Off the Grid: The Painted Planes of Jeremy Moon

By Matthew Jeffrey Abrams

If you spend enough time with Jeremy Moon's painting *Caravan II*, you might just hear it hum. Sit with the work; now listen. Let your eyes wander from one olive square to the next. Note how your gaze falls into those troughs of bright cerulean, and then, inevitably, follows that long orthogonal channel that runs from lower left to upper right, which seems to bisect two ordered grids. Now sit some more, and watch those grids begin to vibrate, as if charged with energy. Soon those inert squares will come alive, limned in a pulsing azure two tones darker than the channel, and then the canvas almost resonates, like the trill from a high-tension power line.

Moon's mature paintings often hum, or at least begin to glow. They are auratic, in a way, emitting light like old, gilded icons. One could reasonably think that this vibration, or shimmering, had been the artist's goal – but Moon, it seems, never cared much for optical deceits. In a 1972 draft letter to Norbert Lynton, Director of Exhibitions at the Arts Council, Moon distanced himself from his contemporary Bridget Riley, and by extension the larger Op-Art movement, and instead cast his lot with "what for the sake of clarity I will reluctantly call field painters, colour painters, hard edge (ouch) painters."[1] Works like *Caravan II*, then, are singing a different song. They also represent something else: a subset of Moon's oeuvre that I would like to call *off-grids*, or paintings where two uniform grids with disparate alignments converge. These shall remain my focus, because Moon's off-grids are the most representative – or at least the most obvious – examples of the painter's core aesthetic interest: not a manipulation of optical theory, but an investigation of the *plane* as an autonomous geometric unit, and one worthy of depiction. For Moon, illusory and stereoscopic qualities were secondary, and somewhat incidental, to this primary concern. And so, the question we must really answer is this: what is the difference between a painting *on* a picture plane and a painting *of* a picture plane?

Beginning in the early 1960s, Moon favored a certain clean and abstract manner. By the late 1960s, however, he had embraced a more ordered, more rigorously geometric, and, it would

[1] Jeremy Moon to Norbert Lynton, [April] 1972, The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.

seem, more hard-edged approach. Long past were the bold, gestural strokes of *No 8/61*, where Newman-esque "zips" erode into dry streaks and stipples. Long past, too, were the strangely surreal and organic passages of *Plaque II* (1962), where a throbbing, amoeba-like quadrilateral gives way to tangerine and saffron stripes, which invade the shape like a foreign body. Instead, Moon now filled shaped canvases with stripes and solid fields, or rectilinear canvases with various geometries, but always resisted the aleatory, the organic, and the gestural. Although Moon's oeuvre retains a consistency, the artist sought something more than a refined *style*. It is no accident that the late 1960s saw his off-grids emerge, flourish, and then evolve.

The off-grid paintings lasted one year. Moon's exquisite, hand-drawn index of his major works indicates that the first off-grid, *No 6/68*, appeared in early 1968, and the last, *No 1/69*, marked his first painting of 1969. Importantly, *No 6/68* and Moon's second off-grid, *No 7/68,* were both shaped canvases. These works marked a departure, although both paintings retained numerous characteristics from Moon's shaped canvas experiments of late 1967. These earlier works, like *No 14/67*, were bilaterally symmetrical, nonagonal paintings. *No 6/68* and *No 7/68* retain their tight corner notches, as well as an external, bilateral symmetry (albeit one that runs orthogonally rather than vertically). Moon, however, replaced his nonagons with hexagons while diverging his interior forms, positioning two uniform grids askew in what became his typical off-grid manner.

The experiment proved fruitful: more than half of Moon's twenty-two major works from 1968 were off-grids. The artist used shaped and rectilinear canvases, and explored various permutations, disintegrating his two grids into a disparate collection of squares, or aligning the grids but still bisecting them, or manipulating his shaped canvas's dimensions. Moon ended the series with *No 1/69,* where he tightened his flaring dimensions while elongating the painting, giving the work a strange, attenuated shape that conveys a certain blurry motion, as if the painting were streaking across the wall.

After a year of concerted study, the off-grid disappeared. In its place emerged the singular grid, which would dominate the final four years of Moon's career. Does this reduced complexity indicate a *streamlining*, so to speak, of Moon's aesthetic concerns?

