

Suzanne Blank Redstone
1960s Portal Paintings

Suzanne Blank Redstone: Image as Thought

Jenni Sorkin

Suzanne Blank Redstone is a late-career artist in an emerging artist's mode: that is to say, she is in the process of being rediscovered while in her seventies. This is not an uncommon experience for women artists. Louise Nevelson did not achieve major recognition until she was 60 years old. Or consider Louise Bourgeois, who had her first retrospective at age 70 in 1982, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But women artists never really disappear; they continue working, sometimes out of view, or at the edges of the frame, making art alongside making a life.

Raised in Queens, New York, Redstone holds a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and an MFA from University of Pennsylvania (Penn). As a young artist, she was strongly influenced by the precepts of the Bauhaus, as they were disseminated throughout the United States in the decades after World War II. European émigrés like Josef and Anni Albers and László Moholy-Nagy brought modernism to bear on the curriculum of American art schools, encouraging a pedagogy that was rooted in the specificity of formalism – basic geometry, color, and spatial perception. The exercises taught within the Bauhaus's Foundation course, pioneered by Johannes Itten, included sewing, drawing, perforating, intertwining, folding, and cutting. Redstone recalls being fascinated by Albers's book, *Despite Straight Lines* (1961), which is a poetic meditation on perceptual and pictorial space, conveying its spirited possibilities.

As a RISD student on the senior

year honors program in Rome in 1965–66 (the same program in which Francesca Woodman was enrolled a decade later), Redstone was challenged by the architect Friedrich St. Florian (an Austrian émigré) to apply structure to her work. Over the next four years, working in New York and then in Philadelphia, she decided to adhere to two rules: limiting herself to 90 and 45 degree angles (meaning, no curved lines) and painting using only primary colors, white and Payne's gray (a particular shade of gray). As Redstone comments: "Once I returned to New York, I was simultaneously back in my own world again, surrounded by the familiarity of my Long Island studio, yet changed by what I had experienced abroad. It was like coming back to a book and starting to read it again, excited to be re-entering the story. I worked for hours every day to resolve a painting and rarely showed anyone my work."¹

The body of work that came out of this singular effort – the "Portals" series (1966–1969) – is the focus of Redstone's first American exhibition. In "Portals," Redstone uses architectonic compositions that render space in brilliant primary colors and cordons it off in grids and shadows, creating maze-like paintings that bring three-dimensionality to the canvas. Her rejection of curvilinear forms creates solidity and angularity, positing an interesting tension between geometric abstraction, historically construed as perhaps more "male," than the biomorphism of organic, natural forms, often identified as

