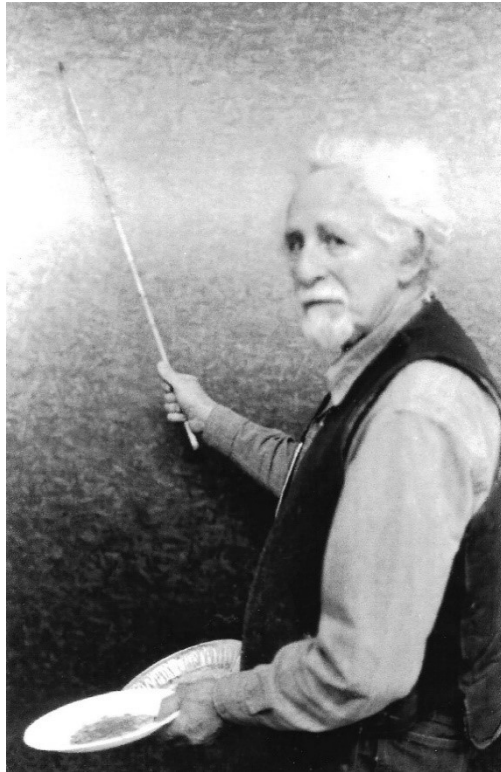


The Perceptual

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Leonard Nelson (1912-1993)

Below, I define and show the origins of the “perceptual” category of art. For argument’s sake, the perceptual came after French impressionism and abstract expressionism in modern art history (French impressionism>abstract expressionism>perceptual). It occupies the space between them whereby one is forced to decide what one sees. The great impressionists, such as Cezanne and Monet, may have tried to paint it at the ends of their careers, but they were constrained by the anatomy of their painted subjects. Their starting point of realism made it difficult to achieve success. They may have envisioned it cerebrally, but they couldn’t capture it on canvas. For example, starting with a portrait and breaking it apart to make it appear abstract led to an abstract portrait. There was nothing to contemplate, or to decide on. There was no perceptual outcome. Starting from a basis of abstract expressionism and moving back towards realism as Philadelphia painter Leonard Nelson did, achieved nirvana.



Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 36 x 50 in, Oil on canvas, 1975

With Nelson's paintings, viewers might see water, land, sky, or a combination. They're not too abstract that one can't see anything, nor too real that an image is obvious. They expose the middle ground requiring perception. They are to be interpreted which makes them important, evolutionary, to twentieth-century American art.

Just as interesting, one can see in untitled 1975 (above) and Alma Noon (below) the influences that great American field painters had on Leonard Nelson, for instance, Mark Rothko, an abstractionist that stacked luminous color bands on top of each other, and James Whistler, a realist who painted tonal harbor scenes. Nelson drew visibly from both, albeit, unintentionally. He discovered the next organic phase of the painted surface, one centered on the unknown, or what can be. It was through his gradation of colors, or tonality, that he would achieve it. He would break paths in 1974 with his invention, according to Professor Sam Hunter, Princeton University, 2000, and then go on to paint hundreds of paintings.



Nelson 2277
72" x 92" 1979

Alma Noon, Leonard Nelson, 72 x 92 in, Oil on canvas, 1979

As a young painter in New York City showing at Betty Parsons alongside Jackson Pollock and Rothko, Nelson locked onto a single idea: to join land and sky into a single visual, or unit. For instance, untitled 1948:



Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 20 x 24 in, Oil on canvas, 1948

He was the first abstract expressionist painter to move his painting style back towards realism. He predated Philip Guston. Some might call what he painted abstract impressionism, but this phrase pairs incompatible words devoid of any known artist movement. Others describe his style as color field. Color is a Nelson hallmark, but color field is patently abstract. A new term had to be assigned to what he painted, because none properly describe it. I offer the “perceptual,” the sensation that one experiences first from seeing his work.



Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 32 x 36 in, Oil on canvas, circa 1950

In the 1960's, Nelson progressed in style. In untitled 1962 and untitled 1963 (below), one can see him divide his canvases between land and sky, using color and horizontal brushstrokes to blur the lines, or physical transition. He didn't at this time employ Whistler-like tonality to accomplish the same, though one can see the hint of it start to seep in. Note his darker foregrounds and lighter backgrounds.



Untitled 1962, by Leonard Nelson



Untitled 1963, by Leonard Nelson

As well in 1963, he painted *One Million Lire* (below). Some believe this to be his first mature “perceptual” painting. It shows his growing intensity of vision and emotional consciousness.



One Million Lire, by Leonard Nelson, 30 x 36 in, Oil on canvas, 1963

In 1968, Nelson painted *Alma's Garden* (below). His brush strokes tightened, markedly, from his earlier paintings. A critical step forward in reaching his ultimate destination.