I would argue that it does – and luckily, Moon left behind a drawing that illustrates both the off-grid's function as a painting of planes and the singular grid as its natural extension. Consider the sketch above. Here, we see that Moon has drawn a thick grid using black and white to distinguish positive and negative space. Whether he made one long grid and then cleaved the shape, or simply made two identical grids on two sheets, we cannot say. What we can say is that Moon literally placed one plane containing a grid atop another and then aligned them at a 45-degree angle – but he did so carefully, so that each plane's form became a mirror image of its opposite. We see Moon's corner notch naturally occur, and we can even see a reiteration of the shaped off-grid inside the grid, in that left-center overlap. The canting of two squares whose corners lie tangent, which nearly occurs right-center and at the notch, is also reminiscent of Moon's 1967 shaped works, such as *No 1/67* and *No 5/67.* In this preparatory drawing, then, we see the literal convergence of two distinct planes, and the formation of an edge where these two planes intersect – or what geometers call an *arris*.

It is not surprising that Moon would mention the word *plane* frequently. In a list of terms made by the artist in 1962, he included the alliterative "purple plane".[2] More significantly, in an article entitled "Enemies of Painting" Moon describes his craft as, "the experience of confronting and aspiring to give artistic life to a plane."[3] The term also reappears in his vitriolic response to John Elderfield's review in *Artforum*.[4] And while a physical plane is all surface, Moon seemed to understand that the concept had great depth. The concept of the geometric *plane* dates to antiquity, but among its earliest modern proponents was Robert Norton, whose *Mathematical Appendix* of 1604 describes a plane as "equally flat, contained within lynes, and doth not bulke out or shrinke in at any place." In addition to never bulking or shrinking,

[2] Jeremy Moon, "List of Words" (unpublished manuscript, 1962), The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.

[3] Jeremy Moon, "Enemies of Painting," *Studio International*, 182, no. 939 (December 1971): 226.

[4] Jeremy Moon to John Elderfield, Draft letter, 1972, The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection. Written in response to Elderfield's review of a group show that included Moon, Frank Stella, and Terry Frost in 1971.

mathematical planes are two-dimensionally infinite, which means that two planes can never lie flat without melding into one; therefore, unless two planes rest parallel, they will inevitably intersect, and wherever they do a crease, or arris, will form. Moon recognized the arris as a unique marker of space and surface, mining its visual potential – and this is how his off-grids diverge from the long and storied history of the "grid" in modern and contemporary art. Moon never used the structure to investigate flatness; he used it to investigate a *multitude of flatnesses*, and that queer, infinite edge where these multitudes would inevitably converge—the *arris*.

The arris is everywhere in Moon's work, even before 1968. We find whispers in early paintings, like *Mirage, 8/64*, where a bisected diamond canvas flickers between a diamond and two faces of a pyramid. We find meditations on the "edge" throughout the shaped works of late 1964 and early 1965, like *Concord, 19/64*, where five canvases abut one another, or *1/65* and *2/65*, where two triangular canvases are either abutted or screwed one atop the other. And beyond external canvas shape, Moon's late 1967 shaped canvases form their own internal arrises through their repetition of bisymmetrical chevrons, which appear not unlike the chevrons of contemporary color-field painter Kenneth Noland. Here, we can trace an arris running from the middle of each leg to the canvas's direct center. Even a work like *Eiger, 13/65*, a large field of black with seven wintergreen polka dots skirting the edges, visualizes a similar concern. Like Anthony Caro's table sculptures, which were designed to droop below the plane on which they stood, Moon's dots seem to wrap around the arris that is the physical edge of a stretched canvas and onto the painting's supports. Even here, Moon manipulates the picture plane that holds his picture planes.

This focus accelerated with the off-grid period. First came the drawing, and then *No 6/68*, which perfectly replicated the internal, mirror-image symmetry of the drawing's two grids. But with Moon's second iteration, *No 7/68*, he ruptured this perfect symmetry, painting symmetrical shapes but manipulating each grid's color scheme so that they very nearly, but not completely, match. *No 8/68* and *No 9/68* came next, marking the first rectilinear off-grids. Moon simplified his exterior shapes while complicating his internal forms. Bilateral symmetry is shattered here, and now the two grids remain identical in color and dimension, but diverge considerably in their layout. Moon then examines several other variations, adjusting and tweaking interior and exterior relationships, but always maintaining an eye towards the arris, the edge that marks a fold. It is interesting that the off-grids end just as they began: *No 1/69*, alongside *No 6/68*, is only other shaped and bilaterally-symmetrical work. Thereafter the single grid reigns.[5] And whether he tightened the grid or loosened it, or skewed it into trapezoids so

[5] Moon actually made his first single-grids just before his off-grid period began; five of them predate *6/68.*

that it appeared more like a lattice-work, the project remained the same. Yes, the number of planes is reduced to one, and yes, the arris is no longer visible. But for Jeremy Moon, as for geometers, a plane is always immersed in a larger conceptual space, so there is always a potential for convergence.

