

# **PETER YOUNG - A Chronology of the Work**

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Peter Young was born January 1, 1940 in Pittsburgh, grew up in Los Angeles, studied at Pomona College for two years, and came to New York in 1960. After working for two or three months at the Art Students League under Stephen Greene and Theodore Stamps, he entered York University as an art history student and was graduated in 1963. All the hours he spent there looking at slides were extremely important for his own development as an artist. Throughout his college career instead of taking notes, he made drawings — not of works reproduced on the screen, but his own inventions. Reminiscent of Gorky in the animate shapes playing around a horizontal line, the tension between organic and geometric also bespeaks de Kooning.

During his student days, Young had painted very little; it was only in 1963 that he began to think of himself seriously as a painter. After some work with the figure, which he soon found held no real interest for him, he started an alphabet of abstract paintings, one for each letter. The "E" picture (which he has recently destroyed along with most of his other early paintings) was almost entirely covered with earth red and brown dots, which he recalls were partly inspired by the mud tattoos on the face of an African woman; this and a few other all-over paintings, which he conceived of as illustrations to Sartre's *The Room*, were his earliest pieces, employing, in part, the dot technique with which he has since become commonly identified. Most of the 1963 paintings are close in character to primitive art, which still continues to affect him deeply. A particularly telling example of that type is divided into four horizontal registers, each with a strip of dots at top and bottom and each with two or three vertically divided compartments, within which are strange cabalistic images. He first made the vertical and horizontal divisions, which resulted in "a. painting of several little empty boxes"; then, with very close looking, he discovered minute differentiations of surface and texture in the brown background and he followed around the edges of those variations with an ocher line. Thus, to some extent, the design is the result of chance; at the same time, the artist obviously controlled the kind of images which he "discovered." This painting is also related to a problem which he had set

himself, namely, to invent a series of his own decorative motifs, feeling that since cultures have developed such forms, why should individuals not be able to?

Several of Young's paintings of the next year, 1964, combine the totemic, emblematic quality with the dot technique. In a curious way, all the little dots (which have now become much smaller and completely overall) reinforce the sensation, cherished by Young, of an animistic presence inherent in objects. This attitude was probably strengthened by the visual effects of hallucinogens and marijuana which he started taking about this time; he has spoken of the kind of "patterning overlying and underlying reality" related to that experience.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, he was also painting in the then-current mode of serial art. In many of his 1964 paintings, Young's small unit ("the irreducible quantum of a painter's activity," as Meyer Shapiro once defined brush stroke) was far from exclusively a dot. "You can make little X's or little horizontal dashes or vertical dashes or you can make little dots or something; it's just a way of covering a field."

His most elaborate serial project was a group of 15 boxes, each 15 inches square on the surface and varying in depth from a half-inch to seven inches. Their red, yellow and blue dots, in acrylic paint neatly placed and shaped like rows of thumbtack heads, were distributed on the front surface according to a numerical scheme depending upon the depth of the box. Since he had been obliged to give up his loft in 1964 and move to a small apartment, it was not until he got to a big loft again in 1965 that he was able to see the series together as a whole. Somewhat disappointed with the total effect, and preferring the individual works, he broke up the set and disposed of them separately.

Also in 1964, Young had painted several "plaid" pictures, some of them on a diamond-shaped canvas (inevitably suggesting the *Victory Boogie-Woogie* as a possible impetus). His first large picture, six feet square, *Unnumbered*, 1965, was again executed in the plaid technique, superimposing and interweaving square strokes and bands in a complex pattern of diagonal as well as horizontal and vertical activity. However, after he saw Agnes Martin's beautiful grid paintings, he stopped working with that device. Feeling also that the grid was getting too rigid for him, too far away from nature, he took a different tack in his next group of paintings: in order to bring space back into the work, he adopted linear

perspective and a particular color of blue universally associated with the sky (see #3, 1966). Moreover, the spatial illusion in these seven paintings was a deliberate reaction to the strict flatness of so much current work. He felt himself challenged by Stella and Poons, who represented contemporary art for him, to "do the next thing" (he no longer adheres to any such dialectical program, dialectic now being the "enemy"). These 1966 paintings had been extremely logically planned several months before when he had again been forced to move

from his loft to an apartment. There he worked in a very small room, emptied of all but a table and chair, and made drawings for paintings and wrote notes about them (as well as about solitude). The enforced change in his situation proved to be a blessing as it helped him break away from a method that was in danger of becoming a manner and gave him a sense of beginning anew, a quality which pervades the actual 10-to 12-foot long paintings which he was able to execute when, in 1966, he took another loft. He decided not to complete a few of the mathematically conceived studies for paintings, perhaps because they seemed too much like gimmicks; one of them was in a curious shape which would appear rectangular when viewed obliquely. At no other time has Young worked from preliminary drawings, and, I believe, this was the only occasion when he "made paintings with the idea that they were for the public." He had now become friends with several painters, worked for a while in an art gallery, and, in his words, "realized that I could just stay home and rattle around and amuse myself, or I could paint in such a way that the paintings could enter the market and possibly make a living for me." It was at this point that Dick Bellamy came to his studio, bought some paintings, and offered to become his dealer. This whole group of perspectival, deep space paintings demonstrated Young's independence within the current geometric mode. His consciousness of his personal departure is fully revealed in the one picture in the group which is not sky blue, but white, #7, 1966, a satire on the kind of painting which to him was as flat, closed, and boring as a brick wall.

