

COLOR THEORY: Week 5

“Color is a power which directly influences the soul.”

— Wassily Kandinsky

Washington Color School

As stated last week, Washington, DC, has never received the critical acclaim for its visual artists as New York City has, with the possible exception of those artists from the 1950s through 1970s known as the Washington Color School. The artists included:

- Morris Louis
- Kenneth Noland
- Thomas Downing
- Howard Mehring
- Gene Davis
- Paul Reed
- Alma Thomas (African American woman who taught in DC Public Schools)
- Sam Gilliam (African American)

Many of these artists brushed or poured thinned paint onto raw, unprimed canvas creating a more translucent effect in the colors. (Typically, canvas is sized, then primed with multiple layers of gesso which makes the surface less absorbent, in turn making the colors opaquer.) Often Morris Louis has been attributed with using this technique first, but recently credit has been given instead to Helen Frankenthaler, who used her “Soak-Stain Technique” in “Mountain and Sea” in 1952.

Film color and volume color—2 natural effects

Film color: In the *Interaction of Color*, Josef Albers noted the changes in the appearance of color of certain elements of nature. For example, mountains in the distance appear blue whether they are covered with grass or trees or flowers; the sun appears to change colors from sunrise to sundown; and the eaves of a white house can appear green on a sunlit day from light reflected off the grass. He referred to these as “film colors,” which “appear as a thin, transparent, translucent layer between the eye and an object, independent of the object’s surface color.”

Volume color: Albers identified a different color effect which he named “volume color.” The example he provided which demonstrates volume color is by comparing coffee in a cup versus a percolator versus a silex glass. He stated that although the three containers hold the same coffee, it appears as three different shades of brown. Volume color is perceived with three-dimensional fluids. For example, color volume can be readily viewed in the water at the steps into a swimming pool.

Transparence and Space Illusion

Using opaque paper or paints, one can create the illusion of one or more colors being transparent and/or some colors being over or under others. This is done by selecting two colors, then finding a color between them. Albers referred to the two original colors as parents and the middle color as the child. It is possible to create the illusion of transparence by shifting the child's:

- **Value:** Select a single hue, then find children of lighter value (tints) or darker values (shades).
- Or **Hue:** Select two hues for parents, then find hues between them. If the child is halfway between both parents, then the child will look transparent. If the child is closer to one of the two parents, the child will look as if it is on top of or below the parent.
- Or **crossing multiple areas of color,** one can create the effect of movement and of a transition of the children from above to below a parent or vice versa.

Graphic designers use the effect of transparence and space illusion in creating logos. Some examples are MasterCard, BP, and Chevron.