

#GridPattern #Contrariness

#ArtistAndDesigner

Praxis paper

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Marion Landry

AHIS 333: INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUMS

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What colours do you avoid, she asked? This simple question, inquired by my teacher during an in-class critique, opened a door to a series of contrary explorations in the studio. I am using the word contrary here to emphasize on the fact that, like never before, I was interested to paint within a mathematical structure framed by a set of pre-established rules. To my amazement, the exercise yielded new experiences from which emerged a series of 'Grid' paintings that I am captured by.

For this paper, my intention is to discuss my art practice with a focus on my recent series of 'Grid' paintings. The term 'grid' in my practice refers to a network of lines that cross each other to form a series of squares. The earliest example of a grid I can recall is the gridded paper my dad used to give me as a child to draw on. A very similar grid layout, drawn with pencil directly on the canvas is the foundation of my series of paintings. The concept of contrariness as explored by Paul Mathieu - one of the many lecturers invited as part of the 'Interdisciplinary Forum' course at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, fall semester- stands out. However, many other subjects explored as part of the course main topic of 'The Art School' helped me frame my research. Reflectivity is definitely an integral part of my practice, and as discovered through research, my interdisciplinary approaches as well. Trained as a designer and followed by years of working in 3D architecture visualization, the grid is the invisible element from which I construct my visual language. For many years I have seen my art practice and my 3D career has two different entities where in fact, through research and reflection about my series of grids, I came to realize that both interests are now merging into one practice. During the research process, which happened after the series of paintings was completed, I was able to position the 'grid' in a broader cultural context by drawing references from various visual arts, including graphic design, film, conceptual art, music, and architecture. The readings illustrated how the various industries use the grid pattern as an integral part of their creative process. As a result, I got to understand the importance of it in my own practice and how I came to rely on the grid pattern to answer a challenge about colours. One cannot work with the grid without being referenced to post-modernist artists such as Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. I will discuss the parallel I find in the practice of these artists and how it further informed my understanding of my 'Grid' paintings. While mostly interested with process over end result, I will explore the final visual composition of the 'Grid' series and how it can be experience by the viewer.

My creative process normally starts while looking at images or other artworks. In this case, I had been spending considerable time looking at the book of Colombian artist *José Antonio Suárez Londoño: dibujos 1999-2011* which shows a retrospective of his drawings. Londoño records the world around him by drawing imagery and text in notebooks as a form of personal diaries. On page 13 (fig. 1) of the book, two grids are the main inspiration for my investigation with the grid pattern. The construction lines drawn in pencil in Londoño's drawings are left visible, adding a sense of ephemerality that reveals the artist's process. Background and foreground become animated by the transparency of the watercolour medium, which creates complex weaving effects. Puzzled by the simplicity of the grid juxtaposed with the motion activated through the transparent layers of colour, Londoño's grids made me reflect on my practice and sparked a desire to explore further. I wondered how I could interpret the visual effect created by the watercolour transparency into an oil medium. This question would become the answer for the colour challenge proposed by my teacher. I needed to explore the uncomfortable in a familiar way. By making the grid visible, it would provide a logical and simple spatial organization in which I could explore with new colours.

