



ART REVIEW: The Pythagorean Poetry of Arthur Carter

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by Charles A. Riley II

One of my favorite musical anecdotes explains why the composer John Cage disliked Handel:

"I had just heard 'The Messiah' with Mrs. Henry Allen Moe, and she said, 'Don't you love the 'Hallelujah Chorus?'" and I said, "No, I can't stand it." So she said, "Don't you like to be moved?" and I said, "I don't mind being moved, but I don't like to be pushed."

In a time when so much art tries to push too hard and too often, the sculpture of Arthur Carter pulls. Strolling Jobs Lane in Southampton on a recent July afternoon, I indulged a pang of nostalgia for the old Parrish Art Museum, its former location now home to the Southampton Arts Center.

From the courtyard, through the wrought-iron fence, the voice of an old and cherished friend invited me inside. It was a peripheral view of Carter's *Mathematika* (1997), an aluminum configuration of three angled squares in the most glorious of slate blues (Carter works with color guru Donald Kaufmann). Accustomed to seeing it across a neatly trimmed lawn at the edge of Moriches Bay at Carter's Remsenburg estate (I wrote two books about his work for Abrams), I was struck by how differently the blues read (really, sounded) in their garden enclosure, framing lush greens and the red brick of the walls.



"Mathematika" by Arthur Carter, 1997.

The outdoor movement of the show in Southampton is as meaningful and seductive as the considerable body of work inside, in part because it is so scrupulously sited by the artist himself (the show is presented in conjunction with Leila Heller Gallery). For example, Carter's *Suffusion* (1999) remains demurely in a corner by the walls, off center from the squares, an homage in bronze with a cobalt patina to a signature work by the Swiss sculptor Max Bill, which is in Carter's collection in Connecticut. At the door *Continuous Elliptical Loops* (2007) greets visitors, a ribbon of bronze crossing itself a half dozen times on the trip up and around and back again to its base along edges that are sharp as skate blades.



“Continuous Elliptical Loops” by Arthur Carter, 2007.

Carter’s work takes its place historically not just within the context of major artists—such as Naum Gabo, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Fritz Glarner, Alexander Liberman (a neighbor and friend from Connecticut), Jan Matulka, and notably George Rickey, whose writings are central to Carter’s thinking—but also of philosophers, mathematicians and composers. A true polymath, Carter taught philosophy at New York University, was a math prodigy at Brown University and Dartmouth’s Tuck School, and is also a classical pianist.



Artwork by Arthur Carter.

Inside the Southampton Arts Center, this generous show offers a course in Carter’s considerable oeuvre that begins, as so many sculptors’ work does, in a brilliant group of drawings: haptic as well as optical (conveying touch and sight) preparatory studies for new sculpture or reflections on his existing work. Delicately shaded charcoal drawings, firmly delineated pen diagrams, and quickly sketched pencil studies define the curves and ruled geometric forms of the sculpture as well as the *Orthogonals*, a series of wall reliefs that is well represented in the show.



“Orthogonals” by Arthur Carter.



“Orthogonal” by Arthur Carter.

I happen to know, from studio visits, that Carter uses Derwent Sketching Pencils extra thick graphite 2B round as well as General Charcoal Pencils 4B from the 557 series for a mark that is more velvety than the sharper pen rule in some of the drawings he uses for fabrication.

A polisher and finisher in the sculpture or painting studio, Carter is an artist of crisp edges and flawless surfaces. Even in the drawings that seem to “flow” from top to bottom, the precise

movements by which the lines are executed reveal themselves on close inspection to be composites of strokes that often move in opposite directions; looping, open ellipses that travel in opposite directions, meeting to create the spiral form. The lyrical, feminine curve that curls inward from the edge is set against the masculine beat of the straight lines stretching outward toward the paper's top and edges.



"The Couple" by Arthur Carter, 1999.

It is a short step from the drawings to the assembled forms, locked tightly together in the *Orthogonals* themselves or the firm architecture of the freestanding sculpture. The estimable critic Hilton Kramer used an epigraph from Apollinaire for an early catalogue essay on Carter's sculpture at Salander O'Reilly in Manhattan: "Geometry is to the artist what grammar is to the writer."

As many in the art world and elsewhere know, Carter is not the typical starving artist. A major name on Wall Street and former partner of Sandy Weill, he owns about a hundred different companies, a roster that once included the New York Observer and a sizable interest in The East Hampton Star. At the Observer, Carter lured Kramer from the Times and ran his art criticism on the front page, and gave Candace Bushnell her start with the "Sex and the City" column.

The paintings in his collection include a stunning Picasso portrait, major works by Fernand Leger, Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miro, and Josef Albers, as well as a glorious Hans Hoffmann painting from the late 1950s. On a panel of artists who are collectors in Florida he said, "Some collecting leads to clutter. Artists could be intimidated by the looming presence of Picasso on the wall, or Rodin on a pedestal in the corner. I don't let the shadows fall on what I work on." The Southampton show proves that Carter is an individual talent who chooses his tradition as selectively as the works in his collection.

Carter's intellectual background is as surprising as his business expertise. Permutations, variations, recursive elements and grids that are so prevalent in the work can be traced to his mathematical training as well as one of his favorite books, the Chinese classic, *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*. Carter is devoted to the ideas of Taoism, including its insistence on a certain graceful and natural ease or acceptance.



"Orthogonal" by Arthur Carter.

He is also a concert-level pianist with a keen understanding of the concept of a tonic key. In his art, his C major is the square. In 2009, Carter began his *Orthogonal* series based on a grid of squares, many of which are in the show. These works may be considered *en suite* as essays in the compositional idiom for a group of reliefs that embody the grid three-dimensionally. In many ways they are closest to the theme and variations of music.

The intellectual core of all the work is a deep understanding of mathematics. In particular, Carter's drawings, sculpture and reliefs are precisely informed by the mathematical work of Fibonacci (Leonard Pisano, 1170–1240).

As mathematician Alfred Friedland helpfully observed in an essay, "All art—including the autogenous (as opposed to "created") art of the universe—is subject to the invisible realities and limitations of space. With his sometimes implicit, sometimes overt references to unyielding and yet flexible mathematics, Arthur Carter encounters the challenges posed by space more than most artists do. Like the finest poetry or music, his creations allude to more than they explicitly contain."



"Untitled" by Arthur Carter, 2003.

The intimacy of the Southampton Arts Center exhibition follows Carter studiously as he traces ideas from paper to wire to paint to stainless steel or bronze. And while it's true that, for a publisher and philosopher, Carter can be frustratingly reticent, even so, he once gave me a subtle clue to why he is an artist:

"Only squares and circles, lines and ellipses," he said, "can elegantly explain and simplify the complex meaning of life."

BASIC FACTS: "Arthur Carter: Sculpture, Paintings and Drawings," July 16 to August 9, 2015, at the Southampton Arts Center, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. www.southamptoncenter.org.

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