundaries and shapes, then assigning colors/values to them.) Many beginning artists try to use strong colors without being aware of how to utilize color perspective -- they use colors tonally; one can usually reduce such artworks to black & white images without losing much of the definition of forms and shapes. Color in such works may serve a smaller descriptive, even decorative purpose -- an external, rather than fully integral to the image role.

Of course, using color in a more limited way need not preclude anyone from creating a beautiful artwork; color perspective is yet another set of tools that extends an artist's range and a viewer's field of appreciation.

Occasionally, one finds an artist who masterfully integrates color with form in an inextricable visual amalgam -- de Kooning in his landscape-based abstract paintings of the 1960's through early 80's comes prominently to mind.

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Lastly, it is particularly exciting for us to bring a color-themed exhibition to a fertile artistic ground of Provincetown. Its color imbued tradition runs deeply -- from American Impressionists to the teaching and giant presence of Hans Hofmann to the latest canvases of Paul Resika. It is said that Charles Hawthorne, who taught in Provincetown from 1899 onwards and founded Cape Cod School of Art, would teach his students "to differentiate between color and tone!" -- all part of educating them how to see. It was also he who memorably said: "Color in nature is never pretty, it's beautiful."

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You may want to consider these many uses of color, while viewing the current 4-person exhibition presented by the Hutson Gallery. What most connects these 4 mid-career artists, currently working in Boston MA, is not simply the use and love of color, but its skillful, exciting and purposeful use. Even more to the point -- in these works of art, **color is not simply important, but integral to structure (and ultimately meaning)!**

From this pivotal originating point, their paintings and photographs engage one another in a conversation over a wide range of color expression -- from **Eleanor Steinadler's** stillness and penetrating light, animated from the inside by transcendent color; to **Philip Gerstein's** irresistible impression of movement, suspended between art and nature and colored by emotions; to **Luanne E Witkowski's** use of startling and revelatory color contrasts, while skillfully fusing the tonal scale to

direct observation; to **Rose Olson**'s move into distilled, pure, saturated color effects and perspectival devices in the service of highly intuitive color-field painting.

Evident in their **statements**, is the full range of possibilities that was launched into the consciousness of the 20c. by the early color pioneers.

**Luanne E Witkowski:** "My interests and focus in my work revolves around light, reflection, and place. Color is the expression of all these things as light reflects through atmosphere, is absorbed by the place and expresses its color to us to receive and absorb. I believe it is the colors we absorb and then outwardly reflect through our being that help to define who we are and our place in the universe."

**Rose Olson:** "I have always been interested in the color of almost anything. Even iridescent nail polish on the hands and feet of women riding the subway fascinates me. But I am especially excited by color created with changing light. I try to emulate hues in the moving sky, the sea and in neon lights. The colors of nature, the colors of culture and many works of art inform my paintings."

**Eleanor Steinadler:** "Color is modulated and altered by light. Color is for me an interactive experience, each in interface with another. It becomes the structure within which the play of light is caught. ... I find myself looking for that moment – the inner light reaches out to me; it transforms what I'm looking at, so that the inner light is experienced; it colors my photographs."

**Philip Gerstein:** "I look for inspiration in both art and nature. These paintings arise from my perception and use of color as a vital, intense, electric, animating force. They would not exist but for the excitement of color relationships. As they are largely abstract and provide enough of an impression of movement, you may be tempted to consider them in musical terms -- color, movement, interval, balance, direction, duration. You need not resist this temptation...".

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**Witkowski**'s photographs in this show record some of her installation work outdoors, on the Cape and in Maine. It is startling to discover that what we actually see here are the silvery sheets of mylar reflecting everything around them, as they transform themselves into the rocks, the air, the very presence of sky on earth. The sharp blue color sings like a high note! This melding of sky and soil -- each distinct but inextricably interpenetrating — becomes the basis of the artist's meditative communion with nature in her subsequent paintings (which actually use native clays and soils as some of the material on the surface of canvas or paper). Thus the paintings utilize these ecstatic outdoor experiences, these "essays of transformation" as studies. The textured velvety paintings use roughly parallel horizontal stripes and layers to ground us in an extended, quieter contemplation – a different, deeply considered and light-suffused reflection upon the inner and the outer reality.

**Steinadler** in her photographic work had come from the other direction. Out of her accomplished background as an abstract painter, she (di)stilled the swirling brushstrokes of color and movement into her "direct" photography, retaining an unerring sense of found composition and a preoccupation with transformative color, color activated from within. A photograph captures but a moment, but Steinadler's photographs give us a clear harmonious feeling of contemplative space, of touching space-

time together with the artist -- of being present at a very special time on earth. The ecstatic colors transport us into the deeper space. The artist looks for and finds a special light – such as the unique Winter light on Cape Cod, reflecting into the atmosphere from the ocean -- but ultimately gives us a glimpse of the light that shines from within, refracting into the multicolored world that surrounds us, revealing it to us anew.

The two *painters* in this show employ very different means to engage the viewers' emotions.

**Olson**'s luminous colors play and frolic within the seemingly shallow illusionistic space between the warm wooden panels and the reflected horizontal bands and coats of color she applies over them. But shine a light onto her panels -- and these exquisitely distilled colors shimmer and radiate outward; and the viewer is enveloped in emotions coordinated like a color symphony. What distinguishes the different series of her work is then the size of the orchestra and the composition of different instruments. The play of depth and flatness, forever changing with the changing light, is made even more palpable by the artist's use of birch veneer panels, which reveal themselves from underneath the deliberately translucent colors, adding their unique texture and occasional imperfections of the wood grain. Olson chooses to weave these beautiful "flaws" into the overall design, always overcoming the siren call of the merely decorative to offer each of us a profound and long-lasting sensory and emotional experience.

While Olson's designs depend on the light reflected upon the translucent flatness of liquid and metallic acrylic colors, **Gerstein** interposes texture and/or impression of texture to slow down the viewer's gaze in the layers of matte paint. For this exhibition he chose a selection of works on paper in oil stick and mixed drawing media, each composed on a distinct color palette all of its own. The eye takes a measurable pause to switch from one to the next – discovering ever more complex and intuitive color interactions that manifest as emotions, the longer one spends with each painting. Like a complex and finely balanced musical composition, these paintings have each been constructed over the space of several years. Surprisingly, they can retain the freshness and immediacy of feeling of a largely unpremeditated creation. Such elements of spontaneity and of a clear artistic design create a colorful contradiction, the resolution of which moves each work to its non-trivial conclusion – the very dialogue that transposes in the eye of the viewer the external elements of composition into the deeper subtext of inner movement. With this lively mixture of artificial and natural elements, the viewer may not be surprised that the artist counts Kandinsky and ancient art of the Far East among his direct antecedents.

The extended use of the color palette and color perspective in each of these artists' works, has another benefit of slowing subjective time and expanding one's contemplative experience. This richly rewarding incorporation of **the element of time** is common to all of the 4 artists in the show, and demonstrates the possibilities of using color as an inextricable poetic integral central element of creating a profound work of art.