

ARTFORUM

TUCSON

Peter Young

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Peter Young is often spoken of as a neglected artist, having fallen into obscurity after he abandoned New York and the art world in 1969, at the zenith of his renown, to wander the world, commune with Indian tribes, paint on canvases stretched over pine branches, and settle, two years later, in the ersatz mining town of Bisbee, Arizona. But Young, decided to recede from view and fixed the terms of his own neglect. An explanation can be found in the title of this survey, "Capitalist Masterpieces." After selling one of his whorling-dot paintings to New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, he deviously replaced its numbered title with *Capitalist Masterpiece*—a good joke, but also a wry recognition that his searching paintings were bound to be commodified once the acrylic had hardened, once they had been extricated from the artist's Bowery studio.

In recent years, the narrative of disregard has been eclipsed by one of belated revelation. Not long before Young's show at Tucson's Museum of Contemporary Art, his paintings had been exhibited in a survey at MOMA PS1 and at galleries in New York, Munich, and Zurich. The paintings on view here—nineteen acrylics on canvas, made between 1965 and 1998—presented Young as a consummate colorist and an adroit synthesizer of programmatic Minimalism, post-painterly abstraction, and cosmological psychedelia. They also evinced Young's singular, recursive artistic path, characterized by the protracted, even languorous exploration of a limited number of figures and tropes—which often come to seem limitless.

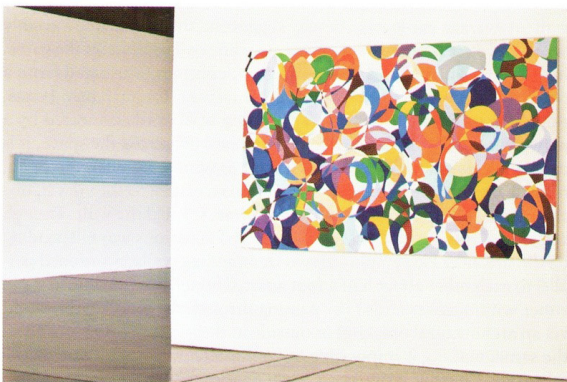
Foremost among these are dots and grids, fundamental forms that have preoccupied Young since the mid-1960s. Originally inspired by a magazine photograph of an African woman with gobs of mud pressed into fissures in her skin, Young developed a pictorial language that is systematic and yet capable of great expressivity. He used a process called "triangulation" to create interlocking bands of colored dots, which he meticulously arrayed across canvases of up to eighty square

feet. In some works, pullulating clusters of blue and white dots are superimposed on swaths of black paint, evoking an agitated firmament; in others, such as #8-1967, which was on view at MOCA, Young limns a realm of quaking molecules just beyond the bounds of our perception.

Young's work, it must be said, was initially fueled by LSD and marijuana and meant to capture the transient sensation—alternately distressing and rapturous—of experiencing the world as myriad minute interactions among matter, energy, and light. The grid paintings, which were made between 1965 and 1980 and resemble teeming, aureate Tetris boards, continue in this vein. But several stellar examples exhibited at MOCA confirm that Young was not merely fabricating postcards from the beyond or indulging in ontological adventurism. He was rigorously seeking a form that might revolutionize perception—conjure a different kind of visual schema, and so his best paintings present a staggering entelechy of psychedelia.

While Young has hewed to oneiric forms, his painting practice also employs a standard syntax suffused with chance operations, calling to mind the semiotic investigations of the Conceptualism ascendant when he quit New York. "Capitalist Masterpieces" included not only a number of folded mandala paintings, with imbricated smears of acrylic segmented by multiple axes of symmetry, but also the droll #4-1966, in which strokes of cerulean paint delineate a white canvas as a brick wall—the culmination of a series of measured geometrical figures and grids on sky-blue backgrounds, and perhaps also a portrait of Conceptualism's endgame. At an early age, Young abjured the debates about painting that have roiled in the past half century. He declared the pressure to "do the next thing"—and the churning dialectic that goes along with such an enterprise—to be his "enemy." And so he has ended up with paintings like #8a-1990 and #8b-1990, a pair of canvases in which involuted grids of multicolored fist-size dots hover above white fields, cannily inflecting flatness with depth, imposing an order that can be discerned but not defined—a distillation of an altogether different dialectic that has proceeded gradually but unremittably.

—Alexander Provan



View of "Peter Young," 2013.
Foreground: #1-1990.
Background: #5-1996 (detail).