

## Dennis Adrian:Essays on Contemporary Art .



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Dan Ramirez: A Critical Survey of Form and Content

This exhibition of the works of Dan Ramirez is of special interest not only because his art is one of the high points of painterly and graphic achievement in Chicago in the decade of the seventies but also because the selection, presenting the artist's development since 1972, has been made by Ramirez himself. While the exhibition reviews the directions and accomplishments of the artist during this period in the examples he feels articulate the structure of these progressions in the most telling and concentrated way, it is not, because of the limitations of available exhibition space and the relatively large size of the paintings, a fully fleshed out retrospective of Ramirez's work. It is more the irreducible germ of an ideal retrospective that contains critically definitive works from each of the artist's developmental phases. In almost every case each work may be said to stand for a series of thematically connected works which should be seen together (or at least in several examples) in order to appreciate the polyphonic complexity of Ramirez's concerns. The groups of small preparatory drawings assembled in books or shown as groups comprise, the artist says, the repertoire of compositional ideas and thematic suites which are his central artistic concerns.

Superficially, Ramirez's work seems to belong to the current of geometric abstract formalism which has been such an outstanding, if intermittent, feature of American painting for more than fifty years. By and large this kind of painting concentrates on the relational harmonies and contrasts within arrangements of pure (and usually regular) geometric forms. The expressive content of such art is often its order, organization and system, simple or complex. Such structures, systems, and organizations are in fact considered the elemental syntax of what is called the "Modern Style" in art, architecture, and all forms of design. Because Ramirez's work since at least 1972 has employed such geometric forms anti their relationships he has from time to time been identified as belonging to this modernist-formalist current, but the artist himself has never been comfortable or satisfied with this evaluation. In statements in lectures, on panels and in his writings Ramirez has declared that his intent/on is to move beyond formalism (the articulation of line, form, color and space) to an expression of spiritual awareness.<sup>1</sup>

The formal development of Ramirez's art is significant in that it reveals the evolution of his expressive means. The earliest painting shown, the vertical Untitled of 1972, is a true abstraction in a somewhat old-fashioned sense in that the composition is, at one level, the severely geometric and two-dimensional reduction of a still life of objects upon a table. The blue and gray flat shapes abstracted from the solids and voids of the motif are enlivened with narrow lines of green and orange which hug the contours of the larger shapes and whose colors are adjusted to initiate chromatic reverberations with the prevailing cooler hues. This painting represents the stage in Ramirez's work when, in the ambiance of Roland Ginzler and Martin

Hurtig, two of the artists most influential instructors during his undergraduate years at the Circle Campus of the University of Illinois,<sup>2</sup> he set and solved for himself one of the classical problems of abstract formal and chromatic structure in a satisfying and accomplished way.

The Untitled diptych of the next year marks a critical step past the previous phase of traditional abstraction. The two halves present the same basic composition of large blue and gray triangular and trapezoidal forms, simpler now than previously. In the left-hand canvas blue, green and orange linear elements are tied to the edges of the larger basic forms, emphasizing and strengthening their order: in the right-hand canvas these linear elements have been freed from the edges of the larger forms to move across one another and extend from one edge of the canvas to another, adjacent or opposite. Already in the Untitled diptych of 1973 the line assumes more than the traditional role as the demarcation of the interface where light strikes the edges of the elements of the motifs. The linear elements serve as illuminations of rational intellection, which divide and define areas of the canvas. This new relationship between the linear form and the underlying structure of larger shapes (which soon will merge into a ground) is the initial statement of the compositional focus of Ramirez's work for the next four years.

Throughout 1973 and 1974 the new role of the line in Ramirez's painting has varied aspects: the line operates as a border for the central enclosed field which is itself horizontally bisected by another, more slender line; the lines vertically bisect the field which is now modularly divided into vertical panels which are punctuated and divided by them. At this time the paintings have dimensional projections sometimes but not invariably corresponding to the large forms of the "field." In 1974 the line clings to one edge of the canvas but is tapered, appearing to vanish at its point of origin but in fact continuing on the adjacent surface of the edge(s) of the canvas. Also the "field" forms are larger, lighter in hue and the paintings are stained into un-sized canvas to produce the sense of a radiant transparent color rather than the earlier opaque hues: the canvases become large, up to 84 inches vertically.

