

Frame of Mind – Ken Greenleaf’s 2010 Paintings

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Now since nothing is ever present to the mind except perceptions, and since all ideas are derived from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows that it is impossible for us...to conceive...an idea of anything specifically different from [those] ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves.... This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produced.

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739¹

If you only glance quickly at Ken Greenleaf’s 2010 paintings, what you see are shaped canvasses with black pigment applied in flat, geometric shapes on raw canvas. Hence the paintings lie within the modernist tradition, exhibiting the use of pigment, support, and flatness that characterizes modernist painting. So seemingly simple. But if you look more carefully and visit the works at some length (silence is nice too), they reveal a complex world of tension between their flatness and their apparent “desire” to achieve a more-than-two-dimensional existence. (It’s useful to remember Greenleaf is also a sculptor.) If they attained multiple dimensions – or a convincing illusion thereof – they would no longer reflect a modernist aesthetic, in which flat patches/lines/shapes of pigment are applied to a shaped support. And yet the paintings “feel” as if they’re struggling for a higher identity in an arena partly physical, partly intuitive, and partly virtual. Greenleaf speaks of his admiration for Cézanne’s painting, noting that it’s not “decorative” – that is, purely flat shapes applied like cutouts to a flat surface – but rather that it’s “spatial,” though that space’s dimensions have been compressed to be congruent with a flat surface. While Greenleaf’s style is unlike Cézanne’s, he nevertheless has developed an intriguing relationship between flatness and implied three-dimensionality that resonates with a Cézannian aesthetic. In fact, many of his titles suggest an exploration of space or spatial qualities: *Sightline* (a view through space), *Trajectory* (implying movement through space/time), *Boundary Layer* (a term from physics and fluid mechanics) *Edge Space* (used in topological graphing and also to describe the limits of our known universe and its dimensions), *Higgs* and *Gluon* (subatomic particles in quantum physics), or *Buckle* (when a flat/straight object is bent into three dimensions by compressive forces).

Our awareness of the tension between two and three spatial dimensions occurs as we try to work out the geometry of black shapes and white canvas in Greenleaf’s work and whether such geometries are actually possible in a three-dimensional, perspectively constructed world (which is what we are most comfortable with, as we believe that it mirrors our “real” world²). Hence the tension lies not completely within the paintings but, rather, somewhere among the images, our perceptions of them, and our mind’s eye. The origin of this virtual space is physiological. Within the brain and central nervous system – for instance in the retina of the eye, which is an extension of the brain – are neuronal

connections that exist in a “fourth” dimension, time, and that process our sensations, turning them into what we *think* we see in the world.

In vision, what actually enters the eye is a constantly shifting arrangement of light and shadow. These flat patches of light have no meaning: in themselves they do not represent anything in what we call the real world. In this sense they’re akin to the flat patches of pigment on a modernist canvas. We usually assume (as early modernists like Manet did) that we understand these visual stimuli in a two-step process: that first, the sensations enter the eye and are impressed on the passive retina in their “raw” state. In step two (we imagine), they travel from the retina to the brain, where they’re organized into our concepts of the world.

Yet this is not the case. Step one, our imagined awareness of unprocessed sensations, doesn’t exist because optically we never see – we *cannot* see – these raw sensations. Rather, they’re received on the retina’s rods, cones, and ganglion cells; because the retina is part of the brain, it works, for instance, to detect and enhance edges and movement in the visual field, analyzing the field spatially. It also filters and compresses visual stimuli. Thus, even at the moment sensations strike our retinas, they’re already being organized into “ideas” about what we’re seeing. Ken Greenleaf’s art seems to work with that phenomenon, bringing it to our attention as it plays out on the surface of his paintings, at least if we spend enough time with the works to allow them to unfold.