With his debut as a selling artist, represented by a famous avant-garde dealer, he switched abruptly from the kind of work Bellamy had bought to the "constellations," such as #3, 1967, which he considers to be virtually realist paintings, "renderings of the heavens." Different-sized, randomly placed, densely packed luminous dots ("stars") swirl through midnight

blue or black skies. "But somehow those paintings pleased me so much that I didn't feel like indulging it, I suppose. I only made four of them." However, he turned the discovery he had made — ;'.e./ of a new use to which he could put his earlier dot technique — toward the solution of a more difficult problem, and an ancient one: how to paint light. In his many attempts throughout the next two years he achieved only occasionally the dazzling radiance of light which he had in mind, a vision intensified by his experience with hallucinogens, which he took most frequently during that time. Later on he characterized his work and that of most of his generation as "psychedelic painting," a particularly appropriate term for the most successful of Young's dot pictures of 1968 and '69. Beginning with the familiar assumption that white and light are composed of all colors, he placed dots of wide-ranging spectral hues on a white ground in a variety of applications: some with the dots chained, some separated (as #10, 1967), some marbled, some in full saturation, others modified with white. Possibly because the dots are fairly small and uniform and the colors are distributed quite equally, most of those 1967 paintings appear almost monochromatic as the hues tend to neutralize and cancel each other out optically. However, while Young thus failed in these first attempts to capture the intense radiance which he sought, he did succeed admirably in presenting the whorling effect of what he calls "primal light" through his positioning of the dots. He usually placed three of them fairly equidistant from each other to form a triangle, and then another dot forming another triangle, and so on until they clustered into pentagons, whose outside edges move toward a circular formation. This was repeated with new sets of triangulation (as he calls the system), thus starting a swing in another direction. The dynamic expanding and contracting swirls and counterswirls into which Young organized the atom-like units of his painting resemble the constant buzzing activity of particles which he perceives while under hallucinogens when, as he says, he can actually "see the air." In 1967 he painted (besides the four night-sky paintings) seven of these pointillist pictures patterned in a multi-directional flow on a white ground.

His output was more than doubled the next year when he painted about 30 pictures, two-thirds of them in the relatively slow pointillist

method — an exceptional productivity for an artist who, like so many of his contemporaries, spends more time thinking than doing. He began

1968 with another stylistic reversal, going back and "reconfirming" the paintings with black lines on a sky blue ground of 1966; but this time, with one or two exceptions, the lines are curved rather than straight, which may explain why such paintings as #8, 1968 are more vibrating than the earlier rectilinear ones. That effect is no doubt related to the whorling movements in the dotted style, to which he returned after about a dozen of the linear pieces. In the new pointillist pictures he concentrated more on color, realizing for himself that "color is light and light is color . . . which is still too little understood ... a no-man's-land." by distributing the hues in less balanced quantities he made each of them, and thus the total coloration, count for more. The "dots," which are smooth-edged drops of acrylic paint, are far from round and never uniform in shape or size, as can be seen by looking closely at such a painting as #29, 1968. This is the first picture in which Young allowed, or rather induced, eccentric little images to emerge here and there across the canvas. There is a teasing quality about these abstract conformations; like vaguely organic creatures they people the work. Animating the inanimate, they suggest the painting of Paul Klee, whose *Gleich Unendlich (Equals Infinity)* in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is, furthermore, executed in a dotted technique.<sup>4</sup> I am not proposing that Klee has specifically influenced Young in this area, although he greatly admires the remarkable variety of the Swiss master's work, and he too would like his pictures to catch the viewer's imagination and open it to fantasy. In this connection, an American painter who has been especially important for Peter Young ever since he first met him in 1956 is Lee Mullican. Such paintings as *The Jungle* of 1953 lie behind the younger artist's work in their pronounced animistic imagery, insistent patterning and busy activity of the surface, although Mullican's repeated linear units are more varied than Young's dots.

