



Joy of Color in Christensen Paintings at Berry Campbell

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by Eric Ernst

In the retrospective of Dan Christensen's work currently on display at the [Berry Campbell](#) gallery in New York, the viewer is confronted with an artist whose paintings revel in the sheer joy of the fusion of light, movement and color.

Spanning his career from early spray paintings to the final pieces completed just prior to his death in 2007, the exhibition underscores Christensen's masterful ability to manipulate the canvas in myriad ways, all of which, as Karen Wilkin described in *Art in America*, were "executed with consummate assurance and a fluid hand".

Further, this manipulation was accomplished despite his violating one of the cardinal rules within the art world. While allowing that it's okay to display a measure of interest about different approaches to the surface, this rule dictates that the artist must maintain a stylistic rigidity, thereby allowing the work to forever be easily categorized or pigeonholed. For Christensen, this was a violation of his own restless inquisitiveness about the endless possibilities inherent in the creative process itself.

Constantly searching and experimenting, [Dan Christensen](#) allowed himself the freedom of exploration and gave his mind and hand free rein to push the boundaries beyond the obvious, always in search of new ways to express the mysterious tones and rhythms that echo in his work from one decade to the next.

At the same time, regardless of any superficial dissimilarities that arise as his paintings evolved over time, one can nevertheless easily discern subtle connections that tie the works together. This is apparent whether the works are from the early spray paintings of the 1960s, through what he called his "Plaid" and later "Stain" periods, or stretching to the later examples from the early 2000s. It was in this latter period that he seemed to be moving toward an attempt to amalgamate elements from many of the earlier phases.

Having moved to New York after receiving a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute, Christensen found himself in an art scene where minimalism, color field, and Pop art were dominating the conversations. This was reflected in his early works such as *Untitled* (acrylic on canvas, 1967) and *Dorado* (acrylic on canvas, 1968), which heralded Christensen's use of a spray gun to create delicately choreographed loops of calligraphic color. These spirals whimsically dance across the surface with echoes of both [Jackson Pollock](#) and the gritty impact that graffiti art was beginning to have on New York artists in the late '60s.



“Untitled” by Dan Christensen, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 42 1/4 x 48 inches.



“Dorado” by Dan Christensen, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 140 inches.

As playful as his spray gun works were, the paintings from what he called his “Plaid” period were much more somber and thoughtfully meditative. With rollers and squeegees used to apply the pigments, works such as *South Delray Way* (acrylic on canvas, 1970) and *Alhera Bloom* (acrylic on canvas, 1971) resonate with a subtle though resolute landscape sensibility that is gently reminiscent of Richard Diebenkorn’s later abstract [Ocean Park series](#). Interestingly, despite their rather impressive size and scale, the works nevertheless feel distinctly intimate and the artist’s masterful use of color and geometric balance creates an entertaining dialogue between the viewer and the works.



“SouthDelray Way” by Dan Christensen, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 83 3/4 x 65 1/2 inches.



“Alhera Bloom” by Dan Christensen, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 116 x 34 inches.

The works from the “Stain” period return to the more free flowing compositional structure of his earlier works, particularly *Breton Mist* (acrylic on canvas, 1975) and *Sandu* (acrylic on canvas, 1972). The echoes here stem from the way the artist uses color to accentuate the dramatic impact of light conjured by the powerful presence of negative space.



“Breton Mist” by Dan Christensen, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 49 x 20 1/4 inches.



“Sandu” by Dan Christensen, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 99 x 14 inches.

Interestingly, *Maricaibo* (acrylic on canvas, 1974), by contrast, uses much darker tones to occupy much of the work’s surface, while slashes of movement and color seem to visually ebb and flow within the painting’s physical composition. The effect moves the work in dramatically different directions from the artist’s usual approach during this period and conjures a dreamlike and surreal ambiance that is reminiscent at times of the Chilean Surrealist [Roberto Matta](#).



“Maracaibo” by Dan Christensen, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 91 1/2 x 56 inches.

By contrast, *Queen of Hearts* (acrylic on canvas, 1986), *Golden Dream of Mexico* and *Festival de Samba* (both acrylic on canvas, 1985) finds Christensen returning to a more geometric structuring of the compositional plane. Here Christensen introduces playfully arranged imagery that is almost Kandinsky-like in the balance between colors and shapes. These images move rhythmically across the surface while the artist introduces mysteriously airbrushed hues that ebb and flow in the background creating a decidedly musical sensibility.



“Queen of Hearts” by Dan Christensen, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 85 x 65 inches.



“Golden Dream of Mexico” by Dan Christensen, 1985.
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 65 1/2 inches.



“Festival de Samba” by Dan Christensen, 1985.
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 38 3/4 inches.

Christensen further simplifies the picture plane in the [Kenneth Noland](#) influenced *Rosa* (acrylic on canvas, 1990) and *Eliminator* (acrylic on canvas, 1993). In both *Bayez* (acrylic on canvas, 1995) and *Dolby* (acrylic on canvas, 1998), on the other hand, he pays homage to [Adolph Gottlieb](#), in the use of space and, particularly in *Dolby*, the introduction of impasto brush strokes that provide dramatic juxtaposition to the airbrushed circular image at the work’s center.



“Rosa” by Dan Christensen, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 65 inches.



“Eliminator” by Dan Christensen, 1993. Acrylic on canvas,
24 x 19 inches.



“Bayez” by Dan Christensen, 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 75 x 90 inches.



“Dolby” by Dan Christensen, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 65 x 70 inches.

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In *Green Glow* (acrylic on canvas, 2004), *Graceland* and *Regulator* (both acrylic on canvas, 2006), the artist comes full circle as he returns to the sensuously looping circular motifs of his early works. In these pieces, though, Christensen tightens the composition and the geometric imagery becomes less calligraphic and more immediately rhythmic, allowing unseen harmonies to orchestrate the organizational framework.

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“Green Glow” by Dan Christensen, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 58 inches.

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“Graceland” by Dan Christensen, 2006.
Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 48 inches.

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“Regulator” by Dan Christensen, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 96 inches.

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BASIC FACTS: “Dan Christensen □Retrospective,” September 17 through October 17, 2015, at Berry Campbell Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011. www.berrycampbell.com; 212-924-2178.

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