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## At the Hirshhorn, Pat Steir's 'waterfall' paintings move you — literally

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*Installation view of "Pat Steir: Color Wheel," a site-specific exhibition of 30 "waterfall" paintings by Steir at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. (Lee Stalworth/Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Gorvy/Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution)*

Beneath a desk, a foot taps unconsciously, timed to headphones' muffled beats. On a crowded concert floor, bodies sway in unison. In a cycling studio, legs pedal rhythmically to the blaring stereo.

The compulsion to move is almost exclusively associated with the medium of music, but what about other art forms? Can you dance to sculpture? Exercise to painting? Move to brushstrokes? The very notion sounds absurd.

Even for those of us who find ourselves moved by visual art, it's rarely literal. Art is visual or intellectual more often than it is visceral. But looking at a horizontal yellow brushstroke strewn across a blue canvas in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's site-specific Pat Steir installation, you might find that, as if by reflex, your shoulders drop, like someone turned off a switch, like an

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acupuncturist hit a pressure point.

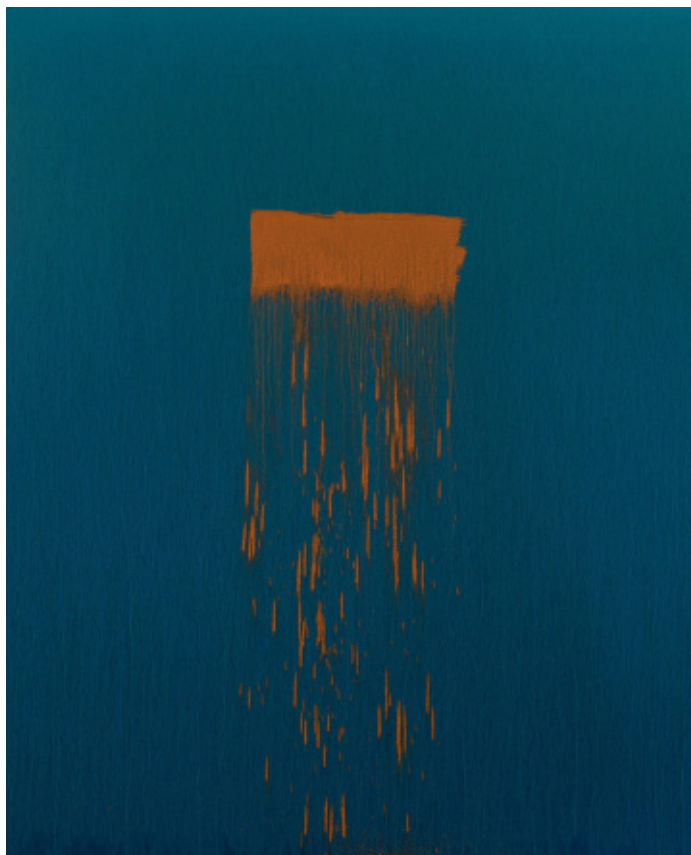
The canvases in “Pat Steir: Color Wheel,” featuring 30 of Steir’s distinctive “waterfall paintings,” are arranged in a color spectrum inspired by the round shape of the Hirshhorn. They stretch roughly nine feet high, confronting you and dwarfing you. They have presence, like one of Richard Serra’s monumental sculptures. You don’t merely look at these paintings, you encounter them.

From a cursory glance, the paintings are relatively uniform in composition. Steir makes a single, sopping, horizontal brushstroke (the “waterfall”) in the upper portion of the canvas. It functions like a starting point. From there, the paint charts its own course — dividing into rivers and tributaries, negotiating the terrain of the fabric. It descends the canvas, directed by the force of gravity, the whims of the material, the commingling of chemicals.

Some of the waterfalls stand with the confidence of built structures, thick lines reaching from the initial brushstroke all the way to the bottom of the canvas. Others feel unchained — a horizontal, blood red mark hovering above a yellow infinity.

