

Fields of Vision: Anton Ginzburg's VIEWS

by Junni Chen

In the video work *Color and Line* (2013), red, yellow, and blue pieces of fabric appear and re-appear, draped across a washing line and tossed loosely across the floor. The spatial compositions keep changing, interrupted only by lights turning on and off. Anton Ginzburg's short film is shot, with one continuous take, in the concrete basement of a laundry room; in between each structural "cut," the colorful planes of fabric find themselves arranged in different positions in each "staging." During the periods of darkness, the sound of movements at the set intensifies, creating a "blind" narrative through sound. Within the mundane, vernacular context of the laundry room, Ginzburg's video work comes across almost as an irreverent and playful interpretation of Eastern European modernist methodology, and as an infinite progression of DIY Suprematist installations.

Color and Line is one of Ginzburg's earlier works on show at *VIEWS*. Collectively, the exhibition is a synthesis between the artist's personal biography, modern art historical trajectories, and present-day contexts. Reflecting on theories of viewing and observation, *VIEWS* is a re-application of formal methods that were developed at the turn of the 20th century, and grapples with an ongoing question of how structural elements such as color, line, and plane can generate new meanings in today's context. The core of the exhibition is Ginzburg's newest body of work in the exhibition: entitled *VIEW*, the ongoing series comprises paintings, as well as porcelain sculptures, and a painted wall mural. Much like how Ginzburg chose to film *Color and Line* in a laundry room, *VIEWS* represents a similar effort by the artist to allow for dynamic forms to emerge, by extending formal-structural methods into new contexts.

This is expressed as color studies in the paintings of *VIEW*, a series of abstract compositions on wood panels. Based on diagrammatic representations of the binocular field of human vision, Ginzburg developed the internal structure of the paintings, where planes of color overlap and intersect with one another, revealing abstract compositions. In *VIEW_5A_02* (2018), the viewer looks directly into a triangle of red at the painting's center, where two intersecting lines meet. A section of purple sits above it; below, a blue triangle appears. We begin to imagine a purple horizon, rising above a foreground of red and blue; the perception of depth is guided by the geometry established on the surface of the painting. Fields of



Anton Ginzburg
Burnt Constructions. Gushul Initiative, 2016
(Based on Alexander Rodchenko's Spatial Studies)
Installation view at Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston
Burnt Wood. 60 × 96 × 80 inches.

several colors border this abstracted landscape, suggesting a movement of color in space. These new forms stem from Ginzburg's analysis of the act of viewing, and his demonstration of the process through the material practice of painting. The compositions rely on its established geometry, allowing the emergence of the figure-ground relationship between planes of color, becoming a series of perceptions that are, at once, both deconstructed and abstracted.

In the context of the exhibition, *VIEW* reads as an ongoing experiment, a continuous study of relationships between form, space, and the viewers. Across the entrance-way of the gallery, paintings are hung on walls painted with two different colors. A pair of tall, polychromatic porcelain columns frame the painted walls, towering above its viewers. In thinking about the exhibition, Ginzburg aimed to utilize presentation methods that allow the viewer to engage with what he terms as "expanded modes of viewing." Art historian and scholar Jonathan Crary's words come to mind—in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), he had written of observation as being "increasingly a question of equivalent sensations and stimuli that have no reference to a spatial location."¹ This notion that viewing is closely linked to our emotional, affective selves undergirds the exhibition. The exhibition is realized as a sequence of expressive formal gestures, an open-ended field in which viewers can construct their own engagement. In the second room of the gallery, a smaller work, *VIEW_3A_06* (2018), is hung high above the ground, as though referencing the hanging of religious iconography. Two lines of blue and green cut across the surface of the painting, bringing to mind a perception of a distant horizon. In the same room, Ginzburg's *New York Color-Space Initiative #5* and *COEV Composition #12* (2019), a site-specific mural composed of bands of color running from floor to ceiling, is installed with a mirrored glass panel superimposed over it. *Color and Line* is installed at the foot of the mural—its shifting color compositions mirror that of the movements captured in the glass of *Color-Space Initiative*. The continual shifts in motion, layered within the color fields of the mural, register a sense of Crary's "relentless abstraction of the visual",² where visibility is embedded in fictive pseudo-worlds, rather than in physical, or "real" topologies.

