

HARMONY & DISCORD

A current museum survey proves that Roy Lichtenstein's engagement with abstraction made his Pop art crackle.

BY RICHARD KALINA

THE QUINTESSENTIAL Pop artist, the master of the cartoon figure writ large, the man of whom *Life* magazine asked in 1964, "Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?", Roy Lichtenstein, nonetheless, produced much work that is abstract in the broad sense of the word. As he said in a 1995 *New York Times* interview with Michael Kimmelman, "All abstract artists try to tell you that what they do comes from nature, and I'm always trying to tell you that what I do is completely abstract. We're both saying something we want to be true." The full-scale traveling museum survey, "Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective," opening this month at the Art Institute of Chicago, naturally focuses on the artist's well-known Pop icons. Most of us think of Pop art as representational, but a substantial number of the over 160 pieces in the show fall into the realm of the abstract. Viewing the artist's achievement through the lens of abstraction—an approach rarely taken—allows us to look at Lichtenstein from a different perspective, and to connect him not just to the wider range of 20th-century art, but to the ongoing evolution of abstract painting.

Lichtenstein (1923-1997) developed a methodology—a toolbox of devices, effects and stylistic moves imbued with a distinctive mix of irony, craft and anxiety—that has had a significant impact on several generations of abstract artists. I am one of them. Having worked early on as his assistant, I absorbed, perhaps inadvertently, many elements of his studio practice and his artistic worldview. De Kooning



Roy Lichtenstein:
Brushstroke with Spatter,
1966, oil and Magna
on canvas, 68 by 80 inches.
Courtesy the Art
Institute of Chicago.

might seem a more obvious influence on abstract painters, but could Philip Taaffe, for instance, be seen in quite the same light without Lichtenstein's example?

Lichtenstein's abstractions draw from his well-honed repertoire of Pop material. These works, however, may be divided into two prominent categories—one calm, regularized, balanced and easily read, the other perceptually odd and off-putting. Apart from the Surrealist mash-ups and American Indian montages of the late '70s and the "Reflection"

OPENING THIS MONTH

"Roy Lichtenstein:
A Retrospective," at the
Art Institute of Chicago,
May 16-Sept. 3.



Left, *Brushstroke with Still Life VII*, 1996, oil and Magna on canvas, 30 inches square. Courtesy Lenhardt Collection, Arizona.

Opposite, *Pink Seascape*, 1965, Rowlux and collaged painted paper on board, 28 by 21½ inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

series of 1988-1990, Lichtenstein's more familiar Pop work generally fits into the balanced and easily identifiable group. However, working abstractly—that is, being less tethered to a unifying real-world signification—seemed to free him. It allowed him to infuse his work with unease and harshness whenever he wished. This discord is perceptual and direct rather than cerebral and ironic. While these abstractions might seem to be awkward or “off,” they are quite intentionally so, and serve to add depth and emotional shading to Lichtenstein's body of work as a whole.

Discordant abstract paintings appear with regularity in Lichtenstein's Pop oeuvre. There are, for example, the Mirror Paintings

of the early '70s, the Imperfect Paintings of the mid- to late '80s, and the Abstract Paintings with Frames from the early '80s. However, the dichotomy of calm and agitated works is best demonstrated by two themes that Lichtenstein explored in depth—brushstrokes and abstract landscapes. The most familiar brushstroke paintings—those from the mid '60s, such as *Little Big Painting* (1965) or *Brushstroke with Spatter* (1966)—are lively and well ordered, with a tendency toward the baroque. They are famously ironic takes on the sacrosanct Abstract Expressionist brushstroke—that carrier of individuality, existential doubt, improvisation and irreproducibility. Lichtenstein's brushstroke paintings are painstakingly crafted and defi-

antly nonspontaneous, with clear color separations and comic book hues. They are smart and witty to be sure, but they are also among Lichtenstein's most esthetically satisfying and pleasurable paintings. They combine the sensual aspects of both Pop and Abstract Expressionism. In the process they highlight Ab Ex's formal rather than emotional or transcendent qualities, as well as its underlying elegance and legibility.

LICHTENSTEIN RETURNED to the brushstroke theme repeatedly, in painting and in sculpture. Thirty years after the first brushstrokes, he made another 10 modestly scaled paintings of the subject in 1996, three of which are included

in the show. They combine Pop and Ab Ex in a much more literal and disturbing way. Here again, the artist goes against his proclivity for harmony, formal cohesion and good taste (even if this is good bad taste). In these never-before-exhibited paintings—*Brushstroke Abstraction I*, *Brushstroke Abstraction II* and *Brushstroke with Still Life VII*—Lichtenstein takes hard-edge shapes and slathers a few chunky “real” brushstrokes over them in thick lines that form loosely delineated enclosures.

