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ART & DESIGN

Julian Stanczak, Abstract Painter, Dies at 88

By **ROBERTA SMITH** APRIL 11, 2017



Julian Stanczak at his home in Ohio in 2013. Credit: Jeff Downie

Julian Stanczak, a Polish-born American abstract painter who rose to fame as a leading figure of the popular Op Art movement but slipped into obscurity when its reputation flagged, died on March 25 at his home in Seven Hills, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb. He was 88.

His death was confirmed by his New York gallery, Mitchell-Innes & Nash. His family said that he had died after a short illness.

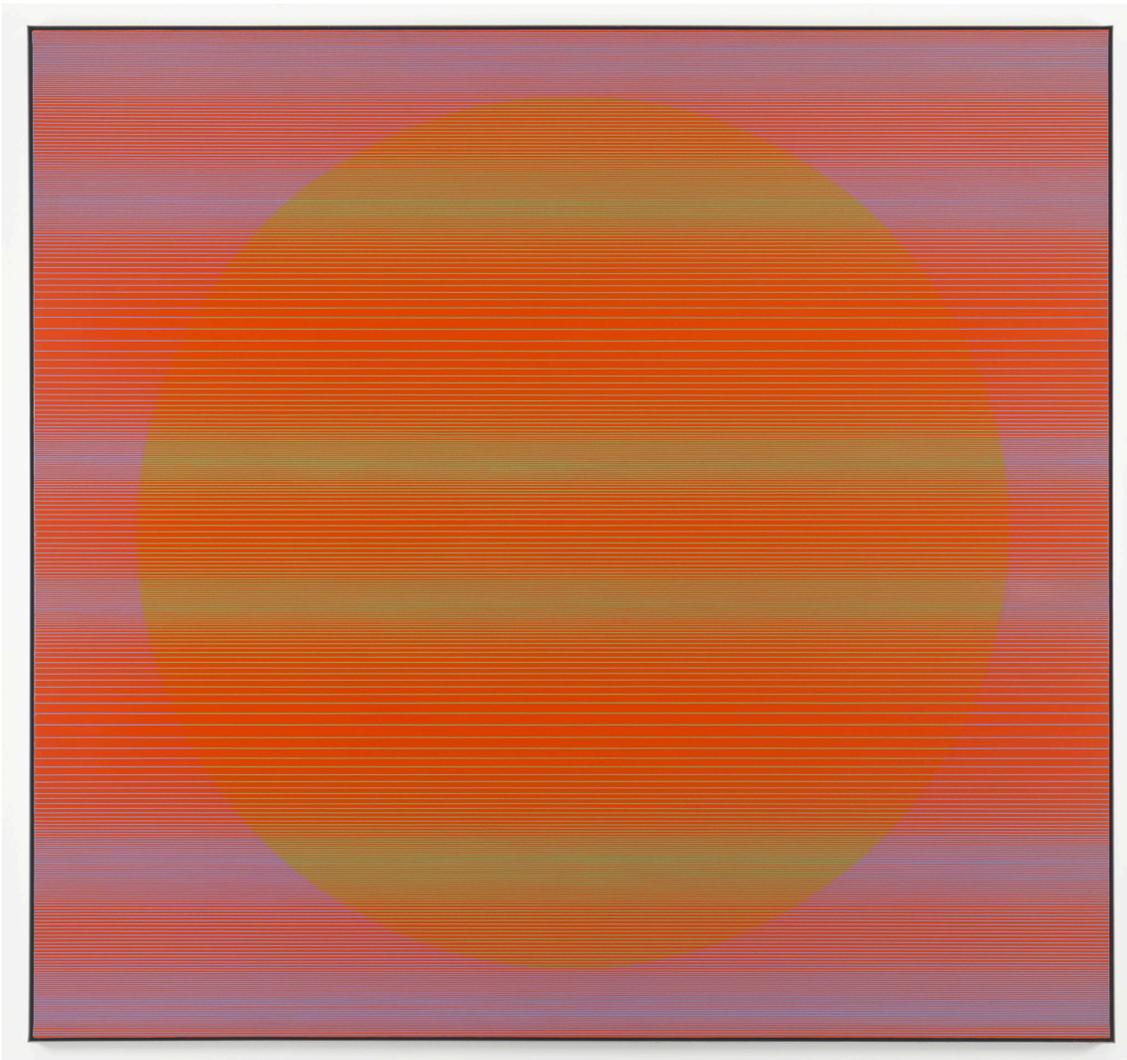
Mr. Stanczak was a firmly optimistic artist, despite injuries in a Soviet labor camp during [World War II](#) that rendered his dominant right arm useless. He helped name the art movement to which he was linked in 1964 when his New York debut at the Martha Jackson Gallery was titled “Julian Stanczak: Optical Paintings.”