In our visual processing, as “the mind” takes over, it creates not just concepts of the world but also emotional interpretations of that world. Generally, our mind wants to “make sense” of what it sees, relating novel visual phenomena to things already known and understood, thus normalizing them to make us more comfortable.³ Memory, imagination, desire, will, and all of our unconscious thoughts participate in the workings of the mind, which, compared to the brain, might be called an “n-dimensional” reality, a reality of an unknown number of dimensions. Ken Greenleaf has fashioned his paintings to exist in that energetic frame of mind – an n-dimensional space? – somewhere between flat “raw sensations” and our concepts, ideas, and feelings about these stimuli.

Yet amazingly, Greenleaf is able to express this ambiguity without



violating the actual flatness of his imagery. Consider his work *Empiric*, which literally is a flat black shape on raw canvas, stretched over an irregularly structured, geometric support. The angles in the black shape are subtle, suggesting – though *not* representing – two sides of a perspectively constructed box (the very opposite

of modernist flatness). The right end of the box “could” shoot off toward a distant vanishing point, yet on its left side, it is truncated, contradicting our impression of recession into space. The angles are wrong too – this is not an image based on the Renaissance mathematical perspective that produces an illusion of three dimensions (even though that’s what we might prefer); the vanishing points for the two “sides” of the suggested form are inconsistent and so couldn’t be part of a unified, three-dimensional space. This leaves us trying to rectify the black shape with forms we know (after all, *Empiric* means based on our own experience), thus creating a very active interplay between painting and viewer. A similar dynamic occurs in Greenleaf’s *Schema*, where the “back” of the rectangular “box” doesn’t match the “front.”

Empiric’s suggestion of three dimensions is complicated by its brushwork. If we focus on the black area alone, we see brushy variations in grey and black as the paint thins or thickens, with tiny white spots of canvas showing through. Hence this black surface appears to undulate softly, creating a sense of three-dimensional ups and downs. Yet the white spots bring our attention back to the flat canvas, stressing what modernist critic Clement Greenberg called the “threadedness” of the canvas.⁴ Further, we know intellectually that, like written or printed words, brushstrokes are made on a flat surface, an awareness that again returns you from three-dimensional illusion to two-dimensional reality.

Despite what our logical intellect tells us, though, this image feels strongly like a flat shape in search of another dimension. There’s a sense of energy and desire in its “seeking” of further dimensions. Perhaps that’s only in our minds – or in Greenleaf’s mind, who says that the irregularities and shapes in his paintings are not created to fulfill modernist theory (which would be intellectual), but rather, intuitively. If we indeed see this as more than a flat shape, then, we may think of it as an irregular “slice” of a three-dimensional reality, but displayed here on a two-dimensional plane (as in Edwin Abbott’s wonderful book, *Flatland*, 1884).⁵ This sense of a slice of a larger shape is also seen in Greenleaf’s painting, *Section*. In this vein, *Empiric* and *Section* resemble, perhaps coincidentally, certain attempts by mathematicians to visualize forms as they exist in worlds of more than three dimensions (from four up to ten or eleven). Greenleaf’s 2009 line paintings also suggest such forms.

In another interesting twist, many of Greenleaf’s 2010 paintings have black shapes that run off the edge of the canvas, extending around the sides of the stretchers. While on one hand this stresses the significance of the painting’s support (which is a modernist concern), it also literally turns what would have been a flat painting into a three-dimensional object colored on several of its sides. In fact, I wanted to peek behind the canvas to see if the paint continued on the back.

For example, in *Edge Space*, mounted on a trapezoidal support, we appear to be looking down into a black rectangular box, a sense enhanced by the



continuation of the black shape over the right edge of the canvas. The continuation draws attention to itself thanks to thinner pigment at the front edge of the canvas, which creates a white “line” just where the black starts to bend around. The bottom also continues around the edge. Yet the angles of the black shapes on the support’s sides are “wrong” as continuations of a perspectively correct box, again suggesting a different set of dimensions than those to which we’re accustomed.

