

Op art still exercising its options in 2000

By Alan G. Artner
TRIBUNE ART CRITIC

Op art was a trend in abstract painting in the 1960s that proved so short-lived it's almost inconceivable it should have inspired works from artists in the '80s and '90s. But "post-hypnotic," a new exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center, indicates that was probably the case.

I say "probably" because, as was true with other neo and retro tendencies of the period, the source of inspiration served less as a model than a springboard leading toward a kind of art that had superficial resemblances but often quite different motives.

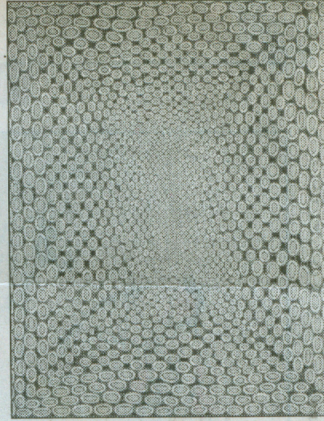
The works by the 28 artists represented in "post-hypnotic" thus might echo the look of Op art and still be "about" something other than its perceptual issues. In fact, a lot of the work on view is as much conceptual as perceptual, meaning that what you see is far from everything the artists intend you to get.

This is quite an impediment to viewer understanding, for if there ever was a self-sufficient kind of contemporary painting, Op was it. The patterns on each canvas made up the complete enterprise. There was no content apart from various eye- and mind-dazzling effects.

Some of the works in "post-hypnotic" — by Mark Dagley, Michael Scott and Philip Taaffe — seem to present the same sort of visual phenomena: moire patterns, afterimages and so on. But the organizer of the show tells us they merely make up the "unfinished business" of Op art, as if they were a means toward some larger goals not at once apparent.

Such goals differ in every case. And they can be discovered only with recourse to written (or spoken) texts. As with most conceptually based objects, few of the paintings on view prove self-sufficient, for they attempt various sorts of societal commentary and, at times, even an ironic stance that cannot be grasped from the purely optical stimuli on their surfaces.

Even the colors can seldom be taken at face value. Pink and chartreuse, for example, evoke such sources as '60s interior decoration, but rarely mean to leave it at that. An entire world of pop-culture references — from cartoons to early color television



James Siena's "Battery," 1997, is on view in the "post-hypnotic" exhibit at the Cultural Center.

Art review

— is supposed to seep in, and it's impossible to say from the works alone whether the artist's attitude is one of affection or critique.

In some instances — notably, the "spin" paintings by Walter Robinson — a kind of painting that once existed solely in the realm of county fair souvenirs is brought into an apparently serious context. But how serious, really, is the act when the results still look like do-it-yourself psychedelia?

Because the painters are far enough removed in time from Op art, they have appropriated the look and brought it into line with contemporary digital imagery. This sort of re-invention, while perhaps inevitable, would not seem to have much point. Yet there's enough of it in the course of the show that viewers are challenged to come to terms with it, if not to tease out ultimate "meaning."

What, for many, will save the most abstruse work is its buoyancy. There are more high spirits here than in another short-lived movement of the past, '80s Pattern Painting. And, profound or not, it is the visual effect that always outlives the commentary.

"post-hypnotic" continues at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., through June 25; gallery talks are scheduled for 12:15 p.m. Friday, May 26 and June 23 at the Center; a slide lecture will be given at 2 p.m. May 12 at Festival Hall at Navy Pier.