

Exhibit shows why Op was on top

Visual impact is all-powerful

GALLERIES

By Margaret Hawkins

Op Art came and went in the 1960s with twice the speed and half the shelf life of bell-bottoms and tie-dyed T-shirts. Hot one day and out the next, Op Art has now resurfaced and, unlike some other resurrected icons of that era, it has aged surprisingly well.

A traveling show at the Chicago Cultural Center offers 37 new abstract works in the Op Art tradition by artists who mostly weren't old enough to tie their shoes the first time it came around. Perhaps it took a younger generation of artists to appreciate what this movement had to offer.

'post-hypnotic'

■ Through June 25
■ Chicago Cultural
Center, 78 E.
Washington
■ (312) 346-3278

Op Art was short-lived precisely because it was so successful. The lessons it taught were instantly absorbed into popular culture. Advertising and fashion recognized the power and appeal of artists' optical experiments and appropriated them for their own commercial agenda. When this happened, artists lost interest.

For a brief time, though, the visual arts rhymed with daily life as it seldom does in our culture. Op Art linked up with popular interest in Eastern religion, altered reality, psychedelia and hallucinogenic experience, all of which seemed to be externally represented by this style of painting. Its success at representing the zeitgeist became its demise.

Artists can finally appreciate this phenomenon that so briefly fit perfectly into cultural history.

One of the great accomplishments of this show is that it is not nostalgic and does not look dated. All the art here is fresh and satisfying, a continuation—not a rehashing—of the fascinating experiments begun by an earlier generation of artists looking for a purely physical approach to painting and visual experience.

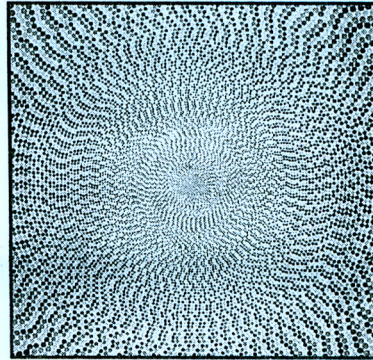
The effect is dizzying, mind-bending, visceral. The work is abstract, purely visual and non-referential. The whole point of these paintings is to create effects that are experienced in the body, passing directly through the eye into the inner ear and the belly.

My personal reaction to this show was to feel dizzy, even slightly seasick, to laugh and to worry that my glasses were not working properly, and I think this was the artists' intention. Completely free of both narrative and philosophy, the work is an homage to the physical power of visual experience over the human body.

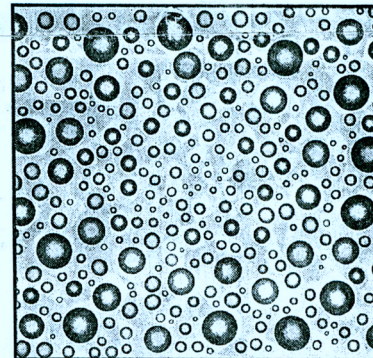
The devices that achieve these effects are so simple as to seem absurd except that they are so effective: concentric circles, stripes of contrasting colors, complimentary colors positioned next to each other to create the appearance of flashing lights, or "afterimages," as they are called. These seem like tricks, and in a sense they are. In the spirit of postmodernism, some of the artists even play with these effects, cracking visual jokes in their direction and carrying on from there.

Tom Moody, in his paper quilts made of photocopied dots printed on colored office paper taped together and hung by push pins, pokes fun at the earlier assumption that graphic precision was necessary to create optical effects. By using his materials in a most cavalier manner and still achieving dramatic effects, he both honors the tradition of Op Art and does it one better.

David Clarkson takes the whole flashing afterimage effect over the top by adding real flashing lights to his



Mark Dagley's "Concentric Sequence" (above) and Tom Moody's "Jump" (below) are among the 37 new abstract works in "post-hypnotic," a traveling exhibit on view through June 25 at the Chicago Cultural Center.



dotted bright orange and green paintings, which seem to pulsate, flash, bulge and spin. To look at these paintings for very long is to approximate the sensation of walking through a carnival fun house where the floors aren't level and the mirrors aren't true and the lights go on and off. You know you're the victim of cheap trickery, but it works and for a little while you're relieved of the burden of knowing what is real.

Judy Ledgerwood's big yellow canvas blinking with white dots mesmerizes with its sweet luminosity and blinding color, and you can almost hear Peter Halley's "Red Cell," which seems to translate color into sound as it blares out magenta and Day-Glo green.

Other artists give the purist Op style a contemporary twist by creating their effects with patterns based in the manufactured world. Michelle Grabner's stenciled, textured enamel patterns do this by reducing household products to elegant patterns, as does Sarah Morris' abstract painting of a tile bathroom floor somewhere in Las Vegas.

There is a kind of high-pitched, good-humored hysteria going on with most of the work made large and bright to heighten its effect. Even the more neutrally colored work, like Grabner's, has a glossy density that makes it hard to look away from.

I love this show, the way it completely bypasses the brain and goes straight to the body. It's an optical joy ride, free of charge and with no pharmaceutical help. Only later, as we recover from the queasy-making dots and pulsing bright colors and dizzying stripes, do we begin to savor its more cerebral pleasures.