The soft, painterly edges of the imaginary rectangle also interfere with the illusion that we’re viewing a truly geometric form. Contrarily, the thinly brushed pigment on the “top surface” of the black box suggests that we *are* looking into a soft depth “inside” the box (or even that the box is a frame opening onto a nebulous space of unknown dimensions). Yet it also reminds us that brushstrokes only exist on flat surfaces, thus bringing us back to a two-dimensional plane. So the painting remains quite ambivalent. It “wants” to become something more than flat, yet it’s constrained from doing so (beyond the actual three-dimensionality of the wrap-around effect). As well, *our* minds want to turn this peculiar shape, so unfamiliar, into something that seems more like things of the world that we already know – for example, a rectangular box.

Finally, the other way our minds want to “correct” or reframe *Edge Space* is the trapezoidal shape of the support. At first glance, the painting seems to hang crookedly on the wall. The viewer might well want to adjust it back into “true” – that is, parallel to the ground and in line with our usual verticality vis-à-vis that ground. So again, the mind (and our kinaesthetic senses) struggle with the actual reality playing out in the work of art, and in a most interesting way, as it makes us question the premises on which its current orientation seems “wrong.” Even looking at a photograph of it can trigger a strong desire to tip it back into place.



Empiric and *Edge Space* both “feel” like black figures on a white ground. In

other images, though, there’s a much more dynamic play between black and white spaces on the paintings’ surfaces as well as between the figuration and the shape of the support. The title of *Salient*, for instance, can mean “prominent or conspicuous,” “of particular significance,” or “projecting or pointing outward.” Here the image certainly raises questions of angularity and the relation of angles, though it doesn’t answer those

questions. For instance, our mind's desire to see things "in perspective" suggests that if this image depicted a three-dimensional space, the lower black shape could almost be part of the same perspectival vista as the upper left and right-hand shapes, a sense enhanced by the fact that they all wrap around the stretcher, stressing their three-dimensional blockiness. Yet it's not a truly consistent Renaissance perspective, but simply our mind's desire to see it that way.

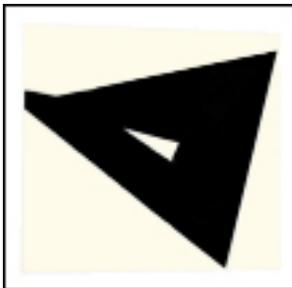
Likewise, all three blocks conjure up (in our mind's eye) an architectural presence, probably because of their verticality and their suggestion (if not the actuality) of a perspective view. But the white space in *Salient* is much more active than, for instance, in *Edge Space*, where it serves more as background for the singular black shape. Here the white space demands attention in itself – it is "salient" and simultaneously energetic, yet quite empty. Along with the architectural sense, it recalls the surreal emptiness of Giorgio De Chirico's cityscapes. A similar effect is found in Greenleaf's *Sightline*, though as with all his work, perspective is only referred to, not represented.

In Greenleaf's *Delta*, the white space is the whole story (unlike the white ground, for instance, in *Empiric*). Here your mind constantly vacillates between



seeing black figures on a white ground and a three-dimensional "folded" white form on a black ground – and that's despite the subtle brushiness in the black shapes. So strong is the ambivalence that the painting recalls the old vase-face optical illusion, though in a far more interesting manner. It's quite brilliant, especially within the whole spectrum of seeming desire for three-dimensionality in the works included in Greenleaf's 2010 exhibition "Trajectory."

That exhibition title, "Trajectory," also suggests Greenleaf's interest in the implications of movement through space/time – activity, energy, propulsion, even choreography. But such "movement" is never simple



in his work. In the painting *Trajectory*, for instance, you can't determine the origin of the force – is it to the left, where the black shape is narrow but bends around the edge of the support? If to the left, it would be impossible for a propelled object to make a 90-degree turn (around the edge of the support) and keep going. If the origin of the trajectory is to the right, then the wide, "truncated"

side of the shape shows no source for the propulsion of the shape leftward. Alternatively, perhaps it is the small white triangle inside the black shape that has a trajectory.

