



Lino Print (Red and Black)

Kenneth Martin

Not on display

Title/Description: Lino Print (Red and Black)

Artist/Maker: Kenneth Martin

Born: 1953

Object Type: Print

Materials: Paper

Accession Number: 31564

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Copyright: © Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

Kenneth Martin's linocut print of carefully arranged geometric forms was exhibited with two of his mobiles in *Nine Abstract Artists* at the Redfern Gallery in London in 1955.[1] This seminal exhibition, organised by the artist Adrian Heath, was used to set out the new approaches to non-figurative art that the group of British artists selected had been exploring since the late 1940s.

Martin had been closely associated with this group since 1951, having moved away from figurative art completely by 1950. [2] He used pure geometric forms, theories of composition and a restricted palette of flat colour to explore new ways of constructing works of art. Martin was confident that by limiting himself to primary elements, a 'complete pictorial expression' could be achieved, unrestricted by any attempt to imitate the forms of nature. The dynamic relationships that Martin sets up between the black and red printed rectangles and the white paper in this print are intended to engage the viewer in a fundamental way with questions of movement, form and space. Martin described this approach in a statement published for the group's first exhibition in 1951:

'The painter creates towards a spiritual harmony using the most fundamental means. So that height and depth, the broad and the narrow, darkness and light, the still and the moving, the curved and the straight, which are the stuff of man's existence, are used to communicate to man not through a reproduction but through a unique object.' [3]

Michael Morris was an early supporter of Kenneth Martin's abstract work and purchased this print from the Redfern Gallery exhibition in 1955. Martin and Morris shared an interest in experimental aesthetics and remained friends until Martin's death in 1984. Morris, who was working towards his PhD in Psychology in 1955 used this lino print as part of an experiment, which challenged assumptions that the most pleasing arrangement of forms is the most artistic or aesthetically valuable. The experiment is characteristic of the lively interdisciplinary debates taking place between artists and scientists in the 1950s.

Morris loaned this print to the Tate Gallery for Martin's retrospective exhibition in 1975 and described the experiment in detail in the catalogue:

'I first met Kenneth Martin in 1955 when planning some experiments in psychological aesthetics. I wanted to examine one underlying assumption of much previous experimental work in art that the most pleasing is the most artistic or aesthetically valuable. In particular, I wished to investigate the assumption of hedonism in relation to the organisation of elements in abstract art.

The first experiment involved making a full size 'model' of a suitable work of art in which the elements could be mechanically manipulated into the most pleasing position. It could then be measured and compared with the original. The work of art finally selected was Kenneth Martin's Linoprint (red and black) 1953. This has a limited number of well-defined elements (four black and two red rectangles) not arranged in any immediately obvious pattern.

The model of the work of art was attached to a wall. At the start of the experiment it presented a white field of the same dimensions as the original picture, with the small, red rectangle permanently fixed. Surrounding it was a grey, raised border which concealed the other five rectangles. These could be brought into view and moved through remote-control by subjects seated at a normal viewing distance. Each rectangle had a pre-determined area of movement, and its position could be accurately read. In effect, the whole apparatus resembled a 'transformable' work of art.

There were two hypotheses to be tested. First, that if the rectangles were moved into the most pleasing positions, they would replicate the original. Second, if this result was not obtained, the provision of some help by progressively increasing the number of rectangles already fixed in the original positions, would establish a gradient of success. A total of 77 subjects took part and their comments were recorded.

A second experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that the subjects would prefer the original work of art to variants of it. The method used was 'paired comparison' in which all the items of a set are presented in pairs. Each item is compared with every other in ways which minimise the effects of order of presentation and relative position. The subjects express a preference in the dimension being investigated, and a total ranking is obtained.

As it is not easy to find variants which are basically similar to a work of art and yet have a reasonable expectation of being preferred to it, careful selection of material is necessary. This was done by classifying the relevant results of the first experiment into four types of composition. From these a set of eight pictures was made, identical in size with the original work of art, and in the proportion found., i.e. three rectangular, two circular, two diagonal and one unclassified arrangement. Included in the rectangular group was the original, and one picture made by 'averaging' all the positions for each rectangle from the first experiment.

The results of the first experiment showed that the most pleasing positions of the rectangles were not those of the original work of art. There was also no gradient of success as the number of movable rectangles was decreased. In the second experiment, six of the eight pictures, including the original, were ranked equal. But choices for the seventh and eighth were significantly different from it. It was interesting, but not statistically significant, that the original was ranked third overall, and the most preferred was the 'average' picture.

It was concluded that in relation to the original work of art the most pleasing positions and arrangements are not necessarily the most aesthetically valuable. Furthermore, there was evidence that subjects were not guided solely by motives of pleasure, but usually had some idea of pattern-making as well. Thus, there is a need to revise hedonistic assumptions in experimental aesthetics. Also these experiments have clear implications for the organisation of elements in non-figurative works of art.' [4]

Lisa Newby, November 2020

[1] Michael Morris's notes in the Sainsbury Centre Archive document this work as Cat. No. 22, 'Print' in *Nine Abstract Artists*, exh. cat. (London: Redfern Gallery, 11 January - 29 January, 1955). Morris purchased the work from the Redfern Gallery in 1955.

[2] Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.86

[3] Kenneth Martin, 'Abstract Art', *Broadsheet No.1* (London: Lund Humphries, 1951). Published in

conjunction with an exhibition of abstract art at the AIA Gallery, London, 1951. Original publication available in the Sainsbury Centre archive.

[4] Michael Morris, 'Notes on some experiments with a work by Kenneth Martin', *Kenneth Martin*, Vol.2, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1975), pp. 21-2.

Exhibitions

Nine Abstract Artists, Redfern Gallery, London, 1955

Kenneth Martin, Tate Gallery, London, 1975

Further Reading

Michael Morris, 'Notes on some experiments with a work by Kenneth Martin', *Kenneth Martin*, Vol.2, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1975), pp. 21-2.

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.11.

Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.