Alma's Garden, by Leonard Nelson, 49.75 x 74 in, Oil on canvas, 1968

He steered closer to his arrival, by painting the sky throughout the painting untitled 1970:



Nelson #230
30" x 36" 1970

Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 30 x 36 in, Oil on canvas, 1970

In 1974, Nelson “arrived” with the painting untitled 1974-1975:



Nelson #269
48.25" x 72.25" 1974-75

Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 48.25 x 72.25 in, Oil on canvas, 1974-1975

It would draw-in talented, nearby Philadelphia art professor/painters, overtime ushering in the novel and spectacular, “Philadelphia School of Art.”



Cascade
by Murray Dessner, 2008



Settlement Magenta
by Warren Rohrer, 1980

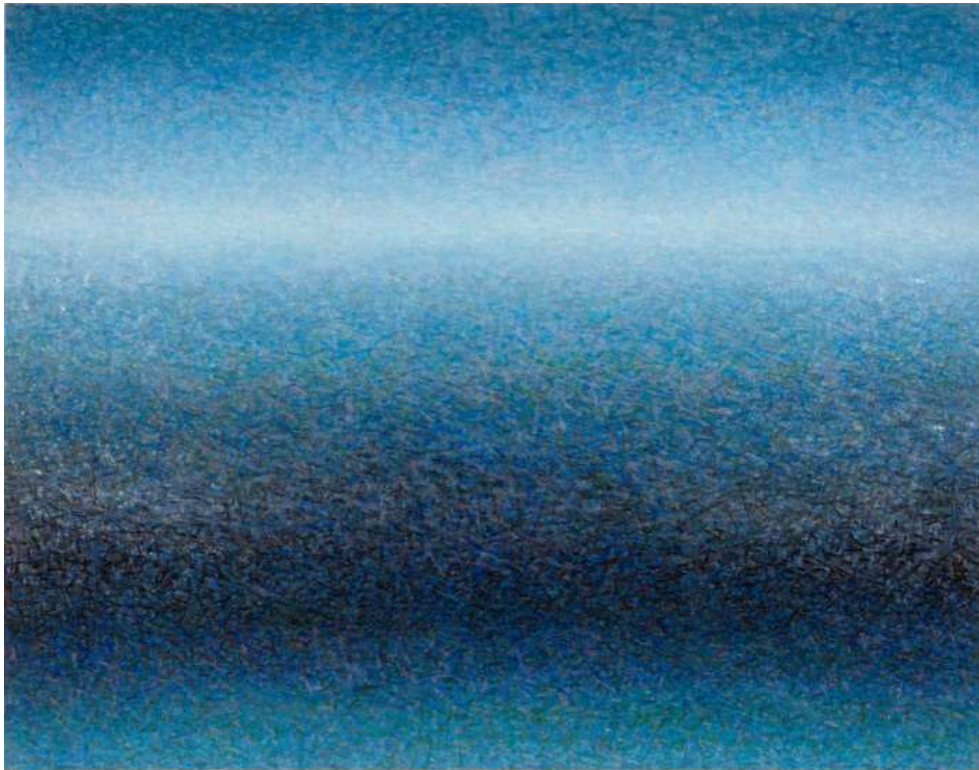


Roman Summer
by Stephen Estock, 2012



Spring
by Leonard Nelson, 1980-1981-1982

He would then paint the infinite cosmos beyond Earth in his Alma series, particularly, Alma Night:



Alma Night, by Leonard Nelson, 72 x 90 in, Oil on canvas, 1979

Nelson would breakout again with Alma’s Garden, 1980 (below). He was now painting in his glory for Alma was his wife.



Nelson #366
56" x 70" 1980

Alma's Garden, by Leonard Nelson, 56 x 70 in, Oil on canvas, 1980

Critically in Alma's Garden, 1980, Nelson added to his atmospheric canvas what he saw as "exciting and beautiful." He now insisted that his paintings be both. He became a Modern Seurat while keeping his Rothko and Whistler foundations. He had the upbringing to do so. He brought forward what he learned from his student years spent at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Barnes in the late 1930s, and the French impressionist masterpieces that hung just feet away. They would have a lasting impact on how he approached painting. It's likely the reason he painted with a brush versus staining, a preferred choice of many color field painters. He was fortunate to be an art student at this time, caught between the old and new. He would grow into an art fountain of youth that kept pouring over its ledge.

