

Tom James

The Color and the Shape: An Analysis of the Psychological Weights of Colors in Abstract Painting

Abstract art is a widely controversial field, because it lacks any sort of symbol system, and its content is left up to the imagination of the viewer. The particular artist I have chosen is Mark Rothko, one of the prominent figures in the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940's and 50's. His paintings featured large, nearly symmetric figures of solid colors, usually stacked horizontally on another solid colored background. What is most striking about his work, however, is the sense of balance that these colored figures achieve. Forces in a painting include any objects or figures, as well as colors. They hold a "visual weight," which is based on many factors, including relative placement, the presence of other forces, shape, size, etc. The various forces play a major role in painting, determining whether or not a painting is visually appealing or not, based on their ability to balance. Colors hold prominent weights in the visual world, which are based on a number of factors, especially brightness. Brighter colors hold a larger weight in the visual world due to the eye's automatic movement towards them. From this basic rule, we can conclude that darker colors are "lighter," holding less visual weight.

In my research, I used a slide program to test perception of colors in abstract painting. The subjects viewed six slide shows consisting of seven slides each. On each slide was a solid colored rectangle with two solid colored rectangles within it. Each slide displayed itself for six seconds, until the show ends. After the subject views the series of images, and chose which one he or she believes to be "balanced" and most visually appealing, they repeated the process while viewing all of the slides at once. In addition, the subject was asked to view all of the slides at once and make a comparative decision. The data collected showed that the majority of the subjects (50% or more) chose the slide that most closely resembled the actual painting, leading the researcher to conclude that the weights of colors have a significant effect on balance and visual appeal.

Mentor:

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