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Richard Anuszkiewicz, Whose Op Art Caught Eyes in the ’60s, Dies at 89

He was a pioneer in manipulating fundamental elements of art to create optical effects — and to make, as he put it, “something romantic out of a very, very mechanistic geometry.”

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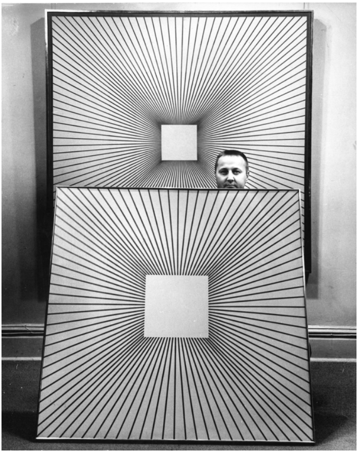

Richard Anuszkiewicz in 1965, the same year a critic wrote that he “might already be called an op old master.” Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by Sam Falk/The New York Times

By Jillian Steinhauer
May 25, 2020

Richard Anuszkiewicz, a pioneering practitioner of Op Art in the United States before that perception-altering style was even given a name in the 1960s, died on May 19 at his home in Englewood, N.J. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by his son, Adam, who did not specify a cause.

Mr. Anuszkiewicz (he pronounced it ah-noo-SHKEV-ich) devoted his career to studying how some of the fundamental elements of art could be manipulated to create perceptual effects. His experiments with color led him to make paintings of geometric shapes that seem to vibrate and emanate light.

And though his compositions are hard-edged, their repetition of shapes and lines and their complementary radiating hues evoke a kind of spirituality. “I’m interested in making something romantic out of a very, very mechanistic geometry,” he once said.

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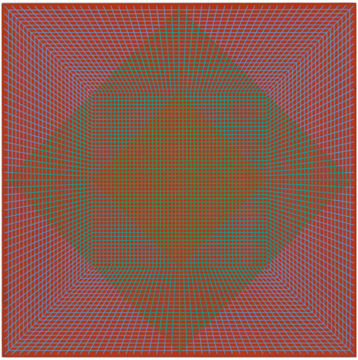
He was at the forefront of the Op Art movement in the United States, making and showing his abstractions before writers had even come up with the term, short for optical art. Once they did, they were quick to apply it to his work.

Covering the Museum of Modern Art’s blockbuster survey of the movement in 1965, “The Responsive Eye,” Grace Glueck of The New York Times identified Mr. Anuszkiewicz as “one of the brightest stars” in the show and said he “might already be called an op old master.”

Many critics were dismissive of the trend, however, regarding it as an empty spectacle. When the art world moved on, Mr. Anuszkiewicz was left contending with a label whose connotations were mixed. But it didn’t deter him. Although he experimented with different forms and mediums, he never wavered from his project.



“Principle of Unity,” 1966 Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via The Yale University Art Gallery

Mr. Anuszkiewicz saw his process as more conceptual than technical. He considered himself a problem solver, starting with a mathematical idea and then manifesting its results in his work. “We put too much emphasis on the hand,” he told an interviewer in 1970. “You can never create any new art unless it’s created by the human mind.”

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He had roots in modernism, having studied with Josef Albers at Yale. It was Mr. Albers who taught him that colors were not set entities but rather looked and behaved differently based on their contexts. Mr. Anuszkiewicz made explicating that lesson his life's work.

"The image in my work has always been determined by what I wanted the color to do," he said in a 1974 catalog. "Color function becomes my subject matter, and its performance is my painting."

Richard Joseph Anuszkiewicz was born on May 23, 1930, in Erie, Pa., to Adam and Victoria (Jankowski) Anuszkiewicz, both Polish immigrants. He was the couple's only child but had five half siblings from his mother's previous marriage. Richard started drawing at an early age; his father, who worked in a paper mill, would bring home tablets of paper for his son to draw on. The nuns in parochial school encouraged his talents, and after enrolling in Erie Technical High School, he studied art for several hours a day.

"Metamorphosis of Cadmium Red — Blue Line," 1979 Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

He went on to win a pair of regional and national art competitions, which brought him scholarships to attend the Cleveland Institute of Art. He earned his bachelor's degree in fine arts there in 1953 as well as a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship. Instead of taking a trip, however, he put the money toward graduate studies at the Yale University School of Art and Architecture.

