Richard Anuszkiewicz: An Artistic Vision Born in Cleveland Leads the Way to Op Art and Beyond

Curlee Raven Holton
Assistant Professor of Art
Lafayette College
Easton, Pennsylvania 18042-1768

Introduction

Among the important artists of our time, the work and life of Richard Anuszkiewicz stands out as symbol of discipline and dedication. His exploration of the function of color and visual perception bridges the palette of Matisse and the austere images of the minimalist.

Richard Anuszkiewicz is a man of tradition, both as it relates to his artistic career and his personal life. He has stated that, although his work has been defined by its optical phenomena, he believes it to be firmly grounded in the tradition of the modern abstractionist and expressionist. His work stands firmly in the pantheon of American art.

Anuszkiewicz’s esthetic investigation spans almost fifty years and moves well beyond the dimensions of the modern art. In making the function of color his subject matter, Anuszkiewicz releases the internal light and spirit that reside in each color. His works resonate and pulsate with an aura much like those associated with ancient religious objects. Joseph Albers, the renowned painter and teacher, once stated that the role of an artist was that of illuminator. Anuszkiewicz, a student of Albers, has gone on to become legendary in mastering and illuminating the mysteries of color. In the 1960s, shortly after arriving on the New York art scene, Anuszkiewicz was described by one reviewer as a “master magician of cool pyrotechnics whose colors glow and shimmer with calm, almost classical beauty”.1

Our Meeting

Richard Anuszkiewicz and I first met last spring during his visit to Lafayette College as the Grossmen Artist-in-Residence. As a result of this meeting and discussions of our shared history with the Cleveland Institute of Art, we agreed to collaborate on a series of prints. This was not my first encounter with his work. As a former student of the Cleveland Institute of Art, he was regarded as one of its most accomplished graduates. I also had the opportunity to view his Distinguished Alumnus Exhibition, held at the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1988.

Anuszkiewicz’s work is found in major museums and collections which include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Yale University and of course our own Cleveland Museum of Art. His work has been exhibited internationally in venues including the 1966 World’s Fair, Montreal, Canada, and the 1986 Venice Biennial. Richard Anuszkiewicz’s international recognition has
brought him much respect, but so has his graciousness and his generosity of spirit. His spirit of sharing, and that of his wife, Sally, made our project and this presentation possible.

The Print Project

The collaboration between Anuszkiewicz and me began shortly after his very successful residency at Lafayette College. It was my suggestion that I print one of his images, hoping to demonstrate two things. First, our newly-established print facility at Lafayette could fully execute the printing of works by major artists. In previous Grossmen residencies, I had only limited opportunities to print plates executed on site during classroom visits by such renowned artists as Faith Ringgold and Robert Beauchamp. The second factor was my desire to demonstrate to Anuszkiewicz that we could achieve a highly-embossed surface similar to his three-dimensional works and some cast paper pieces. His prints have traditionally been silkscreened.

A Marriage of Engineering and Art

The translation of his construction, Yellow Unresolved (1992), into the print medium represents more than just a mere reinterpretation of an image. This project was unusual in that we utilized computerized equipment to prepare the plate’s surface. During the late spring and early summer, we began the process of transferring Anuszkiewicz’s original drawings to a computer program. First, the Engineering Department programmed the cutting drills to execute the patterns designed by Anuszkiewicz.

The other unusual aspect of this project was the excitement we both shared as we began the proofing process. In most cases the role of the printmaker is limited to that of translating the image for an artist. In this case those traditional boundaries were removed. This approach expanded the range of choices and consequently infused the process with a sense of excitement and anticipation. We proceeded in this project by printing a series of proofs in the colors of my choice with references to Richard’s signature palette of chromatic colors.

To remain true to Anuszkiewicz’s esthetic sense and palette, which demanded a certain clean color registration, we did multiple printings. This was also done to avoid the halo effect that occurs with deeply-incised plates. These were the only limitations placed on the process. Anuszkiewicz also encouraged me to experiment with my own colors and to include them as I felt inclined. During the late summer, I completed travels to Mexico and the Caribbean as a part of a junior faculty research leave and decided to incorporate into our palette some of the popular colors of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Richard Anuszkiewicz gave generously of his time to participate in this project even as he prepared for upcoming exhibitions in Europe. I believe this represented deep commitment to sharing with others. Later in the project when I asked him about this, he stated that he felt
comfortable working with me and that our Cleveland connection was an important factor in his decision.