The brushstrokes, laid down not with a brush but a cloth dipped in paint, are rendered in an especially unattractive shade of ultramarine blue, crudely and unevenly mixed with white. The Kline-like strokes are awkward and inelegant. The hard-edged elements seem designed to set the teeth on edge as well. *Brushstroke Abstraction I* features a field of thin and very optically active diagonal black and white stripes occupying the upper left corner of the painting and a swath of the bottom edge, a triangle of pale turquoise on the lower left-hand edge and a small section of red Benday dots on a yellow field in the lower right corner. The other two paintings, in addition to the blue brushstrokes, give us a collection of planes and textures and some half-formed perspectival elements in a palette of odd tans, browns, grays and pastel yellows.

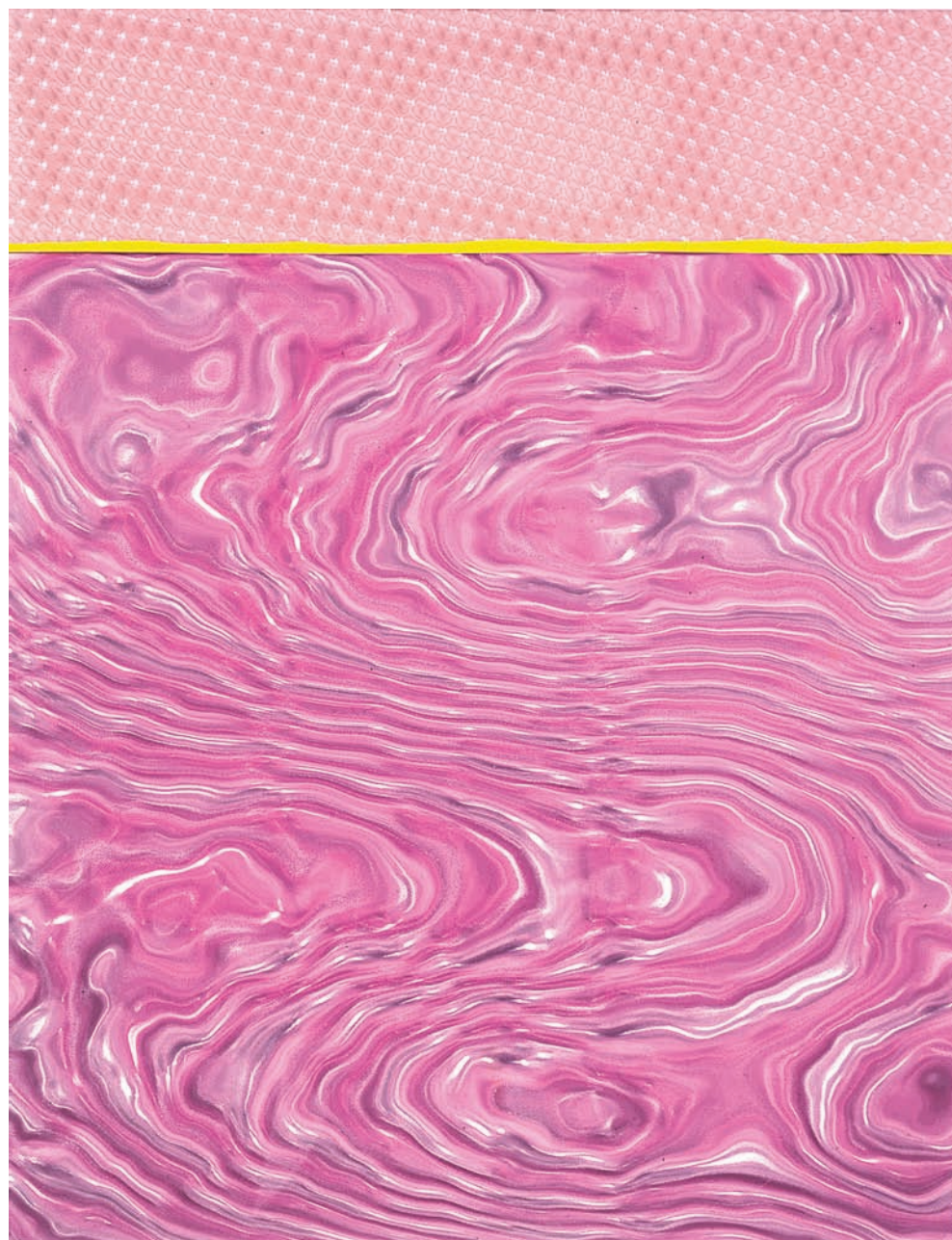
These paintings are studies in immiscibility. Nothing flows or mixes smoothly—not the gestural and the geometric, not flatness and perspectival depth, not one color or texture against another, not even the blue and white paint of the brushstrokes themselves. Lichtenstein referred to the strokes in this group of works as “obliterating brushstrokes,” and we can see a distinct element of destruction and unmaking vying with his normal practice of careful construction. We might also note distinct affinities to the work of younger abstract painters of the '90s, like Jonathan Lasker or Tom Nozkowski, who broke apart the conventions of well-made abstraction, courting the awkward

