The Materials and Techniques of Ad Reinhardt
Lecture Notes

Corey D'Augustine

Slide 2:

Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) was a prominent New York School painter as well as an important theorist, critic, and comic.

Reinhardt's early work in the 1930s combined his interest in European geometric abstraction with a heightened attention to color.

In *Number 30* (1938), the artist stacks adjacent cool blues and violets with hot reds to provide the entire composition with a pulsing energy.

Reinhardt was a vehement proponent of abstraction and often sought to purify art from any commercial, political, or religious influences in his paintings, critical writings, and comics.

"Art is art-as-art," Reinhardt wrote, and "everything else is everything else." Further, "The one, eternal, permanent revolution in art is always a negation of the use of art for some purpose other than its own."

Slide 3:

Reinhardt was trained as an art historian and was a devoted scholar of East Asian and Islamic Art.

Among his early influences, the gridded compositions of *De Stijl* artist Piet Mondrian and the calligraphic traditions of Chinese and Japanese classicisms played especially important roles in his aesthetic development.

Slide 4:

Reinhardt fused these European and Asian traditions in a series of paintings of the late 1940s that adopt the grid as a compositional framework for an allover application of loose calligraphic brushwork.

While his New York School peers such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock also emphasized gestural painting techniques, Reinhardt's work of this period deliberately lacks both the physically aggressive handling of paint and the hot emotion characteristic

of these artists. Reinhardt was an oppositional figure and often an outspoken critic of his peers.

Reinhardt wrote, “By 1960, the battle for free and abstract art was being fought by artists, numbering now perhaps only one, privately protesting the Modern Museum’s “New American Painting,” the Whitney Museum’s “Geometric Art in America,” and the Guggenheim Museum’s “American Expressionist and Imagist” exhibitions, for using the ideas and history of abstract art to support and promote vulgar, postexpressionist, postsurrealist “pop abstraction.”

Slide 5:

Reinhardt further explored chromatic effects by often working in near-value palettes of complementary colors.

Value is the darkness of a color and can be estimated by imagining a black and white photograph of a painting.

Adjacent near-value colors often visually accent each other and amplify the chromatic effect of the palette.

Slide 6:

Reinhardt then gradually moved away from color contrast by working in tonal palettes, or a series of variations on a single hue.

His paintings of the early 1950s often work within ranges of red or blue hues as he also began to tighten his compositions by using fewer and more regular geometric shapes.

Slide 7:

Reinhardt continued this logical progression and by 1954 was often painting in 3x3 gridded formats.

These tonal paintings employ subtle chromatic differentiation to explore the spatial effects of color. For example, in *Abstract Painting (Red)* (1952), the warm red/orange colors are quickly perceived by the eye and suggest a space in front of the picture plane, while the cool red/violets appear muted and further withdrawn in the painting’s space.

Slide 8:

Reinhardt eschewed all subject matter in his paintings and instead explored increasingly refined formal qualities in his series of Black Paintings that began in 1954 and continued until his death in 1967.

Rather than truly black in color, these quiet paintings employ intensely dark shades of red, blue, and green.

Slide 9:

The compositions of the Black Paintings are often on the threshold of the viewer's perception and what at first appears as a simple black square is gradually visualized as a 3x3 grid. Given sufficient time and attention, the viewer will gradually see red squares at the four corners, blue squares midway along the upper and lower edges, and a green band across the center of the painting.

This is not always possible when viewing digital images of his work, and if you hear someone laughing at you, that's probably Reinhardt, who was delighted by the vast difference between the experiences of viewing one of his works directly and viewing its reproduction.

Reinhardt described the Black Painting as "a square (*neutral, shapeless*) canvas, five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (*not large, not small, sizeless*), trisected (*no composition*), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (*formless, no top, no bottom, directionless*), three (*more or less*) dark (lightless) no–contrasting (*colorless*) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a matte, flat, free–hand, painted surface (*glossless, textureless, non–linear, no hard-edge, no soft edge*) which does not reflect its surroundings—a pure, abstract, non–objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self–conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art (*absolutely no anti–art*)."

Slide 10:

In 1960, Reinhardt began an extended series of these Black Paintings that measure five feet on each edge.

Serially repeated, these paintings pushed the reductive logic of Modernism to its logical extreme. Reinhardt referred to these as "ultimate paintings" or "the last paintings that one can make," and he painted them again and again.

Slide 11:

Reinhardt developed a refined process to achieve the aesthetic qualities he sought in the Black Paintings, and unlike many of his New York School peers, he never made a mystery of the materials and techniques he used.

Although Reinhardt employed the most conventional painting materials of his time – oil paint, turpentine, paint brush, and canvas – he skillfully tailored these materials to achieve a painting radically free of surface gloss and traces of the artist's hand.

Slide 12:

To prepare his paints, Reinhardt would typically add a small amount of either red, blue, or green paint to a large amount of Mars Black paint in a glass jar. Although more research is required to fully understand his palette, the pigments Alizarin Crimson, Chrome Green, Ultramarine, and Cobalt Blue have been identified in Black Paintings.

After the paint had been added, Reinhardt filled the remainder of the jar with turpentine before closing the container and shaking vigorously for several minutes. The jar would then be left for at least a week so that the pigment settled to the bottom while the turpentine rose to the top.

The net effect of this procedure was to extract a quantity of linseed oil from the paint to the solvent phase at the top of the jar. This solvent would then be poured off to leave a pigment-rich sludge in the bottom of the jar which would be brushed out on newspaper to test its consistency. If too much linseed oil remained for Reinhardt's purposes, this medium extraction could be repeated several times.

