

The Archive: The Creative Process of Abstract Painter Thomas Nozkowski

by Liselott Johnsson

One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive and the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered. Created as much by individuals and groups, the archive, as distinct from a collection or library constitutes a repository or ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written (Merewether 10).

The Archive and the obsession with memory collection, preservation, and display in our modern culture have played an important role in art, especially in installation art and photography. As an example of how abstract painting can relate to the systems of the Archive, I will discuss the work and creative process of abstract painter Thomas Nozkowski, whose thoughts on painting have had an influence on my own work. Through reading and listening to interviews, I came to the conclusion that Nozkowski's approach to painting exhibits similarities to the way an archivist manages an archive. Like an archivist, Nozkowski collects visual data, chooses what to preserve and in what format, and organizes the information. Although Nozkowski's creative process has been described in numerous publications, linking his methodology to the idea of the Archive, allows an alternative reading of his complex body of work.

There are four aspects of Nozkowski's paintings that I find intriguing: image content, painting format, naming, and surface quality. Nozkowski's colorful paintings—which all differ in content—tend to feature amorphous awkward shapes and geometric patterns that explore the relationship between figure and ground. An example can be seen in *Untitled 8-122* (Fig. 1), which shows a pink figure leaning on a rounded multicolored striped shape. The receding background

is dark blue and the composition is slightly off-center. The image looks vaguely familiar. Through association, it is possible to immediately concoct stories about it; however, none of the stories makes sense. Thoughts of surrealist painting come to mind, such as Joan Miró's *Figure*, painted in 1932 (Fig. 2). This painting also exhibits a figure in relation to a striped element; in addition, the color selection and distribution is remarkably similar. However, despite the similarity, Nozkowski's painting has a very different psychological feel; it lacks the tortured drama exuded by the figure in Miró's work. Notwithstanding similarities to other artists' work, most of Nozkowski's paintings do not reveal recognizable historical art references. For instance, the paintings *Untitled 8-137* (Fig. 3) and *Untitled 8-128* (Fig. 4) evoke thoughts of landscape and the city, but I cannot remember ever seeing anything similar.

So where do these strange compositions come from? Already in 1974, Nozkowski had developed rules that his paintings draw inspiration from shapes, forms, and colors found in the real world (Yau 1). In a YouTube interview, Nozkowski conveys how he looks upon the real world and what inspires him. Viewers are allowed to follow Nozkowski on a walk while he comments on shapes that appear in the environment. He says that he makes note of interesting shapes and then later inserts these into his paintings at his discretion. His paintings are initiated as result of experiences that touch him deeply on either a visual or emotional level (Prose 4). Nozkowski also keeps a diary where he notes his daily experiences in writing (Yau 2). Of all the shapes, colors, and experiences collected, a selection would find their way into the oil paintings and be preserved. During the painting process, the shapes on the canvas bring forth other memories that in turn influence the composition. The critic John Yau writes, "He wants to honor, but not mimic, the range of textures and differences that are the essence of any visual

experience” (92). This method of working resembles the way an archivist first collects data and then chooses which documents are to be archived and where.

The paintings are in a sense two-dimensional containers of found shapes and experiences. The repetitive format, 22”x28”, and materials—oil on linen on board—contribute to this notion, as can be seen in this photograph of one of Nozkowski’s exhibitions (Fig. 4). All paintings are numbered rather than named, a phenomenon, which is characteristic of records in an archive. According to an interview with Francine Prose, Nozkowski starts about thirty paintings a year and finishes between ten and twenty. The unfinished paintings join a collection of more than three hundred other unfinished paintings that Nozkowski hopes to finish some day (Prose 4). Both the finished and the unfinished paintings contain fragments of events in Nozkowski’s life. These make me think of Andy Warhol’s *610 Time Capsules* (Fig. 5). In 1974, the same year Nozkowski developed his painting method, Andy Warhol started a system of archiving miscellaneous items, such as invitations, souvenirs, photos, and correspondence in a dated shoebox next to his desk (Spieker 3). Once a box was filled, it would be sealed and sent to a storage facility in New Jersey. By the time he died, Warhol had filled 610 boxes (Spieker 3). According to his own account, Warhol used his storage containers to ship his memorabilia out of sight and out of mind (Warhol 31), but it appears to me that Nozkowski uses his paintings to reevaluate memory. He says, “It’s very clear to me that I am as interested in my failures of memory, the lapses, mistakes, and self-delusions, as I am in any kind of putative accuracy” (Yau 2).