LICHTENSTEIN TAKES FULL ADVANTAGE OF ROWLUX'S VERTIGINOUS SWIRLING PATTERNS, CRUMMY BOUDOIR PINKS AND AQUARIUM TURQUOISES TO MAKE A SERIES OF WORKS THAT ARE TRULY UNSETTLING.

and the disharmonious, both compositionally and chromatically.

A similar dichotomy of affect can be seen in the landscapes of the mid-'60s. During this period Lichtenstein played with the conventions of generic landscape. In addition to creating variations on

greeting card-type sunsets, he also took advantage of the extremely simple visual sign or definition of landscape—the straightforward horizontal division of the canvas—to create work that functions less as landscape than as total abstraction. This simplified configuration



LICHTENSTEIN ALSO ABSTRACTED LANDSCAPE IN THE CAUSE OF PERPETUAL DISRUPTION IN HIS ONLY FILM INSTALLATION—*THREE LANDSCAPES* (1969)—ONE-MINUTE LOOPS SHOWN ON THREE SCREENS.

shares with Minimalism the tendency toward stasis and tranquility. Which is fine, if that's what you want: often Lichtenstein didn't, and to alter that tendency and still keep the basic format, he had to do something forceful in another direction. *Seascape* (1964), for example, consists of an uninflected field of deep blue Benday dots covering more than three quarters of the horizontal canvas, topped with two thin bands of progressively lighter blue dots, standing in for mountains, and a small sector of plain ground that reads as sky. Another 1964 *Seascape* gives us a more varied set of colors—red, orange, yellow,

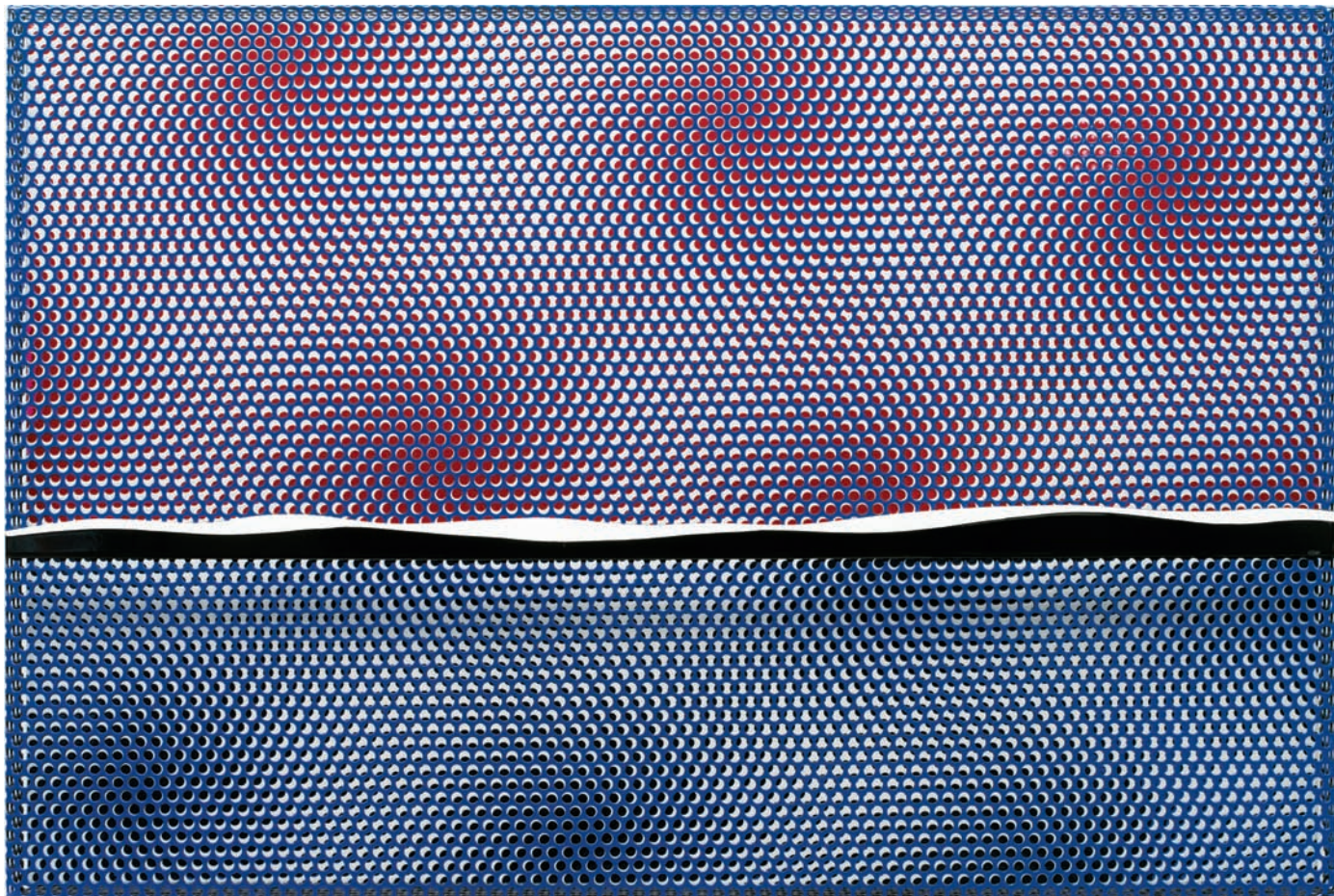
white and blue—and lays them out in a soothing array of wavy horizontal stripes. These paintings are elegant and a bit bland. They take a potshot at Post-painterly abstraction, though they themselves ultimately read as examples of the style.