In 1982, Nelson painted some of his best work, for instance, *Tender Is The Night*, *Bright Is The Day*, and *Spring*:



Tender Is The Night, by Leonard Nelson, 70 x 60 in, Oil on canvas, 1982



Bright Is The Day, by Leonard Nelson, 70 x 60 in, Oil on canvas, 1982



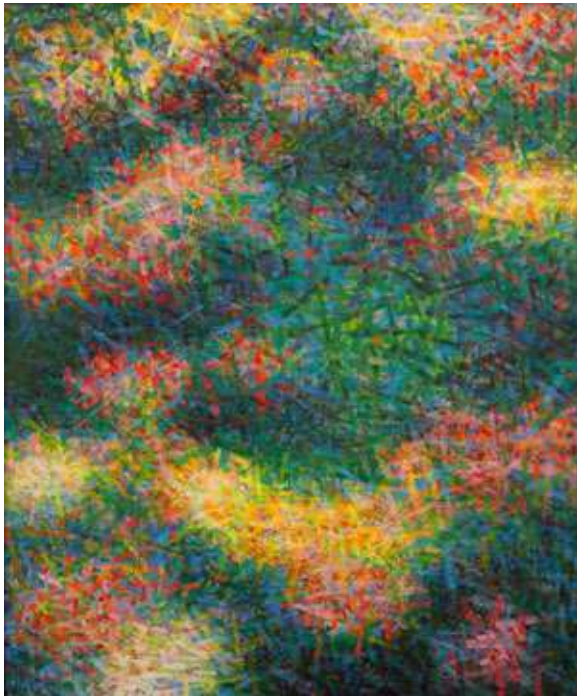
Spring, by Leonard Nelson, 51 x 72 in, Oil on canvas, 1980, 1981, 1982

In 1984, Nelson broke paths again in stride. His exciting and beautiful focus fueled the masterwork, *It's A Beautiful World* (below). Hunter wrote in his 2001 monograph, titled “Leonard Nelson,” that Nelson’s latter paintings sometimes evoke Van Gogh’s “transfigured skies.”



It's A Beautiful World, by Leonard Nelson, 56 x 56 in, Oil on canvas, 1984

Nelson would further his constantly evolving painting style. He is the Modern Monet in *Beautiful Day* and *Berwyn*:

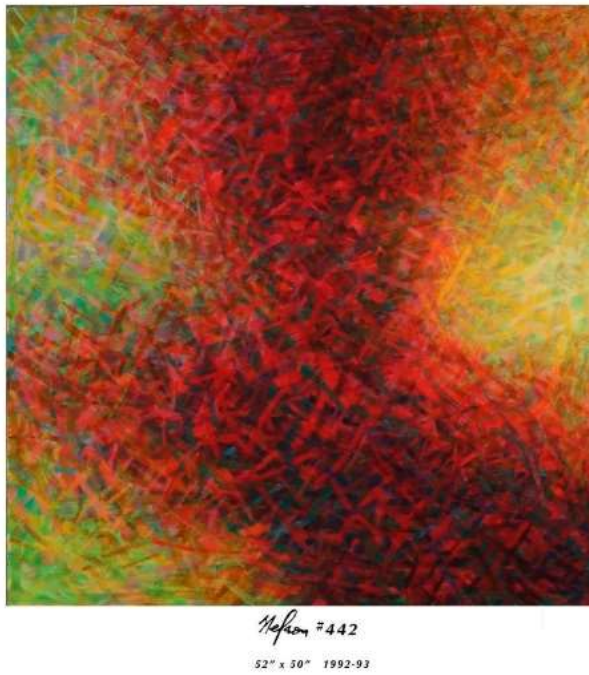


Beautiful Day, by Leonard Nelson, 60 x 50 in, Oil on canvas, 1988-1989



Berwyn, by Leonard Nelson, 60 x 50 in, Oil on canvas, 1987-1988

In 2019, as observed by Jessica Bailey, a talented and bright painter from London, Nelson painted “energy light” on par with Van Gogh. She called him the “Modern Van Gogh” unaware of what Hunter wrote years before. It’s clear in untitled 1992-1993, painted before his death in 1993 at the age of 81 (below). He is the “Missing Link” (Renee Russo, MFA/MA, 2019).



Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 52 x 50 in, Oil on canvas, 1992-1993

Today, Nelson's painting achievements can be seen at some of the best contemporary venues via the paintings of Damien Hirst and Susan Vecsey, Gagosian, Spanierman, and Berry Campbell galleries, respectively.



Veil of Perfect Harmony, by Damien Hirst, 120 x 90 in, Oil on canvas, 2017



Untitled, by Leonard Nelson, 46 x 50 in, Oil on canvas, 1988-1989



Untitled, by Susan Vecsey, 40 x 42 in, Oil on linen, 2020

They also can be seen across the internet, incorporated by many talented painters. Below are three examples:

<https://www.helenbutler.com/>

<http://www.jbbernadet.com/>

<https://leahporter.com/paintings/>

The space in-between French impression and abstract expressionism, or the perceptual, has come of age. It hadn't a name before other than color field, or abstract impressionism. Leonard Nelson first introduced it in 1948 while showing at the Betty Parsons gallery in New York City. He would arrive with it a quarter century later in 1974, in Philadelphia. It is no less a story. In fact, it is the heir manifestation, or evolution of American painting.

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