The Cleveland Connection

The Cleveland Institute Art holds a special place in Anuszkiewicz’s heart as do the friendships he established there. He speaks of his Cleveland days and friendships with nostalgic joy. Friendships established as a young student of twenty remain strong to this very day. He holds in great reverence the city and school that was the womb for the birth of his creative vision. During my many visits to his home and studio in Englewood, New Jersey, he often spoke of how he arrived in Cleveland from his home in Erie, Pennsylvania.

He brought out a scrapbook that his mother had kept chronicling his career, which demonstrated the great pride she had in her son’s accomplishments. He spoke of his neighborhood and the poverty of his childhood. He spoke of the committed support of his family who had no real notion of the world he was entering, but who had great faith in his abilities. Well, at least most of the time, that is. He told me of the time he had his first show of his optical paintings in New York City. On this occasion, Anuszkiewicz sold a number of works and in his excitement he telephoned his mother to share this news. He laughs as he recalls his mother’s response. She chided him that had he continued painting in his earlier realistic style he would have sold more.

The realistic style that his mother referenced was the type of work he had done during much of his time at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and for which he had received much recognition. This style known as “The Cleveland School” is an approach to realism that incorporated urban social commentary while injecting magical realities into its format. Early works by Anuszkiewicz show not only the impact of this regionalism and his mastery of it, but also his awareness of the work of artists on the national scene. The works, White Wall (1950), and The Artist, (1951) bring to mind the work of Ben Shahn. In other works of this period such as Still Life with White Chair (1950), we recognize the influence of Ivan Albright with whom Anuszkiewicz was quite taken.

Anuszkiewicz attended the Cleveland Institute of Art as a result of receiving a scholarship after winning first place in the National Scholastic competition. He exhibited widely even as he pursued his studies at the Cleveland Institute of Art. These exhibitions often included the work of his fellow students like Julian Stanczak, and in some cases the work of his teachers, Paul Dubaniewicz and Francis Meyers.

This already impressive record of accomplishments for such a young man was only the beginning. On the occasion of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s 35th May Show, Anuszkiewicz won a first and a second prize and an honorable mention in three different painting classes. In the following year he went on to win another May Show prize as well as prizes in two Erie,
Pennsylvania shows.  

This all began when Anuszkiewicz was a small boy in Erie, Pennsylvania, and a nun at the St. Stanislaus Parochial School saw him drawing with crayons and gave him the assignment of decorating the blackboard.  

In May, 1953, he won the prestigious Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship award which allowed him to complete his fifth year at the Institute.  

Considering the work produced during Richard Anuszkiewicz's Cleveland period, his range of abilities is quite evident. Examples include: *Women in White* (1950); *Winter Field* (1951); *The Bride* (1951); *Wall* (1951); *Coal Pickers* (1951); *Kolbe Fishers* (1951); *Elaine* (1951). In the work *Eight Windows* (1951), we recognize perhaps the influence of Edward Hopper.  

Other works during this period demonstrate his academic proficiency, for example: *Six Altar Boys at Sanctus* (1951); *By The Tracks* (1952); *Carpet Still Life* (1952); *Cellar Inheritance* (1952); *The Sled* (1952); *Basket Still Life* (1953); and *Tom* (1953).  

The work Anuszkiewicz produced during this period was focused on mastering technical problems, and finding his way through the traditional esthetics of his teachers at the Institute. As he concluded his fifth-year studies at the Institute, a critical juncture began in his maturation process. He began to narrow his subject matter as he gained greater clarity in his personal vision. He recalled this process in an interview "Portrait of an Artist" by Jay Jacobs, in *The Art Gallery Magazine*, March 1971. He explained that his personal direction started to emerge towards the end of his days in Cleveland, and states "I was beginning to be more selective about what interested me."

What clearly interested him was the use of color and its ability to define spatial elements without the traditional devices of perspective. We see this in its most basic form when we look back to the work of 1951, *Six Altar Boys At Sanctus*. Anuszkiewicz took one last walk through the doors of the Cleveland Institute of Art. He noticed a rather tall fellow reading the bulletin board; and as he passed, he recognized a young Joe McCullough who had just started teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art. He continued his rounds to say good-bye to his best friends and teachers who had been important in his development and took one last walk through his classrooms. He packed his things and had one last beer at the Old Euclid Tavern and was on his way to make his mark in the art world.  

This was not to be the end of Richard Anuszkiewicz's connection to Cleveland. He was to return often during his studies at Yale University with Joseph Albers. He told me during our interviews that he brought Joseph Albers to Cleveland. His fellow students did not know Alber's ground-breaking work; and as a result, others were inspired to join him at Yale. His close friend, Julian Stanczak, came to Yale the following year where they roomed together.
After Anuszkiwicz completed his studies at Yale, he returned to Cleveland to attend Kent State University for a Bachelor of Science in Education.

Endnotes


4. Ibid.