

Cullum's Notebook: Drennen and Sagerman offer intriguing mysteries that reward deeper engagement

By Jerry Cullum

[this article has been shortened for content and brevity]

I make this point because I want to focus attention on Robert Sagerman's [Totalizations](#), at Marcia Wood Gallery through February 3. This suite of (seemingly) monochrome paintings is an indisputably successful body of work that seems on first encounter to be almost psychotropic in its capacity for defeating perceptual expectations; mind-bendingly beautiful, but nevertheless a recognizable type of pure abstraction.



Robert Sagerman, 17,296, oil on linen, 2017, 48" x 46" (Courtesy the artist/Marcia Wood Gallery)



This is not at all the case. It would be enough if these large (mostly 48 by 46 inches, though one is as small as 21 by 20) oil or silicone and pigment on linen panels were only the dizzying color fields of swirling strokes of paint that greet and defeat the eye. On that level alone, they stir depths of emotion. (By the way, a closer look at a work like 17,296 reveals that only some of these works are monochromes, and then it is a misleading word to use when describing these paintings.)

The numbers used as titles suggest that the number of distinct and separate paint strokes incorporated into the painting have a significance beyond merely covering a given area. In fact, Sagerman has long given a metaphysical significance to his way of working, although he hasn't necessarily been certain of the always elusive meaning. The quest led him to a doctorate in Jewish mysticism, in which acts of numeration are a meditative practice as part of the reparation of the universe and its restoration to the Godhead. In more secular modes of understanding, his longing to find an adequate explanation for the activity of painting has led him to carefully reasoned statements grounded in the anthropology of [Clifford Geertz](#). He uses, in particular, Geertz's concept of totalization; cultures offer what feels to their participants to be comprehensive and complete visions of reality, and Sagerman's artistic practice is meant to provide the same totalization in terms of an overwhelming visual experience (and more than that besides).

There we can leave it. Most viewers will be satisfied with the overwhelming visual experience. Others will want the whole story.

Craig Drennen's [BANDIT](#) runs at MOCA-GA through January 27, and Robert Sagerman's [Totalizations](#) is at Marcia Wood Gallery through February 3. Marcia Wood Gallery will host a special viewing time with refreshments this Sunday, January 21, from 1 to 4 p.m.