It’s tempting to compare Steir’s technique to that of Jackson Pollock, but the comparison is shallow. Pollock sought to dominate the canvas, creating art with a heavy dose of mid-century American masculinity. He put himself into the painting, literally — by throwing the canvas on the ground and stepping all over it — but also conceptually. By leaving his own debris behind in the canvas, Pollock plastered himself into history in the form of discarded cigarette butts.

Steir’s work finds closer kinship in that of Agnes Martin. The late abstract painter, a friend of Steir’s, drew painstaking grids across human-size canvases in an effort to create a wordless experience. In some ways, the two artists could not be more different. Martin craved silence, Steir conjures sound. Martin’s practice is rooted in stillness, minimalism and control; Steir’s in motion, excess and abandonment. But at opposite ends of the spectrum, the two converge. Martin and Steir reveal the thread of the canvas, highlighting not the act but the accident of creation. Blithely betraying representation as we know it, they get at the material itself.



*“Twenty” (2018–19), one of 30 paintings from the exhibition “Color Wheel” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. (Alex Munro/Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Corvy)*

If Pollock was an action painter, then Steir could be called an inaction painter. Influenced by Eastern philosophy, Steir’s work evokes the Taoist concept of wu wei, or “effortless action,” epitomizing the philosophy that “when nothing is done,” as Lao Tzu wrote, “nothing is left undone.”

Steir has spent her career trying to disappear from her work. In these paintings, she is present only briefly, in that initial brushstroke (a gesture that, however small, she has lamented is still too close to her own image). The rest of the painting is up to the paint — and the viewer. Steir has described it as a symphony — she’s just the one orchestrating it.



*“One” (2018–19), one of 30 paintings from the exhibition “Color Wheel” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. (Alex Munro/Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Gorvy)*



*“Thirteen” (2018–19), one of 30 paintings from the exhibition “Color Wheel” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. (Alex Munro/Courtesy of Pat Steir and Lévy Gorvy)*

Steir’s ethos aligns with that of a group of artists who, in postwar Japan, aspired to harness the Gutai, or “concreteness” of the paint itself. In its manifesto, the Gutai group praised art that “reveals the scream of matter itself, cries of the paint and enamel.” While Pollock is among the artists the Gutai revere, Steir takes their agenda a step further, leaving more space for the paint itself to surface.

At the Hirshhorn, moving around the “wheel” from one painting to another, the exercise of looking becomes one decidedly rooted in time. It’s not unlike listening to music: deep purples ground you like heavy bass chords; diaphanous yellows lighten you, trickling over the top like high notes. And they all exist in constant relation to what came before, and in anticipation of what comes after.

On a swampy yellow canvas, a thickly coated navy blue brushstroke descends into increasingly sparse and fragmented streaks of paint. Like the sensation of blood rushing to the top of your head, leaving your feet nowhere to be found, the painting lifts you and dizzies you all at once. Around the bend, a green brushstroke hangs languidly along the top of a full-bodied, bright red canvas, evoking



the unbridled sway of a hammock.

If, as Walter Pater said, all art aspires to the condition of music, surely, triggering an impulse to motion is part of that condition. And while many abstract artists — from Wassily Kandinsky to Stuart Davis — have sought to emulate music, they were primarily concerned with aesthetic similarity. Steir's waterfall paintings go further. They stir you.

Perhaps, it's because she doesn't quite disavow representation in the puritanical way of Pollock and others. She leaves a little bit of reality, a little room for us. Compositionally, the paintings don't look like waterfalls, but the shadows of waterfalls. That's obvious. But there's more going on than that.

Looking at these brushstrokes, it's hard to discern which ones are moving down and which are rising up. Most seem to do both. There's a buzzing tension, an energy that creates a sense of suspension, akin to a waterfall's unending cascade.

The paintings embody something even closer to a waterfall than mere representation. If the waterfall describes itself in the music of rushing water, paint too describes itself, in the multiplying brushstrokes, the illusory depths formed by cracks in the paint (forests? veins?). It all comes together in the rhythm of the fall.

A human hand couldn't have done it better.

Pat Steir: Color Wheel

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue and Seventh Street SW. [hirshhorn.si.edu](http://hirshhorn.si.edu). Through Sept 7. Free.

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