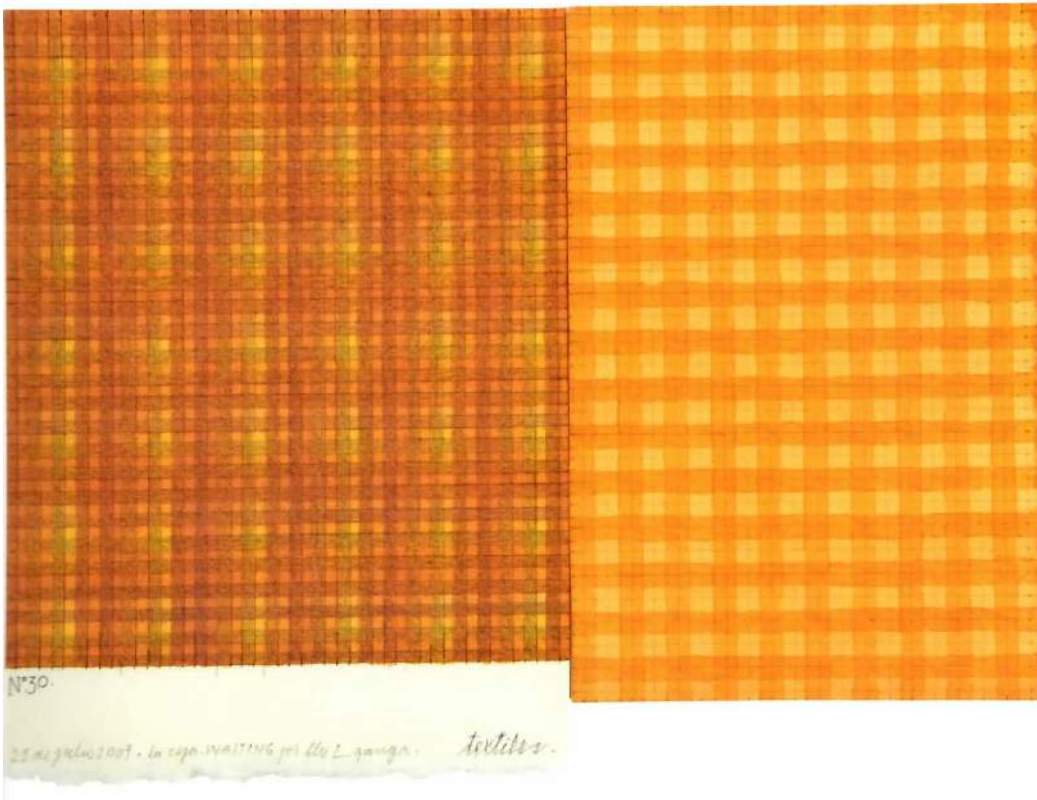


Fig. 1 The water colour grids by José Antonio Suárez Londoño, insert from p 13, Reyna, Maria Soledad, *José Antonio Suárez Londoño: dibujos 1999-2011*, LetrArte Editores SAS, Pan Shapes and Forms of Bogotá, Colombia, October 2012, Artist Book

Inspired by the drawings of Londoño, my 'Grid' series explores how transparent layers of oil paint interact between each other and the relationship it has with the raw material on which it is painted. Pink – the colour I avoid the most because of its girly connotations – and a combination of pink and yellow is used as an attempt to regain control over colour combination I would never dare to paint (fig.2). The paintings are built primarily as monochromatic and later explores with additional colours such as chartreuse, ultramarine, grey and yellow. The grid pattern is constructed from darker to lighter tones of the same colour. Due to the grid paintings being first developed as a series of studies, the grid marks drawn in coloured pencil are left visible and become part of the pattern itself. In an attempt to draw parallel with the experience of the paper medium used by Londoño, the canvas or linen is roughly cut, left un-stretched and painted flat on a table in a similar way one would draw on paper. My focus was to explore how the thin layers of colour can react with the colour underneath against the raw material's support. For that reason, the rule was to leave the raw material exposed throughout the grid pattern. Painted in a loose manner, the imperfections are left visible, adding an element of 'chance' as part of the final result.



Fig. 2: Pink grid #1 on canvas, oil on canvas, 20 x 23", Marion Landry

When presented in a gallery context (fig. 3), the artwork – wrinkled and undulated by the painting process – hangs loosely on the wall attached only by few nails at the top. Threads are hanging from the roughly cut fabric to expose the rawness of the fabric and to make it belong to the realm of "study" rather than final polished piece.



Fig. 3: Grids, installation view, Emily Carr University of Art + Design room 408, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014

As touched on previously, I was trained as a designer and worked as a 3D computer artists specializing in architecture visualization for most of my life. My formal study as a designer taught me the importance of the grid for spatial composition. Furthermore, in the 3D environment, I have relied on the x, y and z axis as well as the grid structure so much so that it has become invisible to me. The grid – always presented as an invisible foundation to organize the composition of my paintings – was never left visible before. This fed the illusion that I broke away from it. However, the fact is that it is the primary way in which I understand the pictorial space, something I had never really thought about before. During my research process I came across the book by Lucienne Roberts and Julia Thrift called *The designer and the grid*. It is a series of essays by an architect, a musicologist, a screenwriter, a selection of artists, and a Web designer, which explains how they personally deal with the grid as a universal idea. The book helped me realize how much of my design training had seeped into my art practice. I strongly related to Ellen Lupton's essay when she states that "In modern painting, the grid is used as a way to look rational but is purely intuitive; ultimately it's mystical and not rational." (123) While challenged to work with unfamiliar colours, intuitively I ended up falling back on something quite natural and comfortable as a designer: the grid structure. It's like I had to establish foundation rules to start, then I could focus on pigments I had so far avoided. I agree with the notion that the grid can be used as a foundation to help focus on the next challenge, as discussed in the essay by Stephanie Krieger when she states, "The grid is a major decision. Once you have it, it helps you make the next set of decisions." (101). The mathematical aspect involved in the creation of the grid pattern provided a structure from which thoughtless exploration could happen. The only thing I had to do was to paint between the lines, which afforded the times to become comfortable with the new colours.