Lichtenstein eventually moved to destabilize matters. Rather than restructuring the spare schematic composition, perhaps making it more complex, he decided to introduce new and unexpected materials. A favorite of his was Rowlux, a thermoplastic film embedded with thousands of minute parabolic lenses, and used for vending machines, drum kits, busi-

ness cards and decals, tradeshow exhibits, nightclub interiors and the like. Rowlux, which comes in a variety of patterns and colors, manipulates the pattern of absorption and reflection of light and gives the illusion of depth and motion. It is, in a word, cheesy.

Lichtenstein takes full advantage of Rowlux's vertiginous swirling patterns, crummy boudoir pinks and aquarium turquoises to make a series of pieces that are truly unsettling. The minimalist quality of their layout renders works like *Pink Seascape* and *Seascape* (both 1965) even more over-the-top: like a highly agitated person trying to be very, very calm. At other times Lichtenstein uses optical manipulation to disturb perception, as in *Perforated Seascape #1 (Blue)*, 1965. In this piece, a plane of perforated blue enameled metal is placed a few inches away from a white background panel painted with ▸

Perforated Seascape #1 (Blue), 1965, porcelain enamel on steel, 28½ by 42 inches. Courtesy Aaron I. Fleischman.





Three Landscapes, ca. 1970-71, 35mm film transferred to video, 1-minute loop. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

clumps of Benday dots. This sets up a pattern of optical interference that disturbs focus and makes the image very hard to locate precisely. This work mixes real space and depicted space, crispness and softness, legibility and blur, yielding an image that seems simultaneously to augment and cancel itself.

Lichtenstein also abstracted landscape in the cause of perceptual disruption in his only film installation—*Three Landscapes* (1969), on view at the Whitney Museum earlier this season [Oct. 6, 2011-Feb. 12, 2012]. In this work, one-minute loops are shown on three screens. Each film features a variant on the simple sea/sky division. Stability is undermined, however, by the hypnotic rocking of the images (the three are never in sync with each other) and the jarring changes in color saturation between screen and screen and between sky and sea within each screen.

LICHTENSTEIN WAS funny, kind, generous and incredibly hard-working. A productive and purposeful artist, he had a keen intelligence linked to a high level of formal skill, particularly in the area of composition. He was also remarkably consistent in terms of quality. The disquiet abstractions are, in essence, the work of an artist with a clearly defined style pushing up against boundaries. He said in the 1995 *New York Times* interview, “My work is, after all, a kind of straitjacket.” Paintings like these add depth and bite to Lichtenstein’s oeuvre and open an important window into a complex artistic sensibility.

A full-scale retrospective, as opposed to a midcareer survey, should ideally allow us to reassess not necessarily our overall view of the artist but rather how the pieces fit together—to tell ourselves the same story in a dif-

ferent way. Looking at Lichtenstein from the point of view of abstraction shows us an artist thoroughly engaged with issues that go beyond the cultural observation at which he was so adept, and allows his work to achieve a deeper and longer-lasting relevance. ○

After its Chicago debut, “Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective,” co-curated by James Rondeau of the Art Institute of Chicago and Sheena Wagstaff of Tate Modern, travels to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Oct. 14, 2012-Jan. 6, 2013); Tate Modern, London (Feb. 21-May 27, 2013); and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (July 3-Nov. 4, 2013).

RICHARD KALINA is a painter and critic based in New York.