Slide 13:

The Black Paintings were executed on low rolling tables so that no drips would occur despite the extremely low viscosity of this uniquely solvent-rich and pigment-rich paint.

In effect, Reinhardt preserved the homogeneity of the industrially-produced paint in the tube while increasing the pigment-to-binder ratio to a level seldom seen in any type of paint. Reinhardt's paint therefore has a matte, velvety quality while remaining free of surface inflections related to patches of increased medium content or pastose paint. However, withdrawing the medium also makes for an extremely fragile paint surface, as discussed later.

Slide 14:

Given the scale of these painting, Reinhardt used quite a small brush with a flat profile. His brushstrokes are perpendicular to the edge of the painted form so gradually construct a hand-made line without the use of a hard edge or masking tape.

In both the image of Reinhardt and the copy on the right, the recently applied paint can be recognized since it is saturated and wet in comparison with the adjacent areas of matte paint.

Slide 15:

The detail image on the left shows that this unorthodox paint "dries" twice – first when the solvent evaporates, and later when the residual oil actually dries.

The image on the right is a photomicrograph (e.g. photo taken through a microscope) of the surface of a Black Painting. Reinhardt's paint layers are so thin that the paint surface retains the woven texture of the canvas below.

Slide 16:

Reinhardt constructed his own frames and also painted them with extremely matte paint. The frames have an L-shaped profile and extends forward to protect the fragile paint surface.

As seen at the right, he also attached cardboard backings that contain his inscriptions while also protecting the reverse of the canvas from potential impact during handling or transportation.

Slide 17:

In 1966, Reinhardt mounted a retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum that contained scores of Black Paintings, each identical at first glance but differing slightly in color and composition. This exhibition was crucial to cementing the artist's role as a critical link between the New York School and the subsequent generations of Minimalist and Conceptual artists.

Slide 18:

Obviously these paintings also differ in condition. For example, a long vertical scuff can be seen just to the right of the center of the bottom edge of this painting.

Reinhardt was acutely aware of the fragility of these paintings and wrote, "The painting leaves the studio as a purist, abstract, non-objective object of art, returns as a record of everyday (*surrealist, expressionist*) experience (*'chance' spots, defacements, hand-*

markings, accident—'happenings,' scratches), and is repainted, restored into a new painting painted in the same old way (*negotiating the negation of art*), again and again, over and over again, until it is just 'right' again."

Reinhardt often restored his own paintings during his lifetime, sometimes by retouching a small damage, and more often by repainting full squares of the composition or the entire painting.

Slide 19:

After the artist's death, conservators and restorers have been greatly challenged by Reinhardt's Black Paintings. Because these paintings have such high pigment-to-binder ratios, the matte paint is underbound and particularly vulnerable to scratches, abrasions, and glossy marks from handling.

In addition, traditional conservation approaches that use water or solvent on a brush or swab are ineffective since the underbound paint literally imbibes the liquid, making these approaches both uncontrollable and irreversible.

These images of a tiny cross-section paint sample of a Black Painting are the result of research carried out by conservator Carol Stringari and colleagues from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and Orion Analytical LLC.

In the photomicrograph on the left, the lower half of the sample shows Reinhardt's paint layers over a white priming, whereas the upper half reveals approximately 10 restoration layers. The same sample was photographed in ultraviolet light on the right, and the blue fluorescence seen in many of the upper layers is characteristic of a synthetic resin such as acrylic. Reinhardt is not known to have completed any painting in acrylic.

These findings indicate that the painting has been completely repainted by a restorer multiple times. This approach does not comply with modern conservation ethics and further research is required to find appropriate techniques for the conservation of these challenging works.

Slide 20:

A possible solution for protecting these works is to exhibit them behind glass or Plexi, but this exhibition strategy compromises the aesthetics of the painting itself. Contemporary glazing materials can protect the paint surface and limit reflections but will still alter the color of the work.

Slide 21:

The Ad Reinhardt Foundation is currently exploring both the artist's materials and techniques as well as new conservation strategies to preserve these iconic works.

Slide 22:

An excellent way to understand Reinhardt's idiosyncratic approach to the Black Paintings is to prepare a mockup painting yourself, as seen here at a workshop held at the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

Slide 23:

Several key factors to consider are the following:

Due to the use of turpentine, be sure to have proper ventilation such as a fume extractor or an open window and fan.

Begin preparation of three jars of paint (Mars Black and turpentine with small additions of Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, and Chrome Green respectively) several weeks in advance of your studio session as described previously.

Choose a square format of primed linen canvas and measure out a 3x3 grid in pencil.

Be sure not to agitate these jars prior to pouring off solvent for the final time since doing so will mix pigment back into the solution and will make painting quite difficult.

Use a flat brush approximately 5cm wide and be sure to clean it fresh turpentine between painting from each jar to avoid mixing your colors.

Remove excess paint from the brush before approaching the canvas. The most common error in simulating Reinhardt's technique is using too much paint!

As seen in this slide, use the tip of the brush to construct the outer lines of each square before filling in the center.

Since the solvent is evaporating quickly, the key is to paint very rapidly and evenly. Editing the surface or painting slowly result in marks that are clearly visible when the painting dries.

The middle three squares of the composition can be painted in a single pass (e.g. rather than painting three adjacent squares).

You can add further layers after your initial surface is complete, but only after allowing the paint to dry for approximately a week.

Good luck and have fun!