Trajectory's shapes nonetheless appear quite energetic in our minds. The black area seems to diminish perspectively at the left, and yet the lower edge of the white, internal triangle does not line up with the upper edge of the narrow black band on the left. Another visual device that argues against a perspectival interpretation is the bend in the upper edge of the same narrow black band – it suggests that the trajectory makes another angled turn, which is impossible. And so the whole black shape remains flat and still, despite its strong “feeling” of movement.



Both *Port* and *Alea* also seem extremely active, evoking a strong (but ambiguous) sense of space. “Port” can be a geographical location with one or more harbors, a nautical direction, a mid-trip stopping point (port of call), or a shelter – all are spatial in nature. The position and angles of the black shapes in *Port* run counter to its energetic, irregularly shaped support. To our minds, these counter-angles suggest that if our attention were being swept along by the direction of the canvas’s support (from upper right to lower left), we could escape that rip current by catching hold of the enclosing black shape and sheltering there.

Port's black area is quite irregular and energetic – indeed it seems to be “striving” to bend or flap up into three dimensions (thus enhancing its identity as a port). And yet, as with all these paintings, the angles of the black shapes are wrong for a three-dimensional form (at least in our “normal” world). We seem to look down on the lower black shape, which appears to head toward a vanishing point in the upper-right distance, a point that might also be intersected by an extension of the top boundary of the central white area. Yet the right-hand “vertical” element seems to overlap (and obscure the angles of) the lower block. This effect results from the direction of the brushstrokes in this right-hand element, strokes which connect the “vertical” and “horizontal” planes in a very flattening manner. The angular “buckle” of the vertical area also suggests a perspectival space conflicting with that of the lower black shape, creating a sense of instability inappropriate in a port. Finally, the black wrap-arounds on several sides of the support, though they’re not easily visible (except by leaning over or standing on tip-toe), create other angles that run counter to the angles depicted on the painting’s surface.

Alea is among the most energetic of Greenleaf’s recent paintings, suggesting a choreography of black shapes within very active areas of raw canvas, equal partners in the image’s dance of energy. “Alea” has several variant but related meanings: in Latin, it means “die,” roll of the dice, chance, or

hazard. *Alea iacta est* is what Julius Caesar is supposed to have said when he crossed the River Rubicon into Italy to begin his war against Pompey and the Optimates – “the die is cast.” And “aleatory” art is art created by chance, as some Surrealists did. Greenleaf’s art is not created by chance or Surrealist automatism, though as he notes, intuition is significant in his work.



In *Alea*, we seem to see two partnered dancers in the black shapes – approaching each other and moving back, attracting and repelling. The shapes are “fast.” They appear to speed down and around and in and up the canvas. The painting is very open, as all the black shapes flow off and around the sides of the support.

The “outer” black shape (on the right) appears to embrace the inner one, yet there remains an unbridgeable white gap between them, stressed by the almost-but-not-quite-parallel space of raw canvas separating them. If you follow the vertical and horizontal edges of that white gap, you find that they widen slightly as they move away from the corner where the black shapes are closest together. That means that if you envisage this painting as a slice of a much larger, ongoing space (a sense that its “speediness” engenders), those two black dancers will never meet or touch. The angles leading out from the corner point have been set by a cast of the die that is the artist’s intuition. His intuitive decision-making is suggested by the softness and irregularity of the black contours – these are not lines drawn with a straight edge, so there is indeed the element of chance that comes with the handmade, rather than machine-made, image.