Another aspect of Nozkowski’s painting process can be linked to memory. The painting surface looks as if it has a weathered patina, as if it had gone through several iterations. Even though the forms appear very simple, the paintings seem to have been worked on for a while.

Nozkowski starts every painting with the intention of finishing it in one day. This does not happen very often. Instead, the painting is reworked many times, sometimes over many years. Since Nozkowski was taught by abstract expressionist teachers, he paints directly on the linen on board surface without any preparatory sketches. When something does not please him, he removes the paint with turpentine or with a palette knife and then paints the image all over again. He seems to value the fact that the surface is reworked completely every time he makes a change. In his process, all the elements in the painting are reevaluated, shapes change location, and colors are revised (Prose 6). This is the reason that the surfaces of his paintings exhibit traces of previous alterations. He says, “You can’t ever erase something; you can’t get rid of it. It will affect everything that’s put on top of it. Whether you’ve peeled most of the paint away or rubbed it down into a fine veil of color” (Yau 4).

Looking at Nozkowski’s process from the outside, I cannot help but think of Freud and the Mystic Writing Pad, a turn of the 20th century writing tool. In 1932, Freud described this tool to illustrate his understanding of the operation of the mind and memory. The Mystic Writing Pad consists of a slab of wax and two superimposed sheets, which retain writing when pressed by a stylus; however the scripture or image will immediately be erased once the sheets are lifted from the wax surface. Nevertheless, traces of the mark will remain in the wax. So the Mystic writing pad, like the mind, can simultaneously retain traces of events and receive an unlimited quantity of new information. Freud thought that traces of our experiences remained in our subconscious (Freud 21). Could it be that Nozkowski’s paintings similarly illustrate a function of memory and that we all constantly reevaluate our experiences until we have a satisfactory understanding? The painting process is a way for Nozkowski to achieve a better understanding of his daily

experiences, and he says, “A painting’s finished when I understand why I wanted to do it in the first place” (Prose 4).

What does this analysis contribute to my own development as an artist? Since I first learned about Nozkowski’s working methods last fall, I have started to consciously document patterns, shapes, and color combinations that pertain to my visual research. I keep these images in my sketchbooks. I know that most of this information will never enter a painting, only glimpses of it will. When I am working on a painting, I often bring out my sketchbooks to look at images that at one point caught my attention. At the time of decision, I am therefore allowed more choices than what my memory would normally be able to provide. This has brought me to realize how much visual information I am exposed to and then instantly forget. In a sense, this method of working has allowed me to think of painting and continue my visual research outside of the studio. This is exactly what Nozkowski shows viewers in his YouTube video when he is walking through the landscape.

Nozkowski’s working methods relating to archival processes are interesting; however, the most fascinating aspect of his work is found in the interplay between the viewer and the painting. No one can look at Nozkowski’s work without starting to imagine what the shapes could be and what they mean. It is Nozkowski’s hypothesis that unless an artist wants to say something with a painting, the painting does not communicate anything (Yau 2). Any viewer can tell that Nozkowski’s paintings strive to communicate something complex and profound; however, the viewer is unable to discern what is actually being told. This information gap allows the viewer freedom to associate and imagine freely; herein rests the true beauty and mystery of Nozkowski’s paintings.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (8-122)*, 2009, oil on linen on panel, 22 1/8" x 28 1/8"



Fig. 2. Joan Miró, *Figure*, oil on panel, 1932, 10 3/4" x 7 7/8"



Fig. 3. Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (8-137)*, 2009, oil on linen on panel, 22 1/8" x 28 1/8"

