



## Conceptualism in Abstract Art

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### ABSTRACT

Before modernity arts and crafts produced by cultures were rooted in the common societal values and traditions of practice. Modernity as a corollary of political, cultural, and scientific revolutions caused radical changes in the constitution of cultures. At the beginning of the twentieth century arts experienced radical changes in their themes and communication techniques. Scientific advances that influenced all the world intellectuals while on the one hand, elevated arts to a universal level and enriched their themes with concepts such as movement, dynamism and simplicity, on the other hand rendered artistic interpretation, criticism and education questionable. In the 1960s the moving of the epicentre of artistic prominence from the mid-Europe to the USA supported first the Minimalism and later the social Expressionism via the artistic visionaries. Abstract art that at the same time opens itself to the criticism of the ordinary man but lacks the true interpretation of the basic meaning is deplete with serious innate problems of reading and methods of teaching apposite for the age.

This study encouraged by the practice-based research that is promoted in the western world during the last couple of decades dwelt upon the readability of some concepts from the samples of abstract art. Upholding an assumption that artistic concepts are related to learning and remembering and might stem from the tacit knowledge, eight national abstract art pieces were selected and re-read via the concept of space/time. In the study that adopts persuasion method, the cases were read with semantic significance. It was concluded that although the cases seemed abstract artistic endeavours they hid a latent meaning. Thus the research proposes that the teaching of painting via concepts prove possible and pose a reliable pedagogical tool.

**Keywords:** Space-time, Art Theories, Painting Interpretation, Subliminal message, Contemporary Turkish Paintings

### INTRODUCTION

This study aims to discover new ways of addressing criticism and teaching abstract art. It proposes conceptual expressionism in reading abstract art and tries to corroborate this hypothesis over examples of re-reading. The underlying conviction is that if abstract art is to have aesthetic validity, it cannot be arbitrary or accidental but must stem from the reservoir of accumulated experiences and subconscious that are cognized by the individual artist as concepts. To verify and justify this basic assumption, eight paintings from different Turkish Modern painters are chosen as case studies, and they are re-read independently of other critics' views with a specific concept, namely, space/time. The general outcome of the re-readings is that in these original constructs space frees itself from the canvas, intrigued by nuances of time and existing in processes; it frees itself from its plastic meaning and turns into the theme of art as space/time. Light and movement reflected through elements of painting such as colour qualities; combinations; complexity of movement represented with intersecting, communicating, combining,



decentralizing lines imbued with different meanings; and moving and hovering shadows all serve to express a major traumatic change in the conception of space.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ART CRITICISM**

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Alois Riegl (1858-1905) ascribed a nation's art history to its conditions and cultural values (1901). According to Riegl *Kunstwollen* is a Gestalt of continuous dialogue between thought and social-technical transformations. Riegl's argument can be translated as styles, perceptual ideals, or different ways of organization stemming from subject-object relationships (Iversen, 1993). Wilhelm Worringer (1907), who recognizes art as an artist's motive for abstraction and desire for creation, sides with Riegl. They both believe that form is a desire that emerges from the soul of the individual artist, which is attached to a culture. Rank (1932), who classifies involvement with arts in categories such as *primitive abstraction*, *classical insight* and *modern expression*, is in alignment with them. The only classical opponent of Riegl is Heinrich Wölfflin (1932), who grounds artistic creations solely on the abstract qualities of art. This historical controversy is still reflected in the competing hypotheses of art history as a discipline today (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1985).

After the Second World War the artistic epicenter was relocated from Paris to New York which caused American critics to come to the fore and act as the prophets of coming generation of artists. Greenberg (1965) criticized the existing situation of creation; 'all verities involving religion, authority, tradition and style are thrown into question. The artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to symbols and references with which he works. In most art schools, this situation usually resolves itself in motionless academism. The history of old styles is rendered to students, and creative activity dwindles in small details of form; all larger questions are being decided by the precedents of past masters' and acclaimed Formalism as an outlet. The formalist theory of Greenberg that founded the basis of institutional criticism and art today played a tremendous role in the maturation of American art (Fenstermaker, 2017).

Greenberg's theory was derived from his studies of the past. For him, since the renaissance the space of the painting moved toward flatness. His proffering was immensely influential; the ARTforum grew into a locus for formalist discourse and MOMA turned into a medium of formalist art (ibid.).

