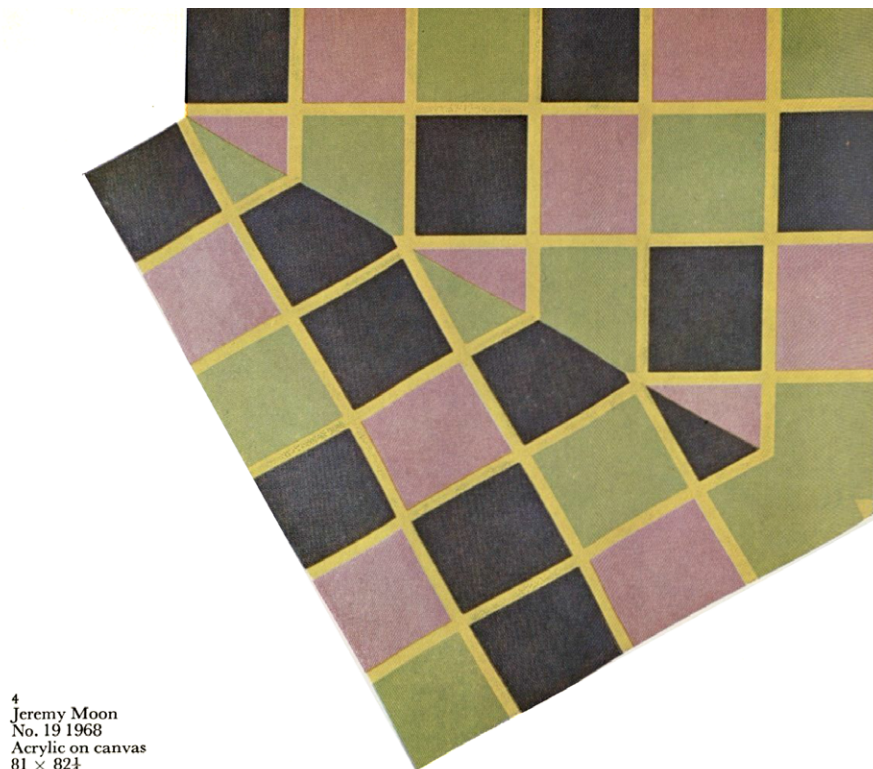


Masheck, Joseph  
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4  
Jeremy Moon  
No. 19 1968  
Acrylic on canvas  
81 × 82½

A painting is not a still from a shot or sequence in the film of history. The folly of being too fascinated with tracing the curve of an artist's development is not only logical (looking at the spaces between things instead of at the things, mistaking the hole for the doughnut); it is also emotional, because its prophetic motivation may hide a sad disengagement from the present. I emphasize this now because these new paintings by Jeremy Moon at the Rowan naturally group themselves into a species distinct from that of 1967, within the same genus. Yet the significance of the change is not in any kind of metaphysical 'development' hovering somewhere between a former painting and a present one. Indeed, there is no lapse or caesura at all; the new works take the same propositions and approach them, quite literally, from a new angle.

The 1967 works (see Charles Harrison, 'Jeremy Moon's Recent Paintings', *Studio International*, March 1968) were basically equilateral triangles, flat side up, with the sides of notched-in corners parallel to the implied bisections of the angles and to the stripes of the surface pattern. They have a hieratic triliteral symmetry, like the Mercedes Benz trademark. With the exception of a still newer example, which I will take up later, the new paintings date from 1968. Apart from a rectangular one, they achieve an astonishingly greater complexity by only a slight adjustment of the 1967 set-up. The overall shape itself becomes much more ambiguous: before you could think of a

modified triangle, or a triangle with attached rectangles (truncations of the squares of *Union*, 1967), but you still felt sure it was basically an upside-down 'Y'; now the possibilities—a truncated isosceles (instead of equilateral) triangle; two overlapping, but askew, rectangles; one fragmentary corner of a vast invisible polygon—press on us with more seriously competing claims. Moreover, the kaleidoscopic composition which the equilateral triangle generated, was a much easier way for Moon to work with diagonality as an abstract motif, since triangles, in a way, *only have* diagonals. Now the rectangle is faced up to and even subjugated. It is a very aggressive shaped canvas that can handle the rectangle itself as a mere motif; that amounts almost to humiliating it, to putting it in its place on the shelf of possible shapes.