There is history within the use of the grid pattern in post-modernism. One can't escape the association to the work of artists such as Sol Lewitt or Agnes Martin when working with it. Through reading the different views and interpretation of LeWitt's line work, I was able to further develop a language which helped me describe my series of grid paintings. I do share some of LeWitt's thoughts about process. For example, I concur with the idea that the end result is not that important. If there are errors in execution they are left in and become part of the work, something explained in the book *Sol LeWitt* by Béatrice Gross when talking about his wall paintings. For me, the grid paintings were more about exploration than the end result. There is a freeing aspect that resides in the use of simple grid structure that is well explained by Gross in her writings about the practice of Sol LeWitt when she states:

“The artist frees himself from the arbitrariness of the subjective composition. By adopting simple geometric matrices that define the possibilities of the work through objective operations, all the elements of the system, where “each line is as important as each other line, “ proved to be interdependent and equal. LeWitt then entrusted the development of his thought processes to self-generating systems once he had selected “the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that, the fewer decisions made in the course of the completing the work, the better. “ (11)

To become familiar with challenging colours, the thought process has to be systematic in order to establish a set of rules to follow. The rules I made to myself are something like the following: First, draw a series of parallel lines that are one inch apart. Then, paint with a thin layer of dark pink to create a one-inch band. Make sure to alternate with a non-painted space between each painted band. This creates the first layer of the grid. Before rotating the canvas nineteen degree, make sure that the painted lines are completely dry. Next, draw a series of line perpendicular to the first layer, one-inch apart. Afterward, paint between the lines one or two tone brighter than the layer underneath. Again, alternate with a non-painted line. Continue the same process until satisfied with the grid. However, when stacking the grid lines, make sure to leave areas of raw canvas exposed (fig.4).



Fig. 4: Close-up detail of Chartreuse Grid #1 on linen, oil on linen, 30 x 40", Marion Landry

The thought process happens before painting begins and is formalized when drawing the grid marks. Then I simply paint while following the pre-established rules. This is similar to how the work of LeWitt is produced. The thinking is done by the artist in advance and sent as sets of instructions to be produced by other artists. The process of painting became somewhat freeing, where I could focus on becoming accustomed with a new colour.

In the writings of Agnes Martin re-printed in the book by Herausgegeben Von Dieter Schwarz titled *Agnes Martin: Writings = Schriften* she mentions her practice as being a pursuit of truth and moments of perfection. Something similar happened for me during the process of painting the grid. I became completely absorbed in the act of painting in a similar way as ones get immersed in a meditative practice. Martin touches on this 'function' in art when she states, "The function of art is the stimulation of sensibilities. The renewal of memories of moments of perfection"(Schwarz 43). She does not describe her paintings as being perfect, but the creative process as a re-enactment of 'perfect moments'. The grid studies came as a desire to work through the avoidance of certain colours and seek within for a place of acceptance. I particularly relate to her statement about being connected with the creative process when she says, "When we are right on the track we are rewarded with joy. We can know the whole truth with a request to our minds. If we are completely without direction we can withdraw and our minds will tell us the next step to take." (Schwarz 99) The mechanical motion of painting between the lines helped me reach these moments of joy well described in Martin's writings.

The final result of the 'Grid' series hovers between architectural structure and interweaving effect. Motion is sensed not only from the transparency of the paint but also between the background and foreground lines of the grids. An optic illusion happens when looking at details of the grids when the eyes try to identify the order of the painted lines. Softness of the fabric and loose execution becomes a contrast with the rigidity of the grid. The grid lines read sharp and crisp from far however, when one looks at the paintings from close up, many imperfections are observed.

In the end, the 'Grid' series started as a simple exercise, and as it progressed it resolved a broader dilemma I had between both my designer and artist's mind. I find myself quite detached from the final result. Rather, I am impacted in a way I had not anticipated by the process of making the grid. As I stepped away from the work to allow for reflectivity, I am increasingly curious about the infinite permutations and the possibilities afforded by the use of the grid. I am left with many questions and a strong desire to explore further with the grid pattern. More will certainly be painted.



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Fig. 1 The water colour grids by José Antonio Suárez Londoño, insert, Reyna, Maria Soledad, *José Antonio Suárez Londoño: dibujos 1999-2011*, LetrArte Editores SAS, Pan Shapes and Forms of Bogotá, Colombia, October 2012, Artist Book

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