Following the influential essay of Rosenberg on abstract expressionism, Greenberg's formalist theory began to dismantle giving way to variations on the abstract themes. Harold Rosenberg, the first American Existentialist, influenced by Marxist theory, conceived painting as an arena in which the artist portrays an expressive record of a struggle, a clash between the classes, a riot, a social unrest, and so on. Abstract art seemed safe retreat at a time of severe political debates and upheavals because it lacked legible narrative content, figuration and even identity. Furthermore, Rosenberg's signification was suitable because the style is rooted in German, Russian and Jewish expressionism that are basically nurtured by French Expressionism.

Over time the abstract expressionism enlarged its borders to admit Minimalism, which is best exemplified by Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Frank Stella. Minimalism is derived from Russian Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevitch, and somewhat from the minimalism of Piet Mondrian and ready-mades of Duchamp. Rose (1965) in her first landmark essay on Minimalist art encompassed sculpture but criticized the trend being reductionist: "One might as easily construe the new, reserved impersonality and self-effacing anonymity as a reaction against the self-indulgence of an unbridled subjectivity, just as one might see it in terms of a formal reaction to the excesses of painterliness." Minimalism was sometimes even criticized as "the rhetoric of power" convincingly (Chave, 1990). Powerful critics of other authors on racism (West, 1989), gender differences (Nochlin, 1971) and nationalist discrimination between the artists (John Yau, 1990). Philip Leider, editor in charge of ARTFORUM who failed to consider feminist movement left his position arguing that the journal had lost its



power on late modernism. His final essay is a disillusion with formalism, stating that to discuss the art of painting on a level far removed from the reality was inadequacy. Abstract art dissolved into a multiplicity of expressions. Now we are in an era of Pluralism (Arthur Danto, 1998).

Within the art history discipline abstract art is the most controversial. Although those who do not appreciate it are usually people who have no education in arts, critiques also dispute over the meaning and value of it. It is because abstract art is not a perfect depiction of an object or an event. For some it is a very creative and intellectual art which leaves the burden of interpretation to the viewer. For some it was a series of strokes of luck reflecting primarily the annihilation of self. However, in reality abstract art, although it may lack a well-defined subject, in serious artistic work, it displays a coherent unity and artistic vision. Abstract art focuses on colour, the intermingling of disparate elements, textures, movement, lines and shapes among many other aspects in order to make a truly beautiful piece of abstract art. This is why it is revisited by powerful artists still. Within contemporary pluralism in addition to Greenberg's Formalism and Rosenberg's Expressionism one can speak of Conceptualism.

### **CONCEPTUALISM**

During Postmodern periods in architecture that emerged upon severe criticism towards Modern architecture, 'concepts' which became an inseparable means of design have also turned into pedagogical design tools (Gür, 2000). Despite the fact that capable architects choose their concepts contingent with issue and place relations, in the design studios hollowed concepts are employed with the argument that they alert the cognitive capabilities of students and are exercised as a meaningless approach to design. The single success of the results achieved is the emulation of typological approach to design. However, this approach leaves the new problems such as the logical and constructional it causes unresolved.

On the other hand, there is no virtual space in art work. There is only the walls and showcases for display of art. Space of painting is confined to the canvas. Therefore, it is almost impossible to raise any question concerning the appropriateness of the choice of concept. Inversely viewed, to read a concept into a painting has limitless possibilities. And any concepts read into a painting might readily turn into a pedagogical tool. In this research relativity theory will be employed as a tool in the re-reading of abstract art exactly for this reason and its pedagogical possibility will be tested thereby. Relativity theory and its impact on art is a universal phenomenon over a hundred years. It is an approach that universalized artists by freeing them from their native cultures. It also melts the polarized art views within each other.

### **THE CONCEPT: RELATIVITY THEORY**

The re-reading tool of the study is the *relativity theory and its impact on arts for over a century*. This novel proposition makes it possible to free artists from the culture into which they are born and to investigate an art object in terms of its innate formal properties, thereby tying the bipolar philosophies of art reciprocally.

Relativity theory, which was first introduced by Max Planck in 1906, was later developed by Albert Einstein between 1906 and 1917. The theory expounds on space/time, which means the co-temporality of space and time concepts, kinematics, gravity expansion and contraction. In *The Turning Point* (1982), Fritjof Capra extrapolates how Einstein's relativity theory caused radical changes in our understanding of space and time, subject and object, and cause and effect. Cartesian theory had conceived of the universe as a machine, an indivisible whole composed of interconnected parts that worked perfectly. The new conceptualization of the universe brought about a new definition of possibility. In classic physics, possibility was a mechanism of forecasting and prediction, but in quantum physics, it meant dealing with non-local indeterminacies. In other words, any phenomenon that seems unrelated to any other phenomenon in daily life may actually be



related to the whole universe. Consequently, since the beginning of the 20th century humanity has experienced a dramatic change of opinion concerning the universe, religion, culture, society, sciences and arts.