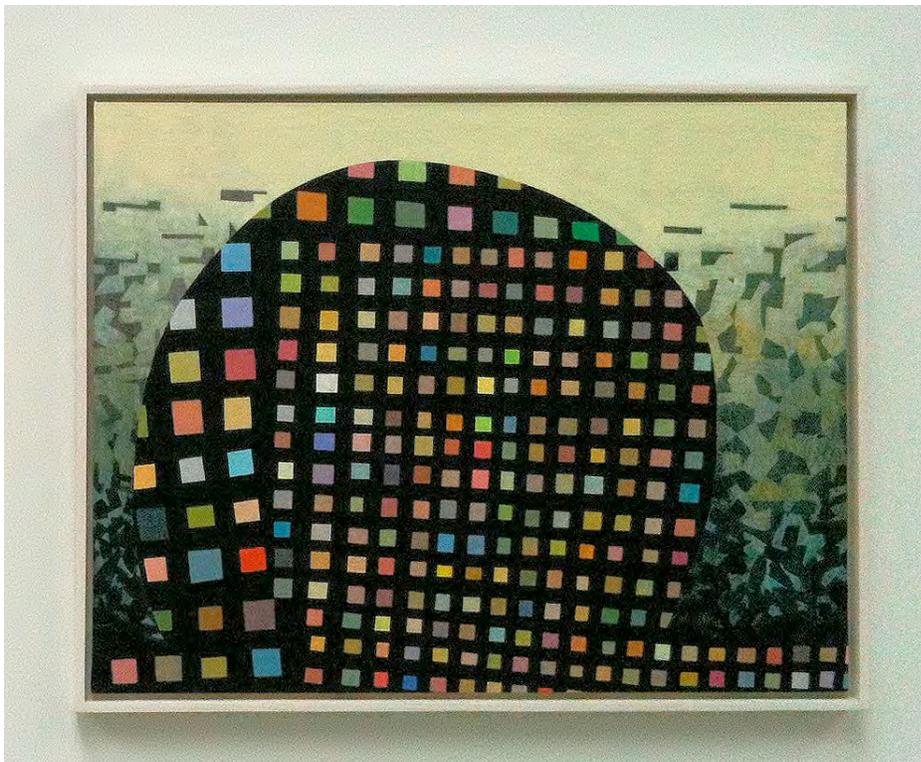


Fig. 4. Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (8-128)*, 2010, oil on linen on panel, 22 1/8" x 28 1/8"

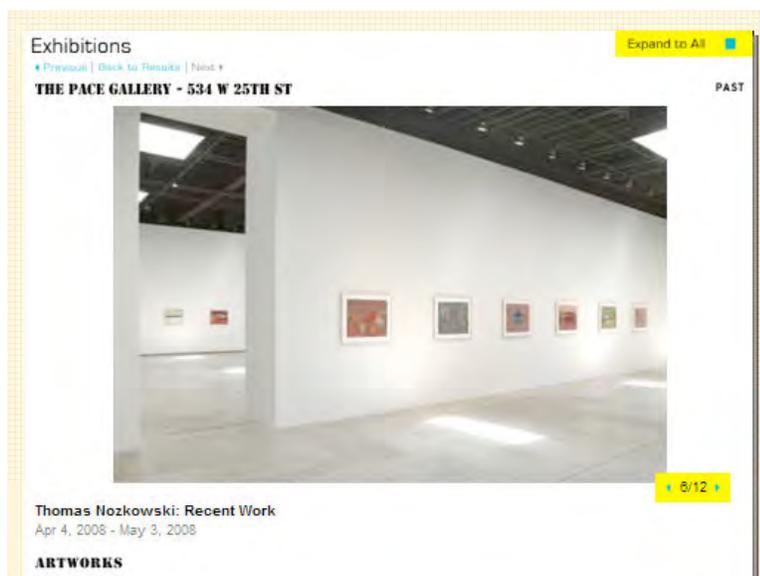


Fig. 5. Screen Capture, Pace Gallery Website, <http://thepacegallery.com/>,
 Installation Photo of Thomas Nozkowski: Recent Work, April 4 – May 3, 2008.



Fig. 6 Andy Warhol, *610 Time Capsules, 1974-1987*, Installation Photo
 Andy Warhol Museum, www.warhol.org

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