

Robert Sagerman

By Roberta Carasso, PH.D.

Lush, intricate surfaces and intense sensuality characterize Robert Sagerman's paintings. Fields of color and texture seem to draw one in, enfolding the viewer. Yet, for those interested in delving into their depths, fascinating conceptual significations also abide within these works.

Most often, Sagerman characterizes his work in terms of the navigation of dichotomies, the holding together of oppositions in the mind. This provides a useful point of entry into his creative world. For, in front of one of these paintings, the viewer is quickly faced with sets of such oppositions. One feels, for instance, the imperative to stand back and take in the full effect of the field, and yet at the same time to walk up close to examine the work's enticing details. There, at close range, one encounters the interplay of another opposition, as a thick density of paint gives way to manifold deep openings in the surface. The latter allow the viewer to look into the piece and back to the early stages of its genesis. Material and empty space complement each other, as the painting's history is opened up to the present. Stepping back again, one sees that more recent pieces contain color transitions or gradations, introducing an optical intangibility or ephemerality to the work. Perhaps the most important opposition of all, the effect of the whole piece is to seemingly dissolve the material stuff of paint into an immaterial force field. It is this latter apparent opposition in the work, the material versus the immaterial, which suggests the conceptual depth of Sagerman's painting.

Sagerman's practice is grounded in the metaphysical traditions of kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and Buddhism. In particular, the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, an influential thirteenth century kabbalist, serve as a touchstone for Sagerman's process. This mystic was the subject of Sagerman's doctoral dissertation from New York University and subsequent book, published by Brill in 2010. Abulafia advanced a technique to experientially bridge the gap between the terrestrial and the other-worldly. This practice involved the meditative manipulation of Hebrew letters, known as *letter permutation*, which opened up endless interpretive possibilities

based upon the letters' numerical equivalences. Such a model is attractive to Sagerman in terms of his own creative process. Sagerman views his activity of color permutation as an opportunity to come into communion with that which arises in the studio in the moment. This proceeds in two directions: Sagerman mindfully takes note of his own aesthetic responses to the developing painting, while at the same time he tracks a seemingly endless procession of more cerebral interpretations of his work activity.

Sagerman maintains a ledger for each developing painting. He records a swatch for each color mixed, along with the time spent on that color and the number of marks applied. Depending on size and composition, a given painting may consist of fifty to two hundred and fifty colors. These ledgers serve to liberate the art from the confines of oil on canvas, lifting the physical art toward a more immaterial realm. Once a painting is completed, the physically detached ledger may be seen to stand as the essence of the work, with the painted object literally embodying the essence, imbuing it with evocative force.

Sagerman's website is a conceptual piece with a thrust similar to that of the ledgers. It presents an ongoing tabulation of all the numerical data for his entire oeuvre, a meta-piece in its own right. It, too, approaches the immaterial core of the work.

Nevertheless, while the conceptual dimension is crucial for him, Sagerman remains a painter. His process begins with the manufacture of his own paint, lending a holistic tone to his entire studio practice. Turning to the painting, he meticulously mixes each color. Then, working systematically in oil paint with a palette knife, he gesturally applies each daub as a sculptural construct. He works from larger to smaller areas, both vertically and horizontally, applying paint all over the canvas, colors shifting from light to dark or dark to light. Gradations may appear in a relatively confined color range, or the overall hue of a gradation may shift noticeably from top to bottom. Sagerman explains that these gradations evoke for him the rich history of mystical literature concerning the veiling and revelation of

the divine essence. Essential to the integrity of the art, each small section of a color gradation is capable of standing on its own within the larger piece.

Sagerman's orientation is one where self and art co-mingle. Herein lies one final opposition or dichotomy, that between coaxing the painting along and deferring to its own will as it begins to articulate itself. Sagerman ultimately seeks a fertile admixture here, relinquishing control within crucial parameters. In this way, an opening is left for the unexpected, and new color and structural possibilities may spontaneously emerge. These tend to defy expectations of a linear development or narrative to Sagerman's artistic production. The work has become compositionally more elaborate in recent years, and yet, for the first time, purely monochrome pieces have also come into being. Sagerman deliberately avoids any over-arching trajectory here, opting always to endeavor to hold oppositions in suspension in the mind. For this project he finds many analogies in mystical literature - he points both to the Buddhist "Middle Way" and to the Kabbalists' "Middle Column" in this regard. What results for him in practice is an abiding with the perpetual coming-into-being of studio practice.