By early 1969 Peter Young had become, from his point of view, too much sought after by avant-garde collectors and curators. Moreover, he was becoming increasingly troubled and wondering if he *could* go on placing little colored dots of paint on canvas with the world in crisis all around him. Like most thinking young people, he was ashamed to live in comfort — even the little comfort that a loft on the Bowery could afford — so he took leave of civilization to spend the first three or four months of 1969 living with the Boruca tribe in a primitive area of Costa Rica. Here he continued to pursue his own trade, but now free from any possible market-place pressures. He made a dozen paintings in unconventional forms, the cloth

wrapped around sticks tied together with thongs, the whole structure most emphatically hand-made looking, in complete opposition to the dominant New York type of nicely tailored, crisp-edged supports. All but one of these new paintings he left with the natives who had become his friends; the only example he brought back with him to the States has now gone to England with another friend.

Back in New York, with renewed integrity and a different sense of urgency, he turned again to the dot technique, not yet having finished what he had to say in that idiom. The richest and most varied in color and abstract imagery of all his paintings in that vein, they became gradually more free and open, while stronger and harsher. While the 1969 pointillist paintings, of which there are eleven, continue the eccentric imagery, the white ground of the earlier ones is replaced by differently colored and shaped patches, with a top layer of dots in an extreme variety of hues, as in *#16, 1969*. The color patches establish one set of images and the dots, in their multi-hued and varied placements, another. In one or two examples, the predominant hues are neighborly (such as violet, blue and rose); in some the cool section of the spectrum dominates (*#15, 1969*); - in others the hot; but in general all of these last pointillist paintings throb and pulsate in a dazzling range of colors in fullest saturation, approximating the intensity of perception induced by LSD or mescaline. It is a brilliant series whose expressive power ranges from lyric and graceful to passionate, painful and even somber.

By early July, 1969, he cleaned up his paints with the last of the dot series, *#23, 1969*, and set off for the West. The brightly colored beads which he made later that year and early the next bespeak his mobile, unsettled existence from 1969 to the present. Although they evolved, in some measure by chance, from his process of painting. Young's plastic beads are a striking symbol of the whole hippie generation's new mode of living: their relaxed concept of masculinity and, it follows, of femininity and of sex in general; their determined break from middle class conventions and values; their mystic or religious concerns; and their adoption of cultural patterns akin to those of the American Indian, such as tribe-clan-family structure, craft tradition (much of it to adorn the body) and simple nomadic life, free of unneeded belongings.

Young's beads first came about when, attracted by the accumulation of

old acrylic paint on the edge of a jar, he peeled it off and hung it up on a nail on the wall. At first about the size of a bracelet, as he kept dipping it in different colored paints, it got heavier and longer. Thus, like many other art forms, the beads developed from a kind of left-handed play with materials. Young soon transformed this accidental discovery into a deliberate process: on a sheet of polyethylene he spread acrylic paint until it became firm enough to pick up; then he dipped it, section after section, into different colors, building it up into a great many layers. Finally, after cutting this "string" into separate beads, he carved each of them individually to reveal their multicolored interior structure. In this last stage Peter Young, somewhat like Matisse, was actually cutting color, although he was carving small volumes of it, rather than slicing large planes. He liked the beads so much that he made over 60 strings of them, giving half of them away. These works add another alternative to the rigid, sharp-edged planar formats of much contemporary painting. He also, albeit unconsciously, aligned himself with the process artists in such works as the board on which the paint had fallen down and splashed; the paint drippings peeled off another board after it had been soaked in water; and the upholstery on an old chair which he had used as a paint rag to wipe off his hands and brush.

After many months of drifting through remote areas of Utah and New Mexico, he wrote in August that the only art work he had made during that time was a wooden bowl; however, in the fall (of 1970) he painted 36 pictures related in imagery and construction to the Costa Rica "stick" paintings (at least to the only example I have seen of that earlier series). Small in size, the largest about two feet high, these latest works are painted on canvas folded over branches about one and a half to two inches thick, and fastened in back with a crisscross arrangement of rope, plastic string, rubber-covered wire — whatever he happened to have at hand. The casual hand crafting and closeness to nature — and the distance from the rigidly edged New York painting — are stressed by unevenly painted borders simulating wood. The images are abstract, formed by a few lines of one color on a flat ground of another; but they strongly evoke Indian art in color, design, and even symbolism. One may ask if a sign can become a symbol without a genuine and general cultural meaning behind it; nevertheless, the zigzag crossing orange lines on a red ground in #15, 1970 suggest the tribal symbol for streaks of lightning shooting through the sky. While few of the other paintings in the series

have such an explicit similarity to Indian motifs, they all convey a curiously compelling cabalistic or magical force. They descend indirectly from the earlier black line on blue ground paintings, but they are far more organic as well as primitive-looking, both of which qualities are accentuated by the variation in thickness, density and edge of lines, the uneven spacing, and the avoidance of exact repetition. Like growing things, these new pictures are closer to the trees and bushes from which their stretchers came than to the mathematically plotted earlier abstractions. They are appropriate works to have come from a mountaintop in Utah (which Peter Young has recently bought). Yet their primitivism in no way conceals the highly sophisticated sensibility which produced them.