### **THE MEMORY**

The assumption of this study inevitably involves memory, subconscious, and perhaps some subliminal fears due to the unprecedented revolution that has taken place in quantum physics, where time is no longer linear but chaotic. The liberation of countries, political revolutions, freedom of individuals, and the race towards technological discovery all came together in enormous possibilities for humanity. However, the awareness of the notion that we are actually suspending in a chaotic void and that culturally defined linear time is unreal and illusionary resulted in delirium and inhabited our subconscious. Our fears and phobias are duly portrayed by Edward Munch.

While our strains and anxieties brought forth the mention of social neuroscience and approval of it as a discipline, they carried artistic creativity to another dimension through memories stacked in the subconscious. However, again, the subliminal is the thing through which numerous channels release information and that procures, protects, is put to use when necessary and help us survive. Paintings may seem to have appeared by the freely moving stroke of a brush, but they actually pass through a long, dark and hidden channel, which the subject might not even realize at all (Ramachandran, 1999). It is comforting to apprehend that incalculable energy spent in producing artistic drawings is spent subliminally, just as the energy spent by us for survival is (Mlodinow, 2015).

At this point, Maurice Halbwachs deserves mentioning. By rejecting Bergson's anti-positivism, by opposing Sigmund Freud's conviction that memories are kept solely in the unconscious, he argued that 'collective memories are not only localized and indexed to a social group... They consist of trauma, social discord, political/religious oppression and resistance' (Halbwachs, 1925). He maintained that the collective memory changes with topography and underlined the importance of the environment, buildings and monuments that witness the social and cultural past. The arts also gain importance in this respect. The arts house the collective memories of the past and their own historical trajectory. They also house the individual memory. İsmet Bırsel admits: 'perceptions would have never sufficed to paint if memory had not played intriguing games' (Ünalın, 2015: 131).

### **COLLECTIVE MEMORY: THE IMPACT OF THE RELATIVITY THEORY IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE ARTS**

This new comprehension of the universe was almost automatically reflected in the arts. Visionaries from different nationalities joined either in journals or other meetings, forming associations to understand the new developments in science and culture in order to aptly respond. This enormous philosophical break naturally caused changes in spatial perception and understanding in architecture and arts (Cooke, 1989).

Russian avant-garde artists known as Constructivists (1920-1930) investigated the new concept not only in the arts and architecture but also in terms of the possibilities it contained for the social system (konstruktsiia). Suprematists, in contrast, worked with abstract four-dimensional space, independent of scale and measurements. As early as 1915 in Petrograd, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878-1935) exhibited in the last Futurist exhibition the painting known as "0'10", which displayed a black square on white ground (Figure 1), and it was meant to say that the new art should break from the past and start totally anew (İpşiroğlu & İpşiroğlu, 2009).

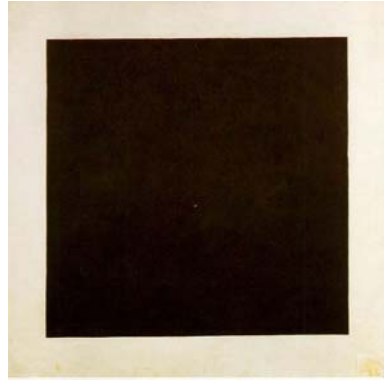


Figure 1. Black Square on White, by Kazimir Severinovich Malevich [URL-1]

From the works of those artists who synthesized Constructivism and Suprematism, such as El Lissitzky (i.e., Figures 2-4), Ivan Leonidov (Figure 5), and Iakov Chernikhov (Figure 6) one can see that they conceive of their designs as physical constructions, time as an entity that negates their existence, and memory as an instance of time's vast category.

