

Julian Stanczak

Essay by Barbara Stanczak, wife of the artist:

This is one of those paintings you have to experience personally, in the flesh. Its dimensionality is so strong that it threatens to suck you into the painting, tempting you to step into its dark center to be absorbed and to cease being you.

Low Sound has several intriguing features that make it uniquely dramatic. For one, it has a dark center. Julian most frequently painted light centers that appear to protrude into the viewer's space and to emit luminous light. A dark center has the opposite effect: it draws you towards its inner core, mysteriously, elusively, perhaps dangerously. *Low Sound's* proportions of height to width are also unusual for the artist. It stands 80 inches tall instead of the more typical 70 inches for a painting that is 50 inches wide. This creates an elongated central space of darkness, daring the viewer to step into it.

However, once the viewer visually steps inside the dark central abyss, he or she realizes that this space is really not foreboding after all! Rather, it is curiously rich in color. While a casual onlooker, viewing the painting from a distance, sees only black and white, the transformative color of this painting is actually purple! Purple was also the last color Julian physically applied to the canvas.

Looking carefully at *Low Sound* from up close, one notices a subtle temperature change from the dark center to the dark edging - the center is warmer than the border regions. This is caused by a tiny shift in the specific color of the purple top squares. That shift affects our psychological response. Although the shift is so subtle that most people do not register the color adjustment cognitively or consciously—rather, they react to the change intuitively or emotionally—the place where it occurs is identified by arrows in the close-up photo on the back of this card. This subtle shift prompts a significant psychological response to the painting. Julian was a conductor of sensations, fine-tuning responses in the viewer's experience.

The Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists (Pointillists) of the 19th Century played with the power of complementary colors to promote perceptual color change and visual action. Dramatic changes in value (light and dark), particularly promoted by Manet and Seurat, can perform similar elusive transformations. For *Low Sound*, Julian prepared a value scale from black to white in 11 equidistant increments. He applied the darkest value in the central rectangle of the painting, then progressed to white, then reversed down the value scale back to darkness at the border. The lighter values, being surrounded by the darker areas, are visually squeezed and, because of that, they gain power and dimensional bulge/projection.

The drama of the advancing whites leads us to believe that the painting is three-dimensional, bulging forward in a quivering rectangle. Why quivering? Why is the central rectangle, when viewed in person, so visually active? The answer is value clash—the clash between light and dark! The clash between the white or light gray, sandwiched between the black ground and the purple squares, agitates the receptors in the eye by requiring them to switch between polar extremes.

But the painting offers more than this dynamic visual action. Julian wanted, above all, to give color a hum -- “a haze, a shimmer or whisper” he would call it -- something that would transport the materiality of the painted color into an untouchable, intangible realm, almost dematerializing it.

In the technical sequence of painting *Low Sound*, Julian painted the purple squares on top of the black-gray-white value-oriented squares as the last application/transformation. Doing so, the achromatic sequence remains visible only as lineal square frames (Julian called them “windows”) offering up the purple as a surprising gift.

Julian named this painting *Low Sound*. Perhaps he was responding to the visual vibration or agitation I just described, likening it to the vibration of sound: the beat of a drum or the sound of an organ in its low register.

Low Sound looks deceptively simple upon first encounter, but the longer the viewer spends time with the painting, the more he or she becomes part of the spectacle and begins to experience a number of magical touches. Consider, for example, the apparent stretching of what look like thin shafts of light toward the corners of the painting. Those shafts of light do not physically exist; there is no painted color change! Another mystery: the painting’s primary impact is that of black and white, but purple has the most transformative power! In addition, the illusion of three dimensionality is extremely strong, yet the surface is physically flat.

Because of that illusion of three dimensionality, the viewer is pulled transfixed into the dark space and loses him- or herself in the pulsation of light and life.

Barbara Stanczak, 2022¹

Julian Stanczak (1928-2017) was one of the most important colorists of his generation. The influential “Op Art” movement was named in response to his first exhibition in New York, a 1964 exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery titled “Julian Stanczak: Optical Paintings.” His work is included in the permanent collections of more than 100 museums.

To learn more about Julian Stanczak, sign up to receive the Stanczak Color Quarterly. You can sign up by following the link in past issues (which you can locate by searching on line for “Stanczak Color Quarterly”) or by sending an email to nrector@rector-associates.com.

¹ This essay was modified slightly for clarity and to reference the images on this card.