

Matter and Matrix

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(Catalogue essay, excerpt)

By Mary MacNaughton

Amy Ellingson also creates visual systems; however, hers pull the viewer back and forth between what she thinks of as a “central focal point and peripheral information.” Thus, she calls her current series *Ec/centric Compositions*, which are comprised of discrete networks of colored lines superimposed to create layered linear systems. Her fascination with center versus periphery was fueled by her reading of Rudolph Arnheim’s book *The Power of the Center*, in which he traced the historical import and psychological potency of centered forms in art. Indeed, her images remind us of the mind’s neural networks, the human aptitude for pattern recognition, and the way the brain can recognize similar patterns in different fields of experience. Her work also materializes the concept of network, a system of connected nodes with links that follow specific rules, forming a pattern.

Ellingson’s *Ec/centric* works grow out of an earlier series, in which she appropriated visual elements from popular culture, splicing parts of textile patterns, comic books, advertising images, and typographic fragments. “At the time I was thinking of the digital ‘cut and paste’ process as the logical extension of collage as pioneered by the Cubists,” she says. In her current work, Ellingson has moved away from appropriating popular cultural imagery, and initiates her compositions with a single, simple element. For example, in *Even After a Century of Winter*, 2001, she began with an arc, which she intersected with other arcs and made into a grid by multiplying them. Throughout her career, Ellingson has been preoccupied with three themes that she describes as “repetition and difference, dissolution and resolution, and sameness and variety.” These forces are at work in *Even After a Century of Winter*, in which she repeated the layers of arcs, compressing one more than the other. Similarly, in *Untitled (Straight/curved: yellow, black, orange, white)*, 2003, Ellingson started with vertical and horizontal lines, and bent the resulting perpendicular lines into an oblong form, transforming the 90-degree angle into an arc. She then created a square of overlapping arcs, which she crossed and extended to form a repeating grid. In other paintings, she begins with a simple dot or line, then replicates and multiplies the mark to make a pattern.

What connects these paintings with her earlier work is Ellingson’s ongoing fascination with repetition, also a major theme of Pop Art, which she acknowledges was a point of departure for her prior series. Fifteen years ago, she developed an interest in duplication by reading Gertrude Stein’s essay “Portraits and Repetition,” in

Lectures in America. In this collection of essays, Ellingson was fascinated by Wendy Steiner's introduction, which connects Stein's ideas about repetition to the serial imagery of Andy Warhol. Ellingson was struck by Stein's assertion that repetition is not meaningless but meaningful. "In expressing anything there can be no repetition," Stein said, "because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist, you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis." Ellingson's works demonstrate how repetition changes the aspect and impact of patterns. "I think of forms pushing through and coming up to the surface and being insistent," she says. She dropped the appropriated images from advertising and popular culture because she felt they were distracting conduits to the outside world. Instead, in her current works, she is intent on keeping the viewer's mind focused and "held," as she describes it, as long as possible in the painting. "I use repetition, replication, and differentiation (of simple geometric forms) to create an object that is more self-contained and self-referencing." To this end Ellingson keeps opposing visual forces in balance. As she explains:

It is the dichotomy of the destabilizing and stabilizing effect of repetition that interests me right now, and the differences between repetition based on the appropriation of recognizable images, and the repetition and differentiation of abstract forms. The latter is more interesting to me because the "matrix" and its variations (changes in subsequent layers) all exist in the same physical space, connoting change, growth, movement, etc. and the development of a network of information that can be understood in relation to itself—through "insistence" and the assertion of forms.

For example, in both *Even After a Century of Winter* and *Untitled*, Ellingson creates visually elastic patterns; her networks expand and contract, pulling outward in *Untitled* and stretching upward in *Even After a Century of Winter*. In these systems, which are both precise and pliant, she creates a dynamic tension between static form and optical movement. This visual combination recalls Op Art of the sixties, which Ellingson likes:

I have been very influenced by Bridget Riley's writings, particularly one in which she describes the use of color as a destabilizing factor that serves to remind us of our unstable world. Her compositions are unified and often regular and predictable (and comforting in that respect) but there is always an optical, chromatic or compositional disruptor of some kind... The struggle between center and the periphery is an Op Art strategy, and I use that technique to keep the viewer focused on the painting.

In addition to Riley, Ellingson has been interested in the writings of other twentieth-century abstract painters, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt. However, in contrast to their art, which is totally flat, her work deliberately contrasts opacity and transparency. "I am layering not just to produce vibrancy," she says, "but also to create a field that is both deep and illusionistic." What Ellingson seeks is a "fragile stability" in which she keeps different optical forces in balance.

Ellingson's works have a tangible physical presence, as she paints them in encaustic, an ancient technique in which pigment is mixed in hot wax and applied to the panel. The wax hardens quickly, so there is not margin of error. Though encaustic is a difficult medium to use, Ellingson, who has employed it since 1991, likes it precisely for its demanding nature. "Yes, it's unforgiving, but a huge part of my process is controlling this uncontrollable medium, largely by going back into repeatedly to add, subtract, and shape it. It is the most labor-intensive part of the process, but it is never right the first time." In each work, she carefully paints separate layers of oil followed by encaustic paint, and between idea and execution, the process is consuming. Ellingson's encaustic bands are both definite and dimensional. As is evident in a detail of *Untitled (Straight/curved: yellow, black, orange, white)*, 2003, she superimposes network upon network, and makes the last layer the thickest. Indeed, a close up view of *Even After a Century of Winter* reveals thick overlapping systems as tactile as taffy.

In her paintings, Ellingson draws attention to our search for meaning in patterns. For some, her systems allude to the invisible networks of the digital world. Her patterns echo the largest network ever built by humans, the World Wide Web, which in 1999 had almost a billion documents. Made up of nodes and links, or Uniform Resource Locators, which take us from one web page to another, gigantic databases are connected by the click of a mouse, and we access them at increasingly faster rates. Similarly, Ellingson's systems hit the eye instantaneously, suggesting sections of vast networks, such as the Web.

Moreover, Ellingson's networks also evoke the image of a huge distributed intelligence, as the Web has been predicted to become by some futurists. Further, her paintings echo the Web's basic structure of connecting large and small nodes. As more links are added to these nodes, the distance between them shrinks, so that within a few steps the viewer moves from one point to another. Though Ellingson does not think of the Web as she works, like this invisible structure, her colorful networks join the macrocosmic and microcosmic. Both large and small, Ellingson's networks have no apparent beginning or end, and seem to be sliced from a larger whole. Indeed, her paintings pose the question of whether they are wholes or fragments of unseen wholes. Ultimately, Ellingson sees her images as metaphors of the feeling of being whole versus fragmented.