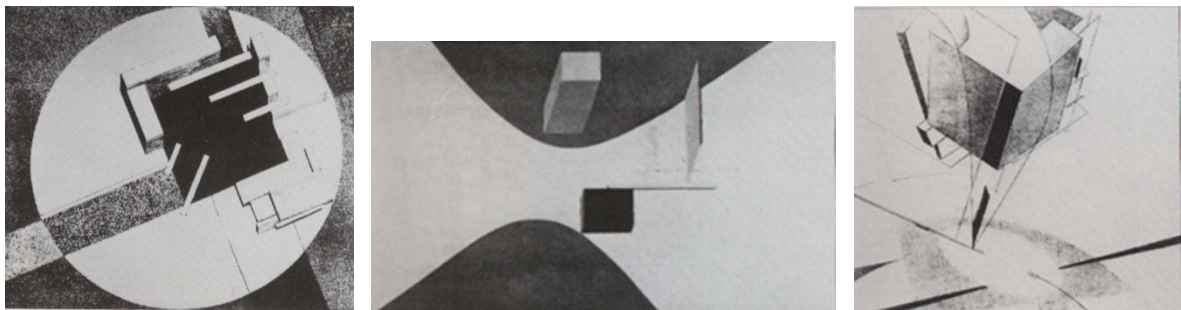


Figure 2-4. Lithographs from El Lissitzky (Papadakis et.al, 1989)

Ivan Leonidov, who resisted the static forms, had drawn the attention to himself with his 1927 Lenin Institute Design (Figure 5). He abandons the long-eschewed static Euclidian volumes to the benefit of space, much to the high esteem of his colleague, Moisei Ginzburg (Cooke, 1989).

Leningrad professor and theoretician Iakov Chernikhov produced a whole new book, a compilation of his works, to advance the formal understandings and principles of the 1st Machine Age, replete with his spatial studies, which he named spatial inventory (Ibid.) (Figure 6). It is clear that the Constructivists had replaced Newtonian time with that of Einstein early in the 20th century.

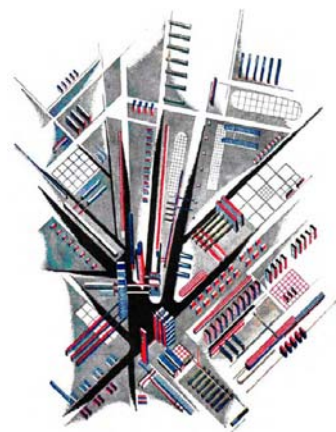
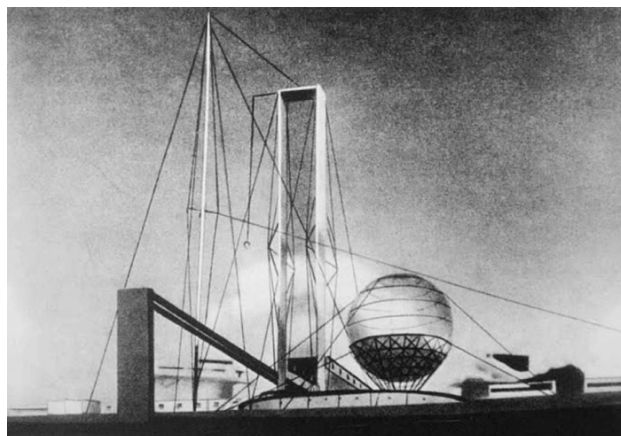


Figure 5. Lenin Institute, Moscow, Ivan Leonidov, 1927 (URL-2)  
Figure 6. From Spatial Inventory, by Iakov Chernikhov (URL-3)



In Western Europe, artists had adopted the necessary tools and intricacies of painting relativity and subjectivism from earlier generations, namely, from the Expressionist endeavours of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), whom Matisse and Picasso call “father of us all”. Expressionism involved conveying feelings and sensations regarding the object.

Dadaism and Surrealism are also styles that reject the past methods and tools of the previous ages, either by desecrating bourgeois styles or by studying unconscious primitive fears. De Stijl is a style that extrapolates the creative chaos. Theo Van Doesburg and his team have disclosed their views of the new art and promulgated their research findings concerning the mathematical explanation of the universe and harmony in nature. Piet Mondrian (1872- 1994), a De Stijl artist, painted mostly rectangular compositions utilizing various letter characters and colours such as red, blue and yellow that would easily harmonize with black (Figure 7).

Cubism, which is a rather substantial criticism of the unfulfilling 19th century art practice, argues that the essence of nature is simple and pure. Cubists are influenced by African art, which expresses nature and natural events in very simplistic art phrases. Nevertheless, their focus on dynamism of space openly reflects their awareness of relativity theory. They dissect the space and then re-integrate it in such a manner that it gives the feeling of passing time and contingently changing space. Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger, Jean Metzinger, Henri Le Fauconnier, Juan Gris, Kupka, Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp are other artists led by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque who meticulously applied the new conception of space/time to the canvas. Paintings point to metamorphism through synchronized actions of the object from different angles (Figure 8). Later, in France, Cubism unfolded into styles such as Orphism, Abstract Art and Purism.