“Inner” and “outer” may suggest spatial relationship, embracing the existence of three dimensions, yet this remains a resolutely flat painting. The concepts of dancing and embracing in a three-dimensional space are simply the ghosts of our own past experience. As David Hume said, “...[N]othing is ever present to the mind except...ideas...antecedently present to the mind....Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves....”⁶ Ken Greenleaf’s work, though, challenges us to *try* to move out of ourselves and into the world of the paintings, leaving us, ultimately, caught up in an indeterminate space between the objective and the subjective. That’s why we want to engage repeatedly with these works, always trying but never succeeding in resolving their ambiguities and tensions, their flatness and their seeming desire to be something more.

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739], ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), p. 67.

² I say “we believe” because Renaissance mathematical perspective is a culturally relative visual convention for suggesting three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, its space presented as homogeneous, isotropic, infinite, and static. To take Europe alone as an example of shifting conventions, ancient Greek culture posited that our field of vision is spheroid (physiologically true) and that the size of distant objects was determined by the angle of their height. Much mediaeval art, however, bypassed perspective, depicting objects and their “space” integrated into a flat, indissoluble surface. Later, the Renaissance developed vanishing-point perspective, the type we are most familiar with. It formed the basis of academic painting from then until now and its illusionism was what Modernists rebelled against. (For discussion of academic misinterpretation of the “window-like” character of Renaissance perspective, see Joseph Masheck, “Alberti’s ‘Window’; Art-Historiographic Notes on an Antimodernist Misprision” (1991), in Masheck, *Modernities: Art-Matters in the Present* (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1992), 15-32.)

Though Renaissance perspective is generally assumed to be “objective” and “how we really see,” it is neither objective nor true to our psychophysiological vision. First, Renaissance perspective constructs the view *vis-à-vis* a single, stationary eye, yet most of us have two functioning eyes that are always in motion. Second, our vision is selective—we attend only to those parts of the visual field of interest to us—hence for us the visual field is inhomogeneous and in flux. Third, we actually see sharply only a small segment of the visual field at a time, while the rest is out of focus. Only light rays that strike the eye’s central fovea are sharply focused—as close as 10° from the fovea, visual resolution disintegrates by 80%. Fourth, our vision is culturally conditioned—people in different cultures see differently, dependent partly on the regional topography and partly on their mythology (what Ernst Cassirer calls “mythic vision”). This applies as well to individuals, whose vision privileges spaces with some personal meaning (a personal mythology). Finally, Renaissance perspective is laden with political meaning; as Tom Mitchell notes, “Aided by the political and economic ascendance of Western Europe, artificial perspective conquered the world of representation under the banner of reason, science, and objectivity.”

For perspective as a visual convention, see Erwin Panofsky, “*Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form’*” in *Vortrage der Bibliothek Warburg, 1924-25* (Leipzig, Berlin, 1927), pp. 258-330; published later as Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1993; first paperback ed., 2009). The psychophysiological nature of vision is discussed at length by Rudolf Arnheim, e.g., in *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1969) and elsewhere. The physiology and selectivity of vision was discussed definitively in the 19th century by Hermann von Helmholtz, *Treatise on Physiological Optics* [1866], 3 vols, 3rd ed., transl. J. P. C. Southall (Washington, DC: Optical Society of America, 1924). On cultural impact on vision, see Marshall H. Segall, Donald T. Campbell and Melville J. Herskovits, *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception* (NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms; Mythical Thought*, vol. 2 (New Haven, London: Yale Univ. Press, 1965); and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology; Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 37-40. For another view of personal “mythic” vision, see Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (NY: The New Press, 1998); and for a psycho-geographical analysis of our views of space, see Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, softbound ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001).

³ For a classic discussion of the way we analyze things by comparing them with what we already know (thus rendering ourselves incapable of seeing what’s unique about them), see Henri Bergson, transl. T. E. Hulme [1912], *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), esp. pp. 21-24.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Louis and Noland,” *Art International* IV (25 May 1960): 28; cited in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood; Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 110.

⁵ Edwin Abbott Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (NY: Dover Publications, 1992).

⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 67.