6-2002

Bern Porter International: Volume 6 Number 11 (June 1, 2002)

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Recommended Citation

Porter, Bern; Holtz, Sheila; and Bernstein, Natasha, "Bern Porter International: Volume 6 Number 11 (June 1, 2002)" (2002). Newsletters. 56.
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To an art forger, the work of Jackson Pollock would seem a tempting target. His famous “drip paintings” are a mess. In one of these paintings, *Alchemy*, there are large areas of black and brown in the background, like soil. Here and there, hints of color emerge. And all across the image, there are thin strands of grayish paint, like some kind of spider web.

There are none of the recognizable figures of a da Vinci, a Rembrandt, or a Modigliani. Pollock made these paintings, after all, by rolling out a canvas on the floor of his barn and dripping paint on them. How hard could it be to fake one and make off with the millions?

Since Pollock exploded onto the art scene in the 1940s, his defenders have always argued that there is something more to a Pollock painting than meets the eye – a unique resonance that his imitators have never been able to capture.

Decades later, a scientist has proved them right. Richard Taylor, a physicist at the University of Oregon, has shown that genuine Pollock paintings have a profound mathematical structure often found in nature. The pattern Taylor found is so precise and follows such a predictable track over Pollock’s career that he has been able to identify forgeries. But the relationship that Taylor identified, first published in the journal *Nature* three years ago, has also yielded a deeper appreciation of Pollock’s work, and its meaning.

In a way, science is just now discovering abstract art. The two would appear to be wholly separate worlds, but researchers say that studying the medium will offer important insights into the workings of human perception and, more broadly, our notion of beauty.

At a basic level, Taylor says, scientists and abstract artists are interested in the same thing. “A lot of abstract artists say they are trying to capture reality,” says Taylor. “They say they are trying to get down to some underlying structure, to distill the universe and get down to its very essence. That is why scientific analysis is very appropriate to abstract art.”

In December, the Australian National University held a conference on the scientific study of art called “The Art of Seeing and the Seeing of Art.” One of the conference’s most interesting findings – an analysis of the paintings of Mondrian – suggests that the mathematical structure of art may be more elusive than scientists first thought.

Mondrian’s paintings are among the most famous in abstract art, with grids of black horizontal and vertical lines on a white background, and a few isolated squares of primary colors. Mondrian spent many hours deciding on the precise placement of the lines and developed an elaborate visual theory to explain his work.

Yet one experiment by Australian artist Alan Lee raises questions about the theory. Lee had a computer randomly generate coordinates for Mondrian-like paintings – the locations for the lines and colored boxes. He then painted eight computer-generated Mondrians and reproduced four actual Mondrians. Neither art experts nor members of the public could correctly identify which were the real Mondrians and which were the random patterns.

Another set of experiments, by researcher Branka Spehar of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, showed that Mondrian’s insistence that all the lines be vertical or horizontal in order to be aesthetically pleasing wasn’t borne out when Spehar showed people paintings with diagonals and asked their preference.

It is hard to interpret the Mondrian experiments. They seem to cast some doubt on the ideas that underlie his work, but it is entirely possible that scientists just aren’t asking the right questions yet.

In a sense, that is the story of Pollock. Taylor and his colleagues have shown that Pollock’s drip paintings are examples of mathematical objects known as fractals – an effect that has been difficult for forgers to replicate. The fractal, which contains similar shapes repeated at different scales, is common in nature. Imagine the branching of a tree: The great branches split from one another the same way as the smaller twigs, and the patterns are repeated again inside a leaf.

But the mathematical understanding of this phenomenon came more than two decades after Pollock. And that is worth pondering: Half a century ago, there was an eccentric artist splashing paint on a canvas inside an upstate New York barn, and only now is science catching up.

Gareth Cook can be reached by e-mail at cook@globe.com.
A letter written by e. e. cummings to a high school student who is asking about becoming a poet.

"A poet is somebody who feels and who expresses his feelings through words. This may sound easy: it isn't. A lot of people think, or believe, or know they feel; but that's thinking or believing or knowing not feeling and poetry is feeling -- not knowing or believing or thinking. Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know. But not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know you're a lot of other people, but the moment you feel you're nobody but yourself.

To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting. As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little bit harder than anybody who isn't a poet can imagine. Why? Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time and then whenever we do it we're not poets.

If at the end of your first ten or fifteen years of fighting and working and feeling you find that you have written one line of one poem you'll be very lucky indeed. So my advice to all young people who wish to become poets is: do something easy like learning to blow up the world, unless you're not only willing but glad to feel and work and fight until you die.
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Lewis Harden and Etta Flora (Rogers) P.; m.
Helen Elaine Hendron, July 15, 1946 (div. Aug. 1947); m. Margaret Eudine Preston, Aug.
27, 1955 (dec. April 1975); m. Lula Mae Blom,
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Colby Coll., 1932; MS, Brown U., 1933;
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1929—. Bern Porter Internat., Belfast,
Corps, 1968, SBA, 1968-88. Author: The
14th of February, 1971. I've Left, 1971,
Founds, 1972, Hand Coated Chocolates, 1972,
Contemporary Italian Painters, 1973,
Trattoria Due Forni, 1973, The Book of Do's,
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***Continued***
BERN PORTER

The Will of the Foundation

By this Will a
(a) it is a
(b) its purposes shall
(c) its activities shall
(d) it shall be
(e) at once on the death of
Paragraph One, In the event of
Paragraph Two, The Testator desires
(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of
In the preamble of
In accordance with
The Foundation is
The Foundation is

DAYS IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES

It is coming out of the sky at me now
The fillings in my back teeth are loosening
The nails in the heels of my shoes are showing fatigue
My beautiful hair no longer combs like it used to
People stab me making deep word wounds
They leave scratches on my eye balls
Their rancid blood in my soup
Radioactive ashes in my bed
Thrust rumors, speculation and gossip
Backed by press releases, news stories
Radioed and TVed into my ears
Leaving fear, doubt, questioning, uncertainty behind
All truths distorted, ground down, gone
I want to run but have nowhere to go.
THE BIG A—Bern Porter, unofficial poet laureate of Belfast, donned his poet robes Saturday and participated in the Church Street Festival. The "A" symbolizes a poet's primary symbol.
WHERE WERE YOU
MARCH 1ST WHEN A
GREAT POET DIED?

at work being asked if
i'm rested up after trip to
New York as if time off is
for resting up refreshed
excited running giddy
back to work work work
work WORK WORRRK!

(get fresh not
refreshed)

remember our dead
family of poets with an
appropriate degree of
rage but if you can't i've
got it covered don't worry

3/3/02

3/5/02

all my
bitching all
our bitching

by the
hair on the
chin of
the earth

more
than we
know we
are the
same

we are

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COLOR OUTSIDE THE LINES

SALESMAN: Would you be interested in hearing rates for our new life insurance policy?
ME: I have a recycling plan, code name Kublah Kahn.
SALESMAN: Pardon me?