In 1975 and 1976 the pictorial format stabilizes as large vertical rectangles frequently about 96 by 60 inches: the tapering lines at and extending around the edges now flash rapidly around all perimeters of the painting; there are further thinner even lines dividing the now very large "field" forms and these lines, while of unvarying width, are subtly modulated in hue along their lengths. The glowing transparencies of the field areas are themselves delicately modulated through wiping very diluted pigments into the un-sized canvas. By late 1976 the large vertical rectangular formats are joined in pairs. The result of this process (a physical convenience in dealing with the large 8 by 12 foot dimensions), which seems at first like the joining of two independent compositions, introduces compositional elaboration's: for one thing, the flash of tapering line at the edge of one canvas will now appear as within the overall format. In addition, the visual line of the physical join of the sections echoes and intensifies the line beside it. Furthermore, the narrow tapering line now actually occurs within the physical fields of the joined parts. The result of this further linear complexity is a sharply intensified energizing of the total pictorial field: the lines zip and flash around and within its component areas and the modulated colors of both the lines and the ground areas amplify and multiply these racing visual dynamics. In the chroma what might originally appear as simple monochromatic fields of tan, pale orange and blue, pink and violet often reveal themselves through the shifts of changing hue and value as complex, yet exceedingly subtle, interactions of various coloristic experiences. Another aspect of the new dynamism of the work of 1976 and 1977 is an innovation in the formats of Ramirez's paintings. In addition to the paired big rectangles described above the artist introduces triangular elements: the rectangular sections are flanked with one or two right triangles of the same height, producing irregular or regular trapezoids. The result of these different overall shapes is a new sort of harmonious balance: the motion of the diagonal sides and the accompanying lines is set in equilibrium with the firm and stable rectangles. The stable harmony of the works of 1975 and early 1976 was activated dynamically by the within-the-field zipping lines of mid and later 1976 in the rectangular paintings. Toward the end of 1976 and in early 1977 the trapezoidal formats set the stability of the Ginzler and Gilman paintings in a chordlike reverberating harmony and equilibrium of color, line, painterly form, and pictorial format.

During 1977 the trapezoidal formats developed the previous year presented to the artist an additional series of compositional options: within the regular trapezoids the central panel becomes, first in a series of graphite drawings and then in novel compound works that combine drawing on large paperboard panels with triangular side elements abutted to them, the focus of visual activity. In a 1977 exhibition at the Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Ramirez showed, along with paintings, powerful graphite drawings which were not large in size (the sheets were 22 by 30 inches) but of an intensity which easily balanced the much larger

paintings. This group of drawings was made with densely overlaid parallel strokes of wide black graphite: the effects are of paradoxical intensity. The dark graphite forms present a concentrated blackness of a curious atmospheric depth in the large surrounding area of white paper but, at the same time, the repeated stroking of the medium produces a burnished surface which is reflective, rather like that of polished leather. The intensely black forms illogically seem to emit light. The themes of these extraordinary drawings are the different compositional ideas which define the artist's principal formal foci: the trapezoidal form as the whole field, the vertical "central" rectangle flanked by narrow vertical tonally graduated forms, and various permutations of triangular and rectangular elements.

At the conclusion of this series of drawings, Ramirez projected the group of works upon which he is still engaged, in which the mysterious dark yet reflective graphite passages come to be integrated into large works in the scale of his paintings. This step receives its first full statement in the very large TL-P 5.6-5.641 / and she had black hair/ALSO (96 by 135 inches)<sup>3</sup> recently acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago. In this work the artist has used three separate panels of laminated paper over Upson board attached to a wooden framework that is bolted together from behind. The integration of a large graphite area with painted canvas elements may be seen in the large, just earlier, TL-P 6.522. The formal issues in this and related works go beyond the simple relationships of the component forms of the trapezoid and extend into the mystical expressive powers of the delicate darkening gradations of the flanking triangular elements as they both contrast and reverberate with the shimmering dark lustrous rectangle of the central panel.

Still more complex formal and expressive interrelationships of form, color, and tone are explored in the watercolor, graphite, and Zipatone drawings and collages of late 1978 and early 1979. From these it is clear that the artist intends, in works of four and perhaps more component elements, to articulate his ideas in works of monumental formats of 6 by 10 feet and larger, the first of which is the concluding piece in the show.

