

Take Five: Jerry Allen, *Timeline* (2008-2014)

By Robert B. Epp

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The fifty-seven paintings in Jerry Allen's ambitious and ongoing *Timeline* series open themselves up to a multitude of visual impressions, interpretations and associations. On the one hand, the painted surfaces can be enjoyed purely for their emotional impact and immediate visual effect, generated by colour and the inventive variety of tonal combinations. From another angle, they can be appreciated for their contribution to formalist abstraction. However, for me, Allen's *Timeline* paintings suggest a strong affinity with music, specifically the cool jazz of the 1960s. The way Allen riffs on a simple composition of five coloured bands suggests the modal jazz structure of musicians like Dave Brubeck and Miles Davis, whose compositions set out a theme of chords which they improvise around in the repeated chord progression.



January (2012)

For example, engaging with a painting like *January* (2012), is to get lost in scumbled bands of brown, green and blue—earthy tones that have a restrained luminosity, like muted notes from a trumpeter’s horn. Its five horizontal bars of monochromatic colour hum with a low emotional intensity that is introspective and personal. In comparison, a painting such as *November* (2009) has a suave smartness. Its snappy two-tone pink and black rhythm, accentuated by a pale green stripe, evokes the up-tempo mood of the post-war swing era. Allen has a knack for handling triadic colour schemes. And after prolonged looking, the delightful visual balance and harmony of colour of his formalist compositions sinks in and pleases the viewer, in much the same way the right arrangement of musical notes seduces the listener.



November (2009)

Timeline began as an investigation of temporality. “Each painting acts like a period of experience in time, of what is occurring during the time of the painting,” says Allen. “The painted bands represent planes of experience.” The titling of the paintings by the month and year of their creation reinforces the diaristic nature of the work. Allen began the series in 2008, while living in Vancouver, Canada.

At the time he was interested in the idea of creating work around a monthly cycle, as a method of exploring the cyclical nature of time found in the changing seasons of the year, for example, or the lunar cycle. Allen says, “It was unusual and fascinating to me that ‘time’ would decide when a painting was finished and not some other intrinsic factor.”

Allen took inspiration from other artists who had explored time as a subject, such as On Kawara, who completed each painting in his *Date Paintings* series the same day they were begun, and French-Polish conceptual artist Roman Opalka who set out to paint ‘time’ by painting numbers consecutively from one to infinity. However, Allen derived the original composition of the *Timeline* paintings from *Carmelita* (2004), a painting by American artist Mary Heilmann featured on the cover of the November 2007 issue of *Artforum* magazine. He was attracted to the idea of the art magazine as an example of monthly time, and Heilmann’s stacked layers of colour appealed to Allen’s colour field sensibility.



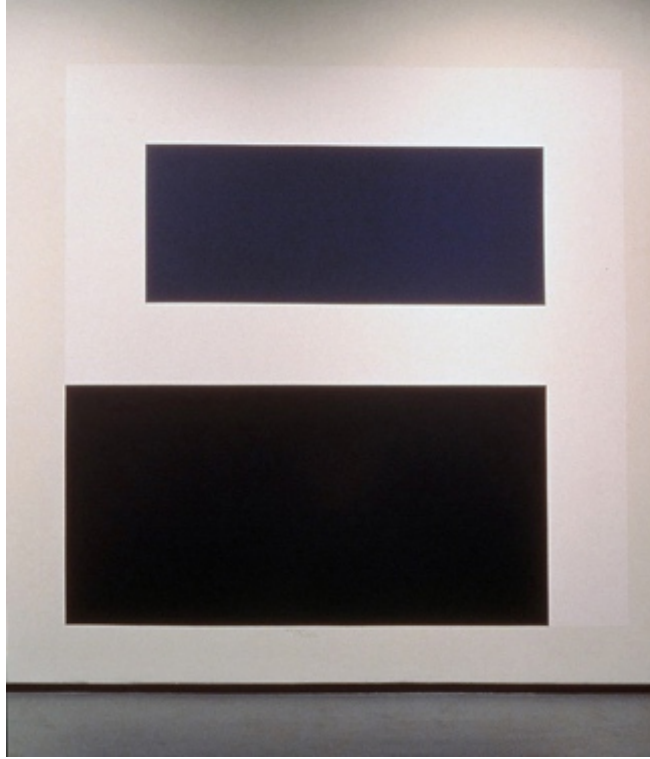
Carmelita (2004), cover, *Artforum* (November 2007)

Allen’s earlier site-specific ‘wall works’ prefigured *Timeline* and his interest in temporality. Executed in tissue paper dry mounted on the wall, the scaled-up numbers in *Rm. 317* (1995), for example,

celebrated time's basic abstract mathematical units of measurement. Allen extrapolated the colourful cut-out numbers of *Rm. 317* into stylized abstract planes painted directly onto the wall in *Rm. nine* (2005), signifying their temporality as time-based site-specific installations (they would eventually be painted over), and suggested the stacked horizontal bands of colour to come in *Timeline*.