Figure 7. Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow, 1930, Piet Mondrian [URL-4]

Figure 8. Woman in Hat and Fur Collar, Pablo Picasso, 1937 [URL-5]

Concepts of relativity, time, speed, and dynamism investigated in painting at the beginning of the 20th century had a long-lasting effect on world intellectuals, both consciously and unconsciously. The subliminal cord of some painters brings back memories through channels of strain, loss, indeterminacy, uncertainty, and fear of the future, although so many years have passed since the discoveries about the universe. This is what we will investigate.

## **METHOD**

As mentioned briefly above, the basic assumption of this study is that abstract art is neither purely cultural nor altogether individualistic. It develops from a universal memory that is grounded in the advances of science and its impact on societies. Therefore, the assumptions of this study are laid out below:



1. Significant, substantial scientific discoveries are shared by both intellectuals and artists. They gain a foothold in their memory.
2. They precipitate in the subconscious.
3. They surface the conscious as cognitions and images of past impressions as well as feelings such as love/hate and fear via subliminal chords.

The method employed in the study is re-reading, which simply means to read with a different viewpoint, notion, idea or perspective to analyse and evaluate something's original value, principles, discourses, and so on. In the first decades of the 21st century, this is already an approved method in history and theory of many disciplines, especially in architecture. Scholars such as Wigley (1993, 1995), Vidler (1992, 2000, 2011), Colomina (1996, 2007), Dutta (2007), Scott (2010, 2016), Martin (2005) and others can duly be cited among them. The most outstanding re-reading in arts is Farago's *Re-Reading Leonardo: The Treatise on Painting across Europe, 1550–1900*, which offers a well-rounded analysis of the reception of Leonardo's Treatise by tracing trajectories of its development through a variety of cultural, historical, social, technical, critical, nationalistic, and re-appropriated forms. However, these are all very often utilized trajectories in examining artists and their creations.

In the present study, paintings are positioned as practice-based research just as illustrations have been by Black (2014); a case study approach is used. A case study is basically qualitative research that may pose insightful questions about the problem and therefore receive provocative answers (Hamel, Dufour & Fortin, 1993).

### **PAINTING SPACE/TIME**

The first step in case study research is to establish a firm research focus to which the researcher can refer over the course of study of a complex phenomenon or object (Yin, 1984). Careful definition of the questions at the start, which we did above, shows where to look for evidence and helps in determining the methods of analysis to be used in the study. In line with the challenging question, several cases are dwelt upon in the following re-reading. When using multiple cases, each case is treated as a single case. Each case's conclusions can then be used as information contributing to the entire study. A useful step in the selection process is to repeatedly refer back to the purpose of the study to focus attention on where to look for cases and evidence that will satisfy the purpose of the study and answer the research question posed (Soy, 2007).

The researchers determined what evidence to gather in advance and what analytical techniques to use with the data to answer the main research question. Field notes generally record feelings and intuitive hunches, pose questions, and document work in progress. They sometimes record testimonies and stories. In this study, we moved beyond initial impressions to improve the likelihood of accurate and reliable findings.

Eight exemplary case studies were chosen among Turkish painters from different age groups. Re-reading concentrated on sorting the data in terms of elements of painting to expose and create new insights. Researchers categorized and recombined data in the conclusion to address the initial propositions and to facilitate an understanding of complex attitudes of different painters.

The eight cases selected were as follows: 1. Untitled, by Zeki Faik İzer (1905-1988); 2. Blue Composition by Ferruh Başağa (1914-2010); 3. Untitled, by Mübin Orhon (1924-1981); 4. Untitled, by Adnan Çoker (1927- ); 5. Ribbons on Grey, by Burhan Doğançay (1929-2013); 6. Untitled, by Canan Tolon (1953- ); 7. One and Only, by Ardan Özmenoğlu (1979- ), 2014; 8. Kirtland's Song II, by Berkay Buğdanoglu (1986- ).

**Case 1. Untitled, by Zeki Faik İzer (1905-1988); Oil on Canvas, 108x137.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Can Has Collection**



Figure 9. Untitled, by Zeki Faik İzer [Image: Contemporary Istanbul Exhibition, 2016]

At first glance, the painting resembles a complex and spontaneous colour cloud. There are no figures or any external contours. Only the colours that have formed a wash by passing into each other are perceived. The eye feels the ground-figure relation due to the unification of the colour confusion in the middle part of the painting towards the edges; this gives the impression that the picture is bordered by a purple-lilac colour.

