

**MARTIN HURTIG**  
TRANSITIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS

**21 August – 16 September 2000**

**Gallery 400**  
University of Illinois at Chicago

I first met Martin Hurtig when I was a student at the University of Illinois in Chicago, referred to then as "Circle." It was 1969. I remember the year because some student had put posters up around the A & A building that stated simply "Kerouac is Dead." I was in the print studio working on a lithograph, a large image of a mouth with prehistoric cave-like drawings set between the rows of teeth. I have no idea what it meant, but it looked enigmatic as most of that stuff does.

Hurtig passed by and made just one comment: "So you're a surrealist." Professor Hurtig had a reputation then for being a difficult teacher (read: hard grader for an art teacher especially given the laissez-faire attitude of the late sixties), and I was a bit intimidated by him. The remark stuck in my head for a long time; I didn't know exactly how to interpret it. In the end I guess I saw it as a challenge because the next semester I took the plunge and signed up for one of his painting classes, which auspiciously began a thirty-year professional relationship and friendship.

Hurtig has maintained a certain aesthetic position that runs through his entire oeuvre. In fact, he has adhered to two main concepts over the last 40 years of art-making: his unflinching commitment to abstraction and his need to speak visually in a non-regional voice. Art, for Hurtig, was its own domain, to be appreciated on its own terms, in its own language of the visual. His work from the beginning of his career embraced an art that operated from a more formal or conceptual base.

In the early Hans Hofmann-inspired pictures from the mid-sixties, with their flourishes of gestural paint, Hurtig began to wed rigorous geometry with the expressive mark (*Who's Out There*, 1967) in an effort to break from the singular passions of Abstract Expressionism. This formal investigation led to his hallmark style of the late sixties, which consisted of an interplay of gestural strokes relegated to the edge with a large unmodulated rectangle of a single color dominating the central area of the canvas.

This series culminated in a dramatic 24-foot-long painting. He did this installation-sized work specifically for exhibits with the "Five" (Ted Argeropolos, Larry Booth, Vera Klement, and Larry Salomon), a group of artists that purposely (some would say polemically) challenged the then hegemony of the locally celebrated "Imagists," à la, Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown and company.

This history, at least that of the Imagists, has been so well rehearsed by many writers (myself included) that I will remain silent on most of it. However, in regard to Hurtig's aesthetic position, articulated above, and vis-à-vis the Chicago art scene, it deserves a few remarks. I think in retrospect, the most

important thing Martin conveyed to me as a young student was to look beyond Chicago and its then celebration of regionalism, to gain a larger view of art's potential on a global scale. Chicago is about the only place I know of where "Outsider Art," or art that imitates the naive and the self-taught, is the mainstream. One's preference for art is not really the issue, but a monolithic art scene can be stifling; nevertheless this was the reality that Hurtig and others faced as artists who were not following the figurative and surrealist traditions subscribed to so passionately by Chicago collectors.

To wit: Richard Feigen's clear choice of artist of the century is Ivan Albright, as related in his recent book *Tales From the Art Crypt*, which chronicles Feigen's life as a Chicago art dealer. This was the artistic climate in which Hurtig doggedly continued to make abstract art. He did have his share of early success with gallery representation in New York, where his work was more appreciated. He also was able to continue to exhibit in Chicago, in part due to the determination of the Five to represent a counter view and the group's distinguished professional reputations. In addition, for several years in the late seventies he was represented by the Jan Cicero Gallery, which at that time was the only gallery exclusively showing Chicago abstraction.

In the early seventies, Hurtig began to focus on sculpture, or more precisely minimalist systemic structures. Once again he bucked the aesthetic tide in his hometown. (One can't imagine a Don Judd or a Robert Ryman being nourished in Chicago. I find it extremely interesting as I write this that one of the hot tickets in town is the Sol LeWitt retrospective at the MCA.)

Again his thinking about art was clear: it was about formal investigation. Based on the idea of the module and its potential permutations, Hurtig's work from this period demonstrates a surprising visual power and conceptual inventiveness. He also explored new materials like corrugated cardboard, which imbued these works with a sense of immediacy, and undercut any notion of the precious object. Nonetheless, these were elegant works, not because of their materiality, but rather through their thoughtfulness of form.

In the eighties Hurtig moved back to painting but continued to mine the constructivist vocabulary of forms he had cultivated in his sculpture. "With these shaped works, I was trying to dissolve the traditional boundary that existed between painting and sculpture," he said about this series.

These geometric-shaped paintings employed a new grammar of curvilinear motifs and a new severe palette of mainly black and white. What was surprising was the degree of formal invention Hurtig could draw out of a simple circular module; the compositions became increasingly complex and exciting with hardly a hint at how they were originally conceived.

At times they suggested illusory space, in some cases appearing to be sculptural reliefs, a nod to his work in three dimensions.

In his 1990 solo exhibition for the Columbia College Gallery he returned to the large format with one modular painting running 24 feet across the wall. He continued to make small adjustments to each new series of works: he added a few colors like blue and red, simple primaries, to his already limited palette to retain the purity of the work and keep the structure in focus. This slow and careful process says a lot about the integrity of Martin's approach to art. In many ways his working philosophy reflects Carl Andre's definition: "Art excludes the unnecessary."

Hurtig's most recent work represented by *Prometheus* and *Dream On* (both 2000), grew primarily out of his experiments with permutations of the grid in his paper pieces. However, the new paintings mark a return to a full generous palette and his touch with the brush is evident with the new gestural facture he now brings to the surface. His commitment to an underlying structure remains: the grid compositions play in and out of the washes of acrylic color. If there is really something new here for Hurtig it is his search for the right amalgam of structural rigor and emotional expressiveness, of intellect and feeling. This fresh endeavor seems to sum up his life-long investigation or struggle with the very nature of art as practiced in the twentieth century: how to make it mean something profound, how to make it vivid and exciting both to the eye and for the mind.

— Corey Postiglione

*Postscript:* Of course much has changed in the Chicago art scene since Hurtig began his career. Now most any kind of art is practiced here, from figurative to conceptual installation works. Many artists from all over the country have decided to make Chicago their home.

In fact, many now call themselves Chicago-based artists and writers and have careers that extend internationally. Regionalism seems to be a thing of the past. This healthy pluralistic attitude was not always the case. Through both his art practice and long commitment to teaching, Hurtig, among others, helped forge this new consciousness. I speak as one artist who owes his vision and career to the mentorship of Martin Hurtig.

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This essay is dedicated to all the artists who contributed to expanding the traditions of Chicago art, specifically, the late Ted Argeropolos and Frank Pannier.