The preceding paragraphs have been intended to outline or give a precis of Ramirez's principal formal developments. Since the artist strongly decries an exclusively formalist approach to his work, what then is Ramirez's art about? In talks about his own work and in written statements he has emphasized again and again that the particular formal relationships in his art are not felt to be independent of very personal associative expressions of spiritual and metaphysical experiences and awarenesses or "ineffable feelings."<sup>4</sup> The objective support (if any is needed) that can be observed in Ramirez's work as evidence of the primacy of intuitive or spiritual content can be found in the facts that he does not use predetermined sets of geometric or arithmetical proportions in the construction of his works; when asked how he determined the height-width relationship of the rectangular elements in his paintings, he replied that most often he lays out stretcher bars of different lengths on the studio floor until the one that is "right" is formed.<sup>5</sup> Ramirez's veilings of color and tonal gradations are similarly developed by eye and mind (Ramirez would say soul) in the process of each work. All this is consistent with his conviction that "the only concrete, comprehensible subject matter that in my opinion, can be articulated verbally, is the formal elements within a tautological structure."<sup>6</sup>

If one accepts Ramirez's feeling that it is impossible to frame with words any comprehensive explanation of his work, what is there to be said about it? Clearly the artist does not intend to obviate all critical evaluation of interpretation: he insists only that discussion of his forms or means is just that and in no way an equivalent of the total experience of his work, expressively or structurally. However, the development of Ramirez's formal concerns allows one to suggest the general direction of his work in its principal aspects. The earlier paintings and works on paper in the exhibition show the artist in the first mastery of problems which deal primarily with the relational properties of two-dimensional angular and rectilinear abstract forms. The liberation of linear forms from the contours of the larger shapes described in the Untitled diptych of 1973 presented Ramirez, still largely within the framework of a formalist "relational" esthetic, with the means to articulate far richer visual relationships than previously. Furthermore, these new potentials went beyond the clear harmonies of large distinct shapes presented as two-dimensional planar areas. The more involved spatial suggestions created by the newly independent line were for Ramirez the additional means which let him feel he could move beyond merely formal problems and begin to express more of the "ineffable feelings" that are his true subject.

The step that Ramirez made here he feels is analogous to aspects of Wittgensteinian Wittgenstein philosophy<sup>7</sup> in that purely formalist concerns are equated with the proposition

that "tautologies show the logical or structural properties of their components"<sup>8</sup> and that to go beyond this to embody metaphysical and personal concerns one can only make manifest or show them through the specifics of the work of art itself. In this progression Ramirez wishes consciously to unify intellectual mental understanding with metaphysical things of the spirit and he sees his efforts as parallel to Kandinsky's ideas in the latter's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and to Arnold Schoenberg's attitudes toward the interrelationships between the structural nature of his tonal system and the expressive content of his music.<sup>9</sup>

For Ramirez the elements of form, line, and color must not only present a visual logic in their relationships which tautologically "show... logical or structural properties...." but additionally present impressions of the "inner nature" or "spontaneous expressions of incidents of an inner character" (Kandinsky).<sup>10</sup> What sorts of "incidents" and "impressions" does Ramirez's art offer? He carefully avoids titles of any emotional specificity in keeping with his conviction that there can be no verbal expression of such things. But it seems clear that the artist's range of color (from pale, light filled hues to luminous blacks), the flashing activity of his slender linear elements, the vibrating striations of the parallel graphite strokes in drawings and compound works, and the idiosyncratic shape relationships set up among their component parts create heroic states of feeling akin to the emotional content of symphonic and other orchestral music. Ramirez has spoken of qualities such as "tragic," "spiritual," and "contemplative" in association with his work. These are not specific or literal characteristics connected with particular events, as they might be in literature, but are internal experiences of the soul and belong to the realm of the poetic sensibility in its largest and most profound aspect.

Though Ramirez's art deals with these grand conceptions, their access to the viewer is not initially through intellection but instead through intense, even thrilling sensuousness and dynamism. The large shifting fields of varying hues in Ramirez's paintings strike one with an almost physical sensation, perhaps connected with their highly individual equilibrium of tonality and hue. The sharp flashing linear elements which both delimit and interrupt these fields are themselves of great chromatic complexity and intensity, seeming both to stabilize and energize the larger forms. Ramirez's personal sense of proportion and scale is something which one comes to recognize as idiosyncratically his after seeing three or four works: though the specifics of these proportions are determined intuitively and optically rather than conceptually, they have a family kinship through their common origin in the artist's individual sense of form.

The finish and execution of Ramirez's work contribute much technique is fastidious and crisp but never suggests means other disciplined, fully responsive hand of the artist, even in works where there is some necessary technical intermediary such as in the unique embossed drawings and etchings. In them the foldings and creasings of the sheets, the tones and colors of the printed and drawn lines offer the same paradoxical contrast of elegantly meticulous execution with a highly personal style and composition that distinguishes the paintings.