Vivid colours in the centre of the image pull the gaze over them spirally towards their centre. The viewer sinks into an enthusiastic dynamism until he comes to the centre of this soft and dense texture. In addition, when he reaches the centre, he suddenly sweeps back to the borders like an explosion. This constant motion is the emotion that the artist conveys to the viewer through the painting. In other words, the painting is perceived not by the image that it creates in mind but by the sensory interaction that follows it.



**Case 2. Blue Composition by Ferruh Başağa (1914-2010); Oil on Canvas, 150x170 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Artam Antik A.S.**



Figure 10. Blue Composition by Ferruh Başağa [Image: URL-6]

For an eye that looks at the painting for the first time, it is noteworthy that the geometric shapes defined by the surface are shattered by linear elements that make various angles with horizontal and vertical and the blue colours in different tones. There is no clearly defined figure-ground relationship. For the viewer, the forms are positioned freely within a certain eternity, as though they were freed from gravity. Following the perception of the whole, the eye feels the rhythm in the painting by navigating vertical and horizontal lines and the distinct planes defined by these lines. During this navigation, the array of dark and light tones creates a sense of depth. The radial descent of bright tones from the top to the bottom of the painting reminds the viewer of the image of ray of lights. Sharp axes cut the canvas, creating a contradiction on the symmetrical, overly balanced and static square surface and make it dynamic, partial and even unstable. The triangular and quadrangular geometric forms superimposed on each other as transparent layers, transform and reproduce each other's colours.

This production creates not only a feeling of movement but also the possibility of displacement of the parts at any time and the inevitability of the formation of new totals depending on time. Therefore, there is an impression that the painting has a temporal interpretation. The past, current, and future locations of the forms vary according to the colour and orientation of the surfaces causing the viewer to pace and pause. The two curvilinear lines at different radii merged from their ends and located at the bottom of the painting, attract attention by visually separating from other geometric shapes. The form, which refers to everyday objects such as a crescent or a sea shell, reminds the viewer of a boat sailing under the moonlight in a wavy sea. The boat swings up and down; it turns out to be a part of the sea that comes out and finally becomes part of it. In other words, the shape and the ground are fused such that they cannot be distinguished from each other. In this way, it is possible to say that all the elements in the space in the painting are integrated with time and that they remain in constant motion without turning into a static volume.

**Case 3. Untitled, by Mübin Orhon (1924-1981), 1970; Gouache on paper, 57x41 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Nev**



Figure 3. Untitled, by Mübin Orhon [Image: Galeri Nev İstanbul, Catalogue, 2014, p.88]

In this monochrome painting, a three-dimensional space description is captured with different shades of colour between green and blue. The viewer first focuses on the light tone in the middle of the painting. This lightness between the darker shades on the edges determines the direction of the space by creating the depth effect. The eye that follows finds itself in this depth. The intensity of the colour reflects on the space and then on the viewer. The space surrounding the viewer is strong, as if it acquires body and mind. It is as if it fills in consciousness through all the senses. However, it seems as though everywhere is blurred as in a dream: half-cloudy, as it is behind a translucent tulle curtain. This is surprising and uncertain for the viewer. The light tone in the middle is mysterious as the eternity comes out. It is not known what is behind it, whether it is accessible, whether it is far or near, past or present. In addition, in the middle of all these unknowns the viewer questions where it is.

**Case 4. Untitled, by Adnan Çoker (1927- ), 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 140x140 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Özlem-Naim Gençoğlu Collection**



Figure 12. Untitled, by Adnan Çoker [Image: Contemporary Istanbul Exhibition, 2016]

The shape formed by the articulation of the square and curvilinear form on the black background is immediately noticeable. At first glance, this unsymmetrical but balanced geometric composition captures the viewer with a monumental force. The colour tones passing in a gradient from white to dark blue in the figure create a sense of depth. This depth resembles a sea and a horizon, imaginatively extending to eternity. The light tone that starts from the upper left of the canvas goes darker towards the lower middle part and eventually becomes blackened, reinforcing the relationship between the surface and the bottom.

After perceiving the whole, the eye moves around the boundaries of the figure and focuses on the details. The border is almost as perfect as it is not drawn by hand. The white contour on the curved surface on the left of the shape gives a third dimension to the two-dimensional figure. In the painting, the contrast between existence and non-existence is clearly felt. The dark, unlit, dark black ground, which is almost deep enough to swallow the eyes, and the bright, eye-catching shapes are far away from each other like day and night. Depending on the figure-ground perception, the space is the area defined either by the shape or the area is defined by the black background. Space and mass create each other; each cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, the emotions that these two components create in the audience also balance each other. The enthusiasm and excitement the colours create is calmed by the black background; in other words, it is bordered and taken under control.