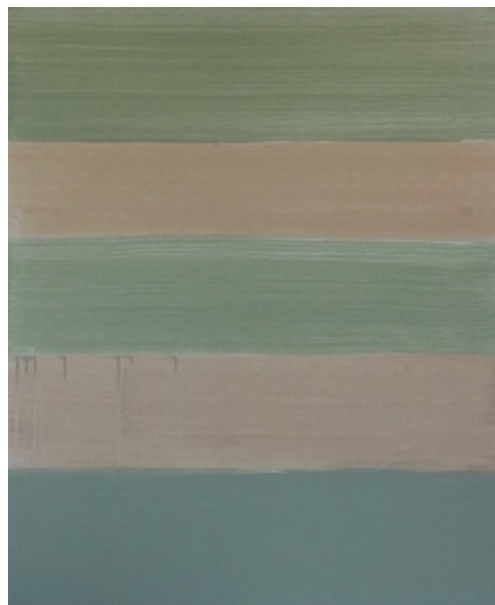
Rm. 317 (1995)



Rm. nine (2005)

To some extent Allen's *Timeline* paintings represent a conceptually-based durational painting performance, albeit a performance punctuated with lengthy intermissions. Although the media of oil and graphite on canvas and the dimensions—each painting measures 36 by 30 inches—remain consistent throughout *Timeline*, Allen's process is more intuitive than programmatic. For instance, he arrived at the final composition of five stacked coloured bands after a year of labour and experimentation, not through the adoption of a preconceived pattern. Also, his colour selection relies on an intuitive sensibility sourced from his street photography, or 'notetaking', as he calls it. From building construction materials and street wear to sports team jerseys and random details of urban architecture, the colours obtained from vernacular culture migrate into Allen's paintings through emotional impulses and intuitive associations.

It is not surprising that a lengthy opus like *Timeline* created over a six-year period would evolve and change considerably. The canvas *July* (2012), for instance, signaled a shift in Allen's process, from thinking of the paintings as 'time' documents to adding the evidence of the passage of time itself to the canvas. In the painting, Allen allows rivulets of paint to bleed over the canvas's edge and drips of paint to disturb the autonomy of the band below, a gestural mark first developed by American abstract painters in the '50s, such as Joan Mitchell, Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns.¹ As Achim Hochdörfer explains in 'A Hidden Reserve', "Form is turned over to the natural gravity of its materiality, and the brushstroke therefore reflects its elapse in time... In this way, the downward-streaming paint constructs an elegiac temporal structure: The present is perceived in the mode of the past."²



July (2012)

It was after a nearly two-year hiatus that Allen returned to the *Timeline* project with the painting *May* (2014). "By this juncture," explains Allen, "the 'image' of the painting had become of more interest to me than the study of 'time'." In the paintings from 2014, which signal the end of this body of

Timeline works, Allen is laying down striking chords of colour, carefully weighted and measured with crisp edges, like *October* (2014) that recall the colour band paintings by Quebec painter Yves Gaucher from the 1970s. Also, around this time, the project branched off in a series of delicate coloured pencil on paper drawings in various dimensions, such as *November* (2014), pointing *Timeline* in a new direction.



October (2014)

Allen considers the entire series of paintings produced for *Timeline* as constituting “one large painting about monthly time in monthly segments.” Looked at in this way, *Timeline* exists as a recurring chronography of days, monthly events and extended creative periods from the artist’s life. To me, at their most fundamental level, Allen’s planes of experience operate as emotional barometers of consciousness made visible through painting. Like the cool jazz of the sixties, his modernist paintings are emotionally restrained and understated in tone. Allen’s paintings invoke a reflective mood that is analogous to the experience of listening to music, producing involuntary memories accompanied by fleeting associations, thoughts and emotions that drift up from his

unconscious self. For their expression the *Timeline* paintings rely on the “universal language of subjective and historical experience,”³ however, they find their strength and qualities in the personal, as introspective objects.



November (2014)

Notes

¹Achim Hochdörfer, “A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958-1965,” *Artforum*, February 2009, p. 155.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, p. 153.

Quotations from the artist are based on the author’s personal interviews and correspondence with the artist. Allen currently lives in Saskatoon, Canada. His art can be seen online at jerryallen.ca.

Robert B. Epp is an art museum consultant and independent curator living in Victoria, BC, Canada.

*Essay updated August 12, 2024.