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Reviewing that exhibition in Arts magazine, Donald Judd, then an emerging Minimalist sculptor, coined the phrase Op Art in a sardonic closing sentence, linking the upsurge in perceptual abstraction, as it was sometimes called, to the Museum of Modern Art's plans to survey the trend.

Indeed, Op Art went supernova in 1965, with the Modern's exhibition "The Responsive Eye" (even though the museum avoided the term). While critically derided, the exhibition set attendance records at the museum. It represented around 100 artists, from 15 countries and nearly three generations, working in assorted optical or geometric styles.

Mr. Stanczak's art evinced a tremendous geometric inventiveness. He constantly elaborated on the possibilities of parallel stripes, both straight and undulant; squares, both checkerboard and concentric; and grids, usually amplified by contrasting saturated colors.



Mr. Stanczak's acrylic painting "Referential Circle," 1968 All Rights Reserved, Estate of Julian Stanczak 2017, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

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He once told an interviewer that his style was an attempt to forget about his war traumas. “I did not want to be bombarded daily by the past,” he said. “I looked for anonymity of actions through nonreferential abstract art.”

But his work was far from anonymous. He produced some of the most emotionally gripping paintings associated with the Op trend. This was achieved partly by his delicately textured paint surfaces and partly by the soft light that often infiltrated his forms and patterns, the result of an infinitesimal adjustment of the shades of one or two colors.

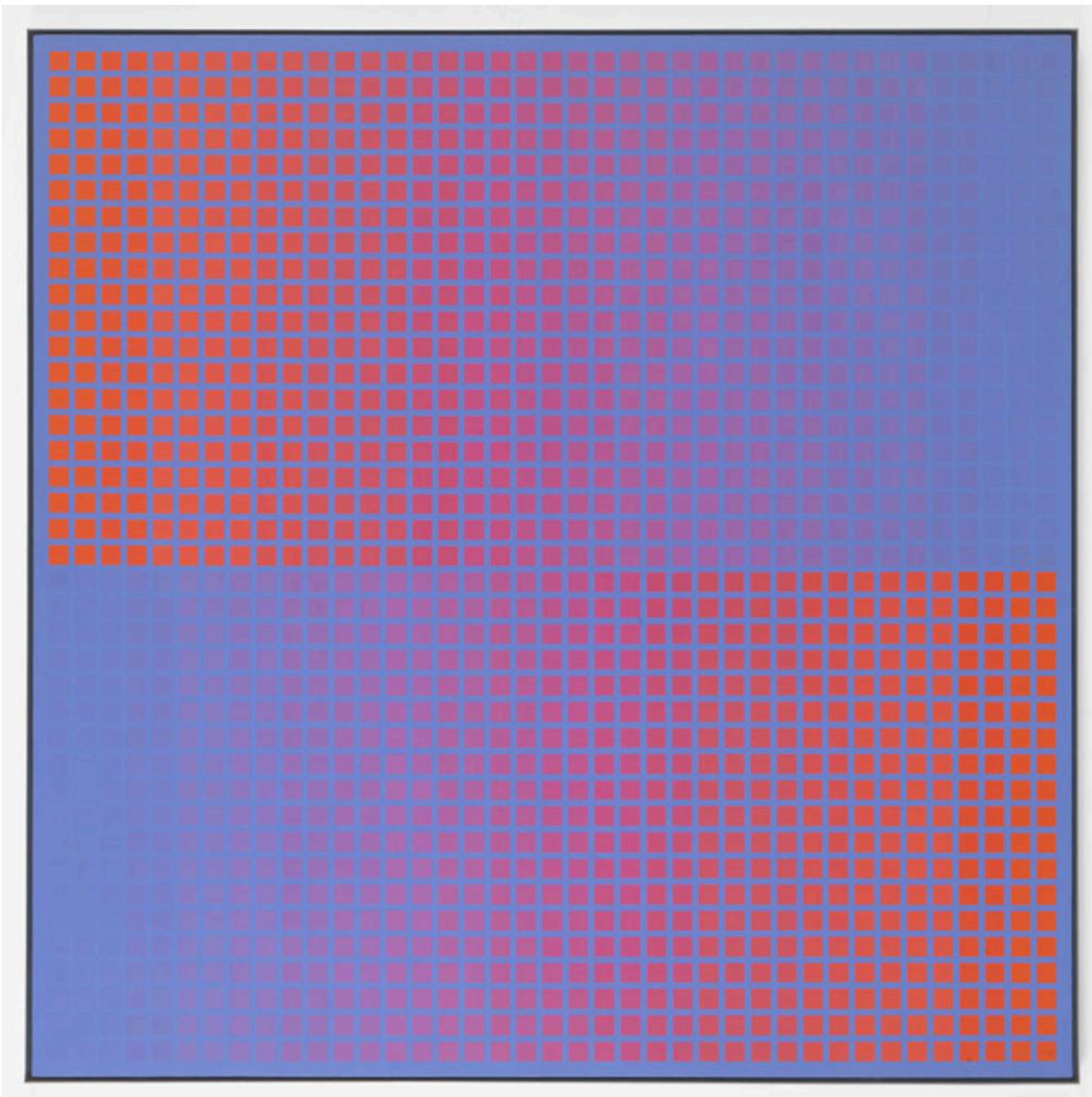
His main concern, in fact, was color, which he viewed subjectively. “Color is abstract, universal,” he once said, “yet personal and private in experience. It primarily affects us emotionally, not logically, as do tangible things.”