At the time, he was painting spare realist scenes of Midwestern life, influenced by artists like Charles Burchfield. Going to Yale, where abstraction reigned and where Mr. Albers was an intimidating and exacting force, was "definitely a traumatic experience," Mr. Anuszkiewicz said in an interview for the [Archives of American Art](#) in 1972.

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Studying in New Haven, Conn., allowed him to visit New York City. He would drive in with his roommate and fellow Clevelander, Julian Stanczak, another future Op Art leader, to visit galleries and museums and see Abstract Expressionism and art historical works by the likes of Paul Klee firsthand.

“Orange Delight,” 1969 Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via The Whitney Museum of American Art

When he graduated with his master’s in fine arts in 1955, however, he wasn’t ready to move to New York. He went back to Ohio to earn a bachelor’s in education at Kent State University. At Yale, he had struggled to change his artistic style, but the physical distance from it now freed him up creatively.

“Now that I was no longer fighting the strong Albers image, I was able to fully accept all this wonderful knowledge that I acquired without any prejudice,” he said in an interview for the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the 1970s, “and instead of going back to realism, I went completely in the opposite direction.”

He was soon making increasingly psychedelic abstractions from accumulations of small, flowing forms. Moving to New York City in 1957, he got a job restoring and assembling models of classical sculpture and architecture for the Junior Museum of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He tried to find a gallery, but dealers like Leo Castelli and Martha Jackson looked at his work and turned him down.

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“Everybody would say: ‘Oh, they are nice, but so hard to look at. They hurt my eyes,’” he said.

“Rainbow I,” 1986 Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Finally, in 1959, the Contemporaries gallery took him on and gave him his first solo show the following year. But when nothing sold for two weeks, the owner wanted to take the exhibition down. Then, on a Saturday, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr Jr., walked in and bought two paintings, one for MoMA and the other for Nelson A. Rockefeller, the governor of New York at the time. For Mr. Anuszkiewicz, who was 30, the sales jump-started his career.

In 1960, he married Sarah Feeney, a teacher. She survives him along with their children, Adam, Stephanie and Christine, and six grandchildren. He moved to Englewood in 1967, creating a studio at his home.

As the 1960s progressed, Mr. Anuszkiewicz gained momentum, finding the tools, like acrylic paint and masking tape, to allow him to execute his increasingly precise vision. The Whitney Museum of American Art included him in the show “Geometric Abstraction in America” in 1962, and the Museum of Modern Art did the same in “Americans 1963,” bringing him a wave press attention, including a feature in Time magazine.

Mr. Anuszkiewicz in 2016 with “Silent Red Square” at the Loretta Howard Gallery in Manhattan. Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by Grayson Dantzic, all rights reserved

He went on to design Op Art gift wrap and even fur coats. By the time of MoMA’s “The Responsive Eye” in 1965, he had joined the stable of artists at the high-profile Sidney Janis Gallery, and, as he told Ms. Glueck, there was a waiting list to buy his art.

Although the Op Art movement was short-lived, Mr. Anuszkiewicz continued to exhibit in galleries and museums across the country and abroad. About 75 institutions own his work.

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That work became more classical and meditative over the decades as he softened his palette; he would place squares and then thin rectangles in the middle of his canvases with lines radiating from or around them. His series "Translumina" included painted and shaped wood constructions that seem to glow like neon. These gave way to spare sculptures that are feats of illusionism: They resemble line drawings of shapes intersecting in space.

Mr. Anuszkiewicz received a Lee Krasner Award for lifetime achievement in 2000, yet he continued to make art for years afterward. In 2013, at 82, he had his first exhibition of new work in New York in over a decade, at the Loretta Howard Gallery, which now represents him. As always, the paintings built on what he had done before — another series of permutations.

"The ideas I work with are essentially timeless," he said in 1977. "If you're working with present-day subject matter, your work can grow old and unimportant. Working with basic ideas will always be exciting, and if a color or form is visually exciting in any profound sense, it will be that way in 10 or 20 years from now."

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