The special achievement of Ramirez's art is his work attains with such an economy of formal means. In this way he seems to surpass the functions of rigidly formalist, minimal, or conceptual art wherein the artist often wishes to remain within the predetermined limits of some proportional, serial, or other system of form. There has been in fact an increasing recent critical dissatisfaction with what are felt to be the confining possibilities and repetitively demonstrational character of this kind of painting and sculpture.

Ramirez can be regarded as among the most important of recent American artists who go far beyond what some see as the mere solution of design problems toward a more richly expressive kind of art which returns to the full range of human emotional awareness as its central concern while retaining the traditional formal vocabulary of modern geometric abstract art. It is important here to state that Ramirez does not regard himself as the extension of a minimalist or conceptualist tradition but rather as having evolved independently of them and more akin perhaps to intuitive formalists such as Barnett Newman [Barnett Newman](#) or Mondrian [Piet Mondrian](#), who both retain an intensely personal inflection of feeling, structure, and execution in works of deliberate sparseness. Ramirez's own tastes and interests in art are not limited to purely abstract traditions, and he has felt uncomfortable at being identified with doctrinaire abstract artists who feel that a specific type of form or format is itself an indication of purity of intention, contemporaneity of style, and a guarantee of qualitative achievement. He has been equally exasperated by critics who wish to see in his work a specific and even referential response to the urban Chicago environment, specifically its modern architecture, and has said that despite superficial resemblances to regular or modular architectural schemas in his work the roots of his art lie within, in an inner vision of artistic necessity and are basically misunderstood if regarded as responses to the Chicago (or any other) environment.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, the notion of Ramirez's art as a series of personal icons misses the point. The iconic statement, however personal, must reduce and concentrate the specifics of a concern or idea that is at least partly conceptual or verbal or that is drawn from such elements. Ramirez's works are informed and suffused with states of deep feeling which can only be presented in the objective reality of each work: they do not capsulize, symbolize, or stand for these experiences but embody them as the final result of a causality originating within the artist's internal awareness and processes.

The power of Ramirez's accomplishments is special, too, in his synthesis of intellectual probity through the intuitive rationalism of his forms and the universal and cosmic states of expressive feeling that his art so radiantly holds. In this he feels himself akin to the line of development of this sort of content from Friedrich Friedrich to Rothko (and beyond) described brilliantly as a major current of modern artistic sensibility by Robert Rosenblum.<sup>12</sup> As Rosenblum pointed out earlier, this is a continuation and development of the eighteenth-century enthusiasm for the Sublime.<sup>13</sup> It is this area of high and expansive feeling, plucking an almost physical chord of sensation about the metaphysical awareness of man's experience of his place and condition in the universe, that is Ramirez's grand métier.

1 Daniel Ramirez, "Expression as Tautology: The Selfish Act (a case for metaphysical man)," Unpublished M.F. A. thesis. The Department of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, 1977. David Elliott, "Painting in Chicago: A battle, but there's triumph in it, too," Chicago Daily News, Panorama Section. January 22-23, 1977, p. 12.

2 He also acknowledges debts of influence to the painter Vera Klement and the collagist Robert Nickle.

3 In the titles of Ramirez's work, TL-P refers to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the numbers to the series of propositions included in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

4 See Polly Ulirich, "Pushing hard in life and art," Chicago Sun Times, Showcase Section, June 4, 1978, p. 8; Elliott, op. cit., pp. 3,12.

5 Conversations with the mist, February 1979.

6 Ramirez, op. cit., p. 15.

7 The relation of Ramirez's work to Ludwig Wittgenstein is described in Buzz Spector, "The Axiomatic Image: The Works of Dan Ramirez," The New Art Examiner. Chicago 6.6 (March 1979), 6-7.

8 Anthony Kenny, Wittgenstein, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 46 (quoted in Ramirez, op. cit., p. 2).

9 On Kandinsky and Schoenberg see Ramirez, op. cit., pp. 10-13 and 16-19.

10 Donald Mitchell, The Language of Modern Music, New York: St. Martins Press. 1970, p. 137(quoted in Ramirez, op. cit., pp. 17-18.).

11 Panel discussion in conjunction with the exhibition "Chicago Abstractionists: Romanticized Structures" held at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Art Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, March 1978.

12 Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

13 Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime" Artnews 59 (February 1961), pp. 38ff.