Other problems which just explode with difficulty when the centralized composition is altered to a non-centralized one, are orientation, colour (in what we could call its 'local form'), and composition. As in the earlier Ys, the only rectilinear element which is allowed to rest horizontal is the upper edge of the canvas, which knocks out the gravitational sense of an object at rest and confirms the material reality of a painting as something (non-rigid) *hanging down* from a straight edge—almost an architectural concept of a painting as an object. The new problem of orientation is that the non-centralized compositions have a definite feeling of left and right. They seem to

read *from left to right*, a limitation (compared with the earlier centralization) which is controlled by the 'hanging down' and by a compositional system which turns out to be only a slight modification of that in the Ys, but much less conspicuous than before: the new paintings combine ranks of 120° angles (the *only* angles within the Y paintings) drifting diagonally toward the lower right, with ranks of 45° angles drifting toward the upper left. These more acute angles also help to check a too quick, too easy, movement from left to right. Turning from parallel colour bands (in the Ys) to coloured grids with coloured interstices complicates what I mean by the 'local form' of colour, because unless a colour stripe is wide enough to be a *body* in itself, wide enough so that our attention can be absorbed into its dense area rather than its particular outside limits – unless this can happen, adjoining colour bands remain simply stripes, which means *lines*. (Example: a big Kenneth Noland hums with colour, while a small reproduction looks like a club sandwich.)

Centralized composition is pleasantly reassuring, even optimistic, and Jung explained how it is even a sign of health – of a spirit actually succeeding in re-integrating its components. The problem for us is that it has aesthetic limitations. Mainly, it distributes significance unevenly over the surface of a picture, whereas the whole tradition of modernism in painting (with Matisse's 'Notes of a Painter' as its focal point) has been to effect a surface of uniform formal significance. Besides, centralization can threaten uncalled-for space (without their truncations the 'Y' paintings could snap into illusionistic pyramids); it does this partly by induction from the conventional spatial cone or pyramid of earlier painting and partly by direct optical effect. In one group of 1968 paintings the problem of uniform significance rears its head: in those paintings in which the bands of the grid are the same width as the squares which they isolate the three blocks where pairs of squares intersect stand out from the squares proper and echo the overall shape of the canvas; that they thus gain more importance than the squares (like chess pieces with more moves in their power) is an obvious technical problem. I have seen three versions which solve it different ways. In one the three forms receive identical treatment with the squares, with the result that they merge into the general rhythm, the two outside ones 'falling in' and marching around the rim with the outside squares, leaving the one in the centre in an even more privileged position; in another work the two corner forms are split into two colours each, which keeps them from slipping away, as before, but still leaves the centre one definitely on the throne; in the third all the three elements remain solidly coloured, but they are each bisected by a narrow line, making for the greatest control of the three solutions, but at the expense of the simplicity of the original system.

Another 1968 painting in the show is a large oblong with two rectilinear grid patterns colliding at an absolute diagonal; it is a kind of experiment in what a single diagonal can do to a whole 'society' of rectangles (like Broadway on the map of Manhattan). Our colour plate shows the most recent work, from 1969. It pushes the experience of 1968 further because the modified trapezoid, or even more exaggeratedly isosceles triangle, is less like a square (interestingly, the 1968 paintings not only have exactly square dimensions, but could be cut and fitted into a square, like a puzzle) and more like an oblong; similarly, the internal rectangles are oblongs of different sizes, instead of uniform squares. Once again, a former concept raised to a higher power.

The reason why I have found myself enmeshed in a detailed comparison of the recent paintings with those of a year or two ago, despite my opening statement, is that Moon's paintings now fascinate me with their 'development' just because, taken one at a time, they seem not yet wholly definitive. The Y paintings are, in a way, easier; these, only slightly different, much more ambitious. Not quite happy at the present moment, it is no wonder that I find myself sketching a curve; the hope now is that before long Jeremy Moon can finish surveying the vaster territory he has just mapped out, so that we can more confidently approach one Jeremy Moon on its own, adequate, unique, and sovereign.

JOSEPH MASHEK