Julian Stanczak was born on Nov. 5, 1928, on his grandfather’s farm near the village of Borownica, Poland. His father worked in construction and built houses in addition to farming, and Julian loved to make things from wood, including furniture and toys.

In 1940, during Russia’s occupation of the eastern half of the country, Mr. Stanczak and his family were caught up in the first wave of mass deportations of Poles to Siberian labor camps. They ended up cutting timber in the Ural Mountains, where conditions were brutal. Mr. Stanczak survived pneumonia, encephalitis and near starvation, but overwork permanently incapacitated his right arm.

In 1942 the Soviet Union granted amnesty to imprisoned Polish citizens, and Mr. Stanczak and his family walked and hitchhiked 2,500 miles south to Tehran, where his father joined the Polish Army in exile. Saying he was 17 and not 14, Mr. Stanczak also joined — partly to eat, partly in the hope that the army’s doctors might help his arm. When they made it worse, he deserted. Mr. Stanczak, his mother and his sister ended up spending six years in a Polish refugee camp in Uganda.

There, Mr. Stanczak learned to write and paint left-handed. He was, he said, profoundly affected by the African light, the intensely colored sunsets and what he called “the immense visual energy” of nature there — the plants, trees and animals, especially zebras. He also admired the geometric patterns of the textiles from which Ugandan women made their clothing.



Mr. Stanczak's acrylic painting "Departing Red," 1974-75. All Rights Reserved, Estate of Julian Stanczak 2017, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

By 1948, when his family was reunited in London, Mr. Stanczak was making small, patterned abstractions in bright colors or in black and white. He studied art at the Borough Polytechnic Institute for two years and devoted himself to the city's art museums. In 1950 the family relocated to Cleveland, and in 1954 he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art.

He then studied for his master's at Yale with Conrad Marca-Relli and Josef Albers, who was well known for his color theories (and who was also the oldest artist in the "Responsive Eye" exhibition). Mr. Stanczak's roommate was Richard Anuszkiewicz, another graduate of the Cleveland Institute and, later, another prominent Op artist.

Mr. Stanczak, who became a United States citizen in 1957, taught at the Cincinnati Academy of Art for seven years. In 1964, the year of his first New York show, he was

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appointed professor of painting at the Cleveland Institute of Art, where he taught for 38 years.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara Stanczak, a sculptor; their daughter, Danusia M. Casteel; their son, Krzys; two grandchildren; and a great-grandson.

Mr. Stanczak remained affiliated with the Martha Jackson Gallery until it closed in 1979, by which time Op Art had been largely superseded by Minimalism and other more austere kinds of geometric abstraction — at least within the confines of New York. He continued to exhibit frequently elsewhere, especially in galleries and museums across the Midwest; more than 90 museums in the United States and abroad ultimately acquired his work. But he did not have a solo show in New York until 2004, at the Stefan Stux Gallery, followed by another there in 2005.

On that occasion, Grace Glueck of The New York Times noted that Mr. Stanczak's work "has steadily become more refined and ingenious" and asked, "Who says Op Art is dead?"

By then, renewed interest was bringing it back to life. From 2010 to 2016, D. Wigmore Fine Art, a New York gallery, mounted six group shows examining different aspects of Op Art, including its manifestations in Ohio; the shows featured Mr. Stanczak's work prominently. Articles on his work appeared in Artforum and Art in America.

In 2012, Mr. Stanczak's paintings were included in "Ghosts in the Machine," a thematic exhibition at the New Museum in Manhattan. In 2014, he had his first show with Mitchell-Innes & Nash. A second one will open there next month.