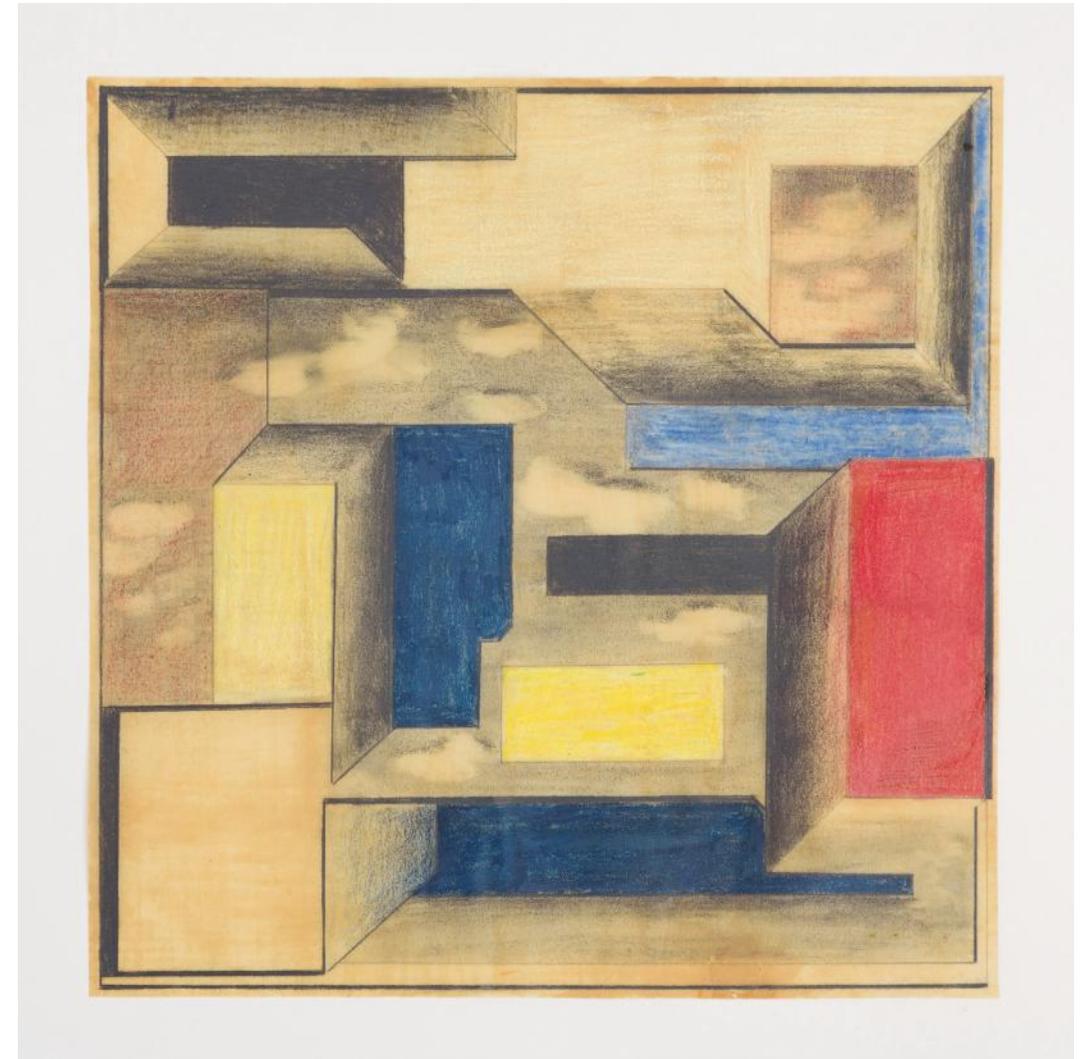


Figure 1. *Drawing for Floating Portal*, 1968, Paper, tracing paper, pencil, and color pencil, 8 ¼ x 8 ¼ in.

"female." In choosing geometric abstraction, Redstone unconsciously identifies with a lineage of male painters. This is not surprising, given the lack of role models available to young women artists at the dawning of the 1960s.

While working within such purposeful limitations, Redstone continued her studies, obtaining her MFA from Penn in 1971. In combination with her own experiments, the program proved to be a formative experience, studying with Robert Engman, a former Albers student. As she recalls, "In particular, I remember introducing Louis Kahn's graduate architecture students to Albers's practice of learning about structures through paper folding."²

Through an adherence to the partitioning of line, Redstone merges hard-edged forms with the interior presence of space, crystallizing image as thought and thought as image. Her formalist experiments situate her at the tail of a generation of

women artists similarly influenced by American Bauhaus pedagogy, such as Sheila Hicks (b. 1934) and Barbara Kasten (b. 1936), artists who pursued non-traditional techniques in fiber sculpture and staged photography respectively, to create what Susanna Newbury calls, "hypertologies where geometry is continuously deformed through aspect and perspective."³ Initially working in drawing and painting, Redstone has recently won public sculptural commissions in Britain. Yet her work has a continuous affinity with ideas of light, color, and formal attributes of the line.

The earliest "Portals" began as sketches, small-scale works repeated on paper such as *Drawing for Floating Portal* (1968) [Figure 1], which map out blocks of color that contrast boxy interior spaces with a background of clouds, creating the sensation of movement and the effect of shapes untethered. Such illusionism, which generates a deceptive experience of space



Figure 2. *Yellow Filter: Diptych*, 1966, Acrylic on shaped canvas, 45 ¾ x 97 ½ in.

through the use of perspective, is one of the hallmarks of “Portals.” Through the precise capture of color and light, the artist offers the phenomena of depth and breadth. Though she worked against the Greenbergian flatness of the picture plane, Redstone’s formalism positions her as a modernist working incongruently with her own era: the social and political foment of the late 1960s.