**Case 5. Ribbons on Grey, by Burhan Doğançay (1929-2013), 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 152.00 x 117 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Doğançay Museum**



Figure 13. Ribbons on Grey, by Burhan Doğançay [Image: URL-7]

The resident focus of the painting is the yellow, orange and red coloured strips that have popped out by tearing off the very dark grey canvas. The eye examines these strips for a long time. It examines their curvilinear forms, warm colours and shadows falling on the background. It then pays attention to the light orange bottom surface where the other ends of the strips are located, more precisely where they take their roots.

The viewer perceives two opposite overlapped layers. One is a warm, moving, surprising coloured layer on which the coloured stripes are rooted; the other is a cold, dull and even blank grey layer that covers the former. The contrast between these two planes is astonishing. The observer does not expect such a colourful space under such a strong grey tone. The painting witnesses the rise of the layer at the bottom and changing the

structure of the grey plane. With the movement of the coloured strips to the upper layer, the lifeless plane becomes more dynamic and warm. The eye imagines the tears that are possible to open elsewhere on the canvas and the vivid colours that will come from those tears. It is unknown whether this metamorphosis process will continue until the entire grey floor is gone. Or, on the contrary, it is also possible that the grey plane closes and restores the colours back to the layer below that they belong to. However, the viewer has seen the hidden floor once and nothing will ever be like it was before.

**Case 6. Untitled by Canan Tolon (1953- ), 2016, Oil on canvas, 190x190 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Nev.**



Figure 14. Untitled by Canan Tolon [Image: Contemporary İstanbul Exhibition, 2016, Catalogue, p. 85]

First, the eye follows the red dots that are distinguished on the tangled background. The points contrast with the backgrounds they are placed on with their warm colours and prime geometric shapes. The brush stroke, which makes up the background, creates a flowing continuity, giving the impression of infinity. This continuity is intensely followed in the horizontal direction and creates uncertainty. The red circular forms on it are partial, bounded and predictable. The eye creates an abstract border, jumping from one point to another and divides the painting into imaginary vertical stripes. Thus, the red dots lose focus, and the eye focuses on a new fact.

In the painting, it seems as if multiple textures are superimposed on top of each other. Overlapping of coherent and opposite layers in such a way makes it impossible to focus perceptually on the whole. The viewer, who sees different images at the same time in Cubism, cannot see here everything at the same moment. For this reason, the mind that follows the painting cannot actually hold the whole and re-reads the canvas every time according to the objects it focuses on. Thus, the space created in this painting rises from the relation between existence and non-existence.



**Case 7. One & Only by Ardan Özmenoğlu (1979- ), 2014. Painting and silk screen on paper, 42 x 60 cm, Ed. 20 + 5. Courtesy of the artist and Mixer**



Figure 15. One and Only by Ardan Özmenoğlu [Image: Contemporary İstanbul Exhibition, 2016, Catalogue, p. 248]

At first glance, a form that has begun to separate and curl up on a vertical surface attracts attention. The upper part of the rectangular form is black, and the lower part where it begins to curl is bright and yellow, as if it were lighted. The dark surface, just below the yellow colour, looks like a shadow of the upward curved form that hits on the vertical plane. It is unknown whether this surface, which began to break off from its background by resisting gravity, was completely flat before. Similarly, it is unknown whether it will fall completely and will be invisible. All that is known is that this surface is now becoming independent. In this position, the black form is never integrated with the white floor.

The viewer begins to imagine the form unfolded. In this position, the black form is never integrated with the white floor. The observer wonders whether this non-integration has started the decomposition process. The white background begins to darken from the bottom thanks to the shadows of the figure that now begin to turn into a horizontal surface. In addition, the two planes become as coherent as possible to each other. When they are exactly compatible the rupture process will be completed and they will move completely away from each other. The painting visualizing the movement of the surface from vertical to horizontal does not describe a situation but a process. This process is a metamorphosis and even a self-reproduction of the surfaces through their interrelationships.

**Case 8. Kirtland's Song II by Berkay Buğdanoğlu (1986- ), 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 215 x 118 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Mixer**



Figure 16. Kirtland's Song II, by Berkay Buğdanoğlu [Image: Reclamation, Mixer Art Gallery Catalogue, 2016]

In the painting of the artist depicting a forest fire, the eye wanders in the white and black regions, giving the feeling of moving with the brush stroke. In these two places that seem to flow into each other, black reminds one to be destroyed, and white reminds one to destroy.