Once we understand Moon's aesthetic trajectory, we can reasonably argue that his most significant mature project had little to do with Riley, or Noland, or Morris Louis, or the abstract expressionists, or even Frank Stella, and perhaps more to do with his colleague John Hoyland, who from the mid to late 1960s was also painting planes atop planes. Moon's aesthetic also, paradoxically, recalls Caro's, who was both his contemporary and colleague.[6] Caro's sculptures of the 1960s, such as the magnificent *Pompadour,* increasingly became more physical investigations of the plane in space. But influences aside, a gap existed between how Moon examined the picture plane and how almost anyone else did, especially his critics. In another of Moon's venomous manuscripts (which he wisely never published), he explains why these critics could never see what he was seeing. "It is not possible to write in depth about light, space or colour in a purely formal/visual way," Moon notes. "Whereas, shape, composition, structure, scale and surface can all be realized more easily mentally and therefore written about more easily and with the greater chance of communication."[7] We could add the *plane* to that first list, too. In the end, Moon's project was much more cerebral and conceptual than his peers ever realized. He distinguished between color and paint, just as he distinguished between the shapes of his physical canvases and the snatches of infinite planes that he mapped upon them.[8]

It is worth noting that forty years earlier, Kazimir Malevich, the first to be considered an abstract painter and the first to develop a painting practice that sought to depict neither color nor form but mere planes, made an uncannily similar remark about the limitations of formal analysis. "The investigation of phenomena by the purely formal method," Malevich wrote,

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[6] Robert Moon, Jeremy Moon's son, noted the elder's friendship with Caro. Robert Moon, Correspondent, email to author, 26 February 2018. In a letter to his sister-in-law, Jeremy Moon once described Caro as: "one of the artists I have spent most time over the years talking and arguing with – and although I don't agree with some of his commitment he is one of the very few people I know who has as much, or more, vitality and mental energy towards art as I feel I have." Jeremy Moon to Jennifer Bryant, [September 1972], The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.

[7] Jeremy Moon, Notes on art criticism: "The limitations of formal criticism" (unpublished manuscript, [1972]), The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.

[8] It is important to understand just how conceptual Moon's thinking was. Consider this very sophisticated critique of Morris Louis and the American color field painters: "Much has been written (in Forum especially) about colour – but so much of what is talked about – particularly in American painting as being colour – isn't 'colour' at all… in the subtle and deep sense of the term in painting. Even Morris Louis – who was a fine artist – was in fact working more with 'paint' than with 'colour' in the sense that he used paint as a substance to be poured and soaked and stained in and not as a simple area of opaque, reflective (flat or painterly it makes no difference!) pigment on a plane…" Moon to Elderfield, 1972.

"brings us to forms, and the formal method can show us quite an interesting structure of phenomenon as forms, but after that we must rely on sensation which should complete that which cannot be shown by the formal method."[9]

Moon took heed of the Russian master, and he, too, believed that a great painting could induce a sensation that was ineffable, that it could produce "a physical, emotional and intellectual response so deep, powerful and unarguably demanding of acceptance that it reinforces beyond all intellectual doubt the absolute conviction that this small arena, far from being a limited or outworn convention, remains the high central plateau of the territory of a visual art."[10] Some might call this hopelessly heroic, but Moon understood the value of true, hard-earned abstraction. "This is the arena for that synthesis of pictorial space," Moon concluded. "Light and form on a plane of given dimensions which we recognize as capable of carrying special expressive potential and call the art of painting."[11] And until his tragic death, Moon practiced what he preached, venturing off the grid without ever really leaving it.

[9] Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, "An Attempt to Determine Relation between Colour and Form in Painting," in *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, vol. 2, ed. Troels Anderson. London: Rapp & Whiting, 1978; p. 138.
[10] Moon, "Enemies of Painting."
[11] Ibid.