An early work, *Yellow Filter: Diptych* (1966) [Figure 2], experiments with a shaped canvas, stretched into a partial rhombus to create a long diagonal swath of blue sky, complete with clouds. Edged in yellow, the sky is both foreground and background, buttressed by a stark black and white grid, and shot through with a yellow screen, a stripe of which interrupts its momentary realism, sharply contrasting with the blue. *Yellow Filter*, then, is both a color study and

an experiment in *trompe l’oeil*, as the eye is fooled by the tactical layers of distortion. Spread over two canvases, Redstone’s extended sky is simultaneously doubled and truncated, and broken up in three ways: first, as side-by-side paintings; second, by the interjection of an abstract grid and a yellow filter, displacing the realism, and finally, by the sense of the canvases as objects themselves in which the wall on which they hang creates an overwhelming sense of volume, becoming a physical darkness situated between the two canvases. While *trompe l’oeil* is one of the historically important attributes of Western painting, it is not common in American art of the late 1960s and was disparaged as “theatrical” by Michael Fried.⁴ In Redstone’s version, “fool the eye” becomes a form of commentary on media specificity: the idea of a contrasting filter is a nod to color photography

and its saturation of hue. Redstone’s diptych, then, functions as another form of doubling: painting playfully mimicking photography, underscoring its unavoidable influence on the way we experience the world.

But Redstone’s “Portals” are also suggestive of doorways, windows, and hollows that offer an intricacy of light and shadow. “I thought of [them] as openings and places to venture into. These were all discoveries,” she says.⁵ Sometimes she utilized the same forms, but altered the colors, such as in *Portal Blues, Grays, and White* (1969), a lavender, more milky version of *Blue and Maroon Portal* (1969), irrevocably changing dark spaces to light, and light to dark, reminiscent of light moving across architectural surfaces and threshold spaces, such as porticos, or archways.

The paintings can be seen as gateways, or windows, onto Redstone’s future, twenty-

first century practice. They foreshadow much of her later work including her ongoing “Colored Circles” series [Figure 3], which consist of winsome aluminum sculptures that transform the simple geometries of concentric circles into explorations of color: delicate to full bodied reds, yellows, and blues, with ranges of sleek pinks and matte eggshell in between, made only through the reflection of light creating washes of color as an afterimage. The light gathers on the surface, collecting and disappearing, an ephemeral view dependent upon time. These recent sculptures have a California Light & Space sensibility, without having a relationship to either the West Coast, or that movement’s history. Redstone’s practice has developed largely abroad, and in semi-isolation, not unlike Maria Nordman (b. 1943), who is the same generation as Redstone, and Jo Baer



After Piero Della Francesca - *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1967, Acrylic on masonite, 30 x 48 in.



Portal 8, 1968, Acrylic on masonite, 27 x 42 in.



Figure 3. *Radiance*, 2003, Aluminum, matte enamel paint on wood board, 48 x 7 7/8 in.

(b. 1929), the minimalist painter-turned-public artist. The career trajectories of the twentieth century's women artists have often been more unwieldy, and less straightforward, than their male peers, with attention arriving much later. Somewhere between the purity of her expression, and the compelling trajectory of rediscovery, Suzanne Blank Redstone is still at the beginning of a full reveal.

Jenni Sorkin is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History, University of California, Santa Barbara. She has written numerous in-depth essays on women artists and issues of gender. Her book *Live Form: Women, Ceramics and Community*, about gender and post-war ceramics at Black Mountain College and other utopian communities, was published this year by The University of Chicago Press.

¹ Suzanne Blank Redstone to the author, July 28, 2016, e-mail correspondence.

² Ibid.

³ Susanna Newbury, "Playtime: Review, *Barbara Kasten: Stages*," *X-TRA* v. 18. n. 4 (Summer 2016), 20.

⁴ For more information, please refer to Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵ Redstone, *ibid.*

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Suzanne Blank Redstone (b. 1945, Orlando, FL) holds a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. For the past fifty years, Redstone has maintained a rigorous artistic practice without the support of dealer representation. In 2009, Redstone won a competition to create an outdoor public sculpture at the Porthcuno Telegraph Museum in Cornwall, England, and, in 2014, Redstone enjoyed her first solo exhibition, a retrospective at Dartington Hall, Devon, curated by Isabel Carlisle. Redstone lives and works in Devon, England. She is represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Cover

Suzanne Blank Redstone, *Gray and Light Yellow*, 1968, Acrylic on masonite, 19 x 14 ½ in.

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