

Wade Guyton OS at the Whitney: A New Kind of Art-Making



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“Wade Guyton OS” (Operating Systems) engages the senses and opens the mind. The exhibition is both sculptural and deeply philosophical—kind of an investigation about the relationships among humans, computers, linen and other printing materials, printers, and the architectural spaces where the works originate, for which they are made, and the new contexts that a ten-year retrospective offers when different bodies of work end up facing each other in the same space.

It is laid out in two sweeping rectangular swaths that show distinct bodies of work that could be an allegory for the human, aesthetic, and abstract properties of contemporary life. Interspersed among objects on walls and in vitrines are four areas with “traditional” sculptural forms: a set of Marcel Breuer chairs, a series of stacked wooden and plywood sheets, and a series of sleek mirrored steel U-sculptures (2004-2012) ranging in scale, proportions, and in size from 24.1 to 1818.6 cm. in length. The final sculpture is a 2001 *Untitled Action Sculpture*—a snaking metal form made from the frame of a Marcel Breuer chair. A highlight of the exhibition is the Whitney’s (purchased) eight panels (2008) with alternating bands of black and white that do not meet from one panel to the next, setting up a dizzying, syncopated rhythm. Another highlight is an intense 2007 black-on-black X painting. The unusual installation simultaneously offers great vistas while the work itself offers a sense of intense intimacy.

Guyton, a 40-year-old artist born in Hammond, Indiana, was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Guyton told me, “I think of the paintings as sculpture because of the way I produce them. They are objects that go through a process.” Guyton pointed to a sharply-angled 4-sided Marcel Breuer recessed trapezoidal window

against one wall—which is flanked by his new work printed on linen and mounted on stretchers, adding, “It’s about that window and the available space and how the objects are pressured by the architectural setting.”

These new works, at a record length of 50 and close to 30 feet long, read as long horizontal warm mustard and China red hues that variously show their interrupted patterns and processes from computer screen to printer, which includes misalignment due to the uneven feeding of the linen through the printer and other unique features. Except for this new work, Guyton noted, “The works in this survey had original contexts and now have a new one.”

Wade Guyton’s genius comes from taking something we all use daily — the print medium — and turning it into an exploration of the interrelations among materials and their architectural environments. Guyton’s body of work has moved from overprinting existing materials to using giant Epson printers on linen to experiment with computer representations of abstract forms and their imperfect — or perfectly flawed — and differing manifestations on linen. Although they “pose” as paintings on stretchers, these works are also new three-dimensional ways of using their component parts.

By taking forms as simple as X and U, Guyton abstracts symbols that we take for granted. It is surprising, in fact, how expressive and dramatic his forms become when we stand beside them at the Whitney’s installation, especially the 30-foot and 50-foot-long works framing Marcel Breuer’s recessed window. This wall-sized work reverses the usual art/viewer relationship, literally putting the viewer inside the art work.

Guyton does not give his work titles, and this further engages the viewer, who is left to ponder the qualities of the work itself rather than its “name.” His U sculpture notably explores the same form/proportions in different scales, and the installation of these steel works is dramatic for these (and more) reasons: We can see them in relation to each other, in relation to the full length of the fourth floor gallery space, and in relation to the two strikingly different black and white wall works on each side of the U series. The resulting interplays between these three series exemplify the ways that abstract forms with minimal colors may activate a large architectural space. “Wade Guyton OS” demonstrates the interactive, sensual, and dynamic possibilities of abstract forms.

After listening to the talking points of the Whitney’s Director and curators, it became clear that no one used quite the same vocabulary to discuss Guyton’s work. The Whitney’s Alice Pratt Brown Director, Adam Weinberg, considers Guyton’s work so significant that he noted, “It reminds me about what the response might have been to Frank Stella in his early years,” adding, “and it upends what people think about painting and sculpture.” Donna De Salvo, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Programs, reinforced this sentiment, praising Guyton’s art for its “continuing belief in abstraction.” Curator Scott Rothkopf repeatedly referred to the wall art as painting.

Guyton’s work strongly links steps, processes, and contexts to suggest a new notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—work involving multiple disciplines simultaneously. In addition to crediting three types of Epson printers (with capabilities and limitations), the works are printed on materials ranging from book pages to wood and plywood to linen. Sometimes the ink is especially heavy or light, or the uneven feeding of the linen into the printer distorts or interrupts the image. Among other things, this process becomes a metaphor for the relation between an idea and its realization.

The 228-page exhibition catalog distributed by Yale University Press features outstanding visuals, an interview with the artist, and a long essay by Rothkopf that discusses the roles of scale, sensuality, art historical antecedents, and much more.

[VIEW PORTFOLIO: Wade Guyton at the Whitney](#)