Fire is mobile. It goes from one point to another, advances, grows and goes out when it gets everything it can. It is in a loop. The combustion process is the transition from one state to another. During this transition, the entity does not disappear, but continues to exist in a new form. The eye thus seeks the figures within, but the ground is so strong, and it is unclear whether the image is the ground or the shape. In other words, the ground swallows both the shapes and the viewer who looks for these shapes.

The observer feels motion, chaos, and power within the burning action, as if watching a real forest fire. In addition, the space in painting is no longer a tangible reality that can be touched and measured, but a reality that can be seen but never spatially occupied.

### **GENERAL ASSESSMENT**

The effects of relativity theory can be read either directly or at the subliminal level in all works examined in this study. Different phenomena such as rejection of linear time, oscillation in space and the transition of the space from a constant volume to a process are reflected in each painting differently through colour, form, light, shadow or figure-ground relationships.

For instance, the paintings of Zeki Faik İzer and Canan Tolon confirm that even the pieces that give a feeling of scattering and complexity can also define a chaotic harmony. In these paintings, the rhythm and interaction of colours and brush strokes that seem to be unrelated depict a whole that constantly recreates itself instead of a concrete and finished reality. This description is also a sensual expression, and of course, it is relative to each eye. The paintings of Ferruh Başağa, Burhan Doğançay and Ardan Özmenoğlu envisage a movement. Başağa's curves and slant lines, Doğançay's vivid colours and Özmenoğlu's dynamic form turn the frozen image into a formation process. This process reveals the continuity of space/time that has merged into one another. In the monochrome painting of Mübin Orhon, the viewer, who finds himself in an insufficiently defined and mysterious space, actually falls into a chaotic and infinite void and feels the subliminal fear of disappearance. In the paintings of Adnan Çoker and Berkay



Buğdanoğlu, traces of cyclical time can be seen. With the relation of colours passing each other and the variable figure-ground perceptions, the work of Çoker recalls a phenomenon that repeats and transits from one state to another. The cycle of space-time of Buğdanoğlu is more striking. The hope of existence following disappearance emphasizes the temporality of reality.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, the authors make no distinction between the critique at the painting studio and the art criticism in the media because the goals, the content and processes that they contain are very much alike. The former aims at teaching, while the latter, whether done meticulously with due attention to the philosophies and techniques or not, might aim to bring more visitors to the gallery, increase the price of art objects, promote a specific artist, and so on. However, with rare exceptions, they both rely on timeless interpretations of artistic practice that are grounded in the past theories of art.

Today, we are desperately in need of deeper knowledge, innovative tools for both substantial criticism and effective teaching methods. Thus, we need to include different perspectives and viewpoints into the art of painting. The need for freedom to explore the interdisciplinary research areas in the face of stubborn inertia in the discovery of new knowledge for better conceptual structures and the need for more plausible tools for criticism have led several institutes and art schools to accept, profess and even promulgate creative approaches to research to possibly arrive at new apprehensions of art and advance the knowledge thereof (Hawkins & Wilson, 2016).

Inspired and encouraged by practice-based and practice-led research, this study advocates ventures into an unexplored notion in painting and proposes a basic hypothesis that art is neither purely cultural nor altogether individualistic. Rather, it swings between the bipolar theories of culture and man, maintaining a unifying principle as collective memory/collective unconscious. It thus argues whether a decipherable language of abstract art exists and is subconsciously shared as a result of worldwide impact of certain major scientific advances, i.e., relativity theory.

This is a practice-based and practice-led study that was undertaken to expand knowledge in abstract art and suggest new concepts and methods in art criticism and education. Eco (1975) clarifies his reflections on the collaborative relationship between text and its interpreter and proposes the most original attempt to create a fertile dialogue between the theory of codes, which is slowly but surely translated into a theory of interpretation. As opposed to the rules of reconstructive/strategic criticism, this study disregards the artist's particular goals and philosophies at the time of painting, and adopts free re-reading of abstract art by the observer, inspired by Umberto Eco. The statements here are an attempt to reinterpret the reasoning behind formal gestures, structural details, programmatic arrangements and spatial qualities of abstract art. The study employs memory, collective memory and the subliminal with respect to the radical changes caused by relativity theory, which actually gave rise to the abstract art. It proves that the assumptions made here are valid interpretations of the observer. In addition, since the objects of investigation are visible, the process of justification is testable. Indeed, the approach can be repeated by others and the outcomes can be tested for other abstract paintings to arrive at a universal truth.

We do not profess that all abstract paintings can be read in the same manner via the same concept, but the study paves the way towards different methods and tools for art criticism in general, and abstract art in particular, thereby improving art education.

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