¹ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 24.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

For Ginzburg, “The problem of form is definitely crucial [...] However, unlike Modernists, I am not searching for some pure, ideal form. Form in my works is always dynamic. It develops through interaction with the surrounding context [...] as it undergoes semantic, material, and historical transformations.”³ The *VIEW* series is a continuation of his exploration into how new forms can be generated and expressed in conversation with current contexts, where Ginzburg’s work is “an analytical system for observing the process of the development of form.”⁴ Populated with a constant stream of imagery, media, and messaging, our lived realities are partly constructed through a mechanics of viewing that has more to do with our broader consciousness than representation. *VIEW* engages with this changing relationship between the viewer and the viewed, where physical spaces overlap with semantic images, converging onto a single experience. The experience of encountering *VIEW*, with its active shapes, abstract formal vocabulary, and non-traditional placements within the space of the exhibition, identifies more with a dynamic process of observation, where the viewer shapes their readings of the works through their own intuitive responses, as much as the works do themselves. As Crary goes on to write, “a more adaptable, autonomous, and productive observer was needed in both discourse and practice—to conform to new functions of the body and to a vast proliferation of indifferent and convertible signs and images.”⁵

The preoccupation with the act of viewing also stems from a major point of reference that Ginzburg has drawn on for the better part of his practice in recent years: that of the experiments and investigations by the Constructivist methodology. Ginzburg, who is Russian-born, and New York-based, has worked with the historical narratives of his own cultural past throughout his practice; increasingly, his investigations have centered on the Eastern European historical avant-garde movement. Considering what he refers to as an “interrupted trajectory” of this movement,⁶ his recent bodies of work are rooted in an interest “to overcome a Western normative cultural-colonial position,” where “non-Western artists are allowed to cross the barrier of alienation only through self-exoticism and

³ Anton Ginzburg, quoted in Maxim Burov, “Anton Ginzburg Discusses His Work, Views on Modernism, and the Synthesis of the Arts,” trans. Anastasia Osipova, Anton Ginzburg, accessed March 13, 2019, <http://antonginzburg.com/publications/press/on-neo-modernism>, para. 5. For the original interview in Russian, see <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/19278-tema-formy-dlya-menya-yavlyayetsya-tsentralnoy>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Crary, 149.



Anton Ginzburg. *VIEW_5A_01*, 2018. Pigment, acrylic and oil on wood. 37.5 × 60 inches.

‘exporting’ local themes.”⁷ Citing the theories of figures such as Władysław Strzemiński and Mikhail Matyushin as an influence in the series, Ginzburg’s inquiry explores the direct relationship between the viewer and the process of viewing, through the development of new forms that are nevertheless, informed by Constructivist discourses, with its underlying principle that viewing can be approached as an active and political experience in and of itself, rather than merely a somatic, physiological process. This spirit of mediation and synthesis between different temporal contexts pervades Ginzburg’s artistic practice; in 2016, Ginzburg presented the exhibition *Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives*, at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Canada. The exhibition presented “a series of artistic investigations” that “recall[ed] Constructivist pedagogical experiments combined with the artist’s personal mythologies.”⁸ Works such as *Burnt Constructions. Gushul Initiative* (2016)—which was made by burning, and then displaying, a series of spatial studies sculptures made after the initiatives of Rodchenko—evoked the

⁶ The VkhUTEMAS, or Soviet art and technical school that many key leading figures of the Constructivist movement were associated with, was dissolved in 1930. Many participants were later persecuted.

⁷ Ginzburg, “Anton Ginzburg Discusses His Work,” para, 21.

⁸ “Anton Ginzburg Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives,” Exhibitions, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://saag.ca/art/exhibitions/0713-blue-flame:-constructions-and-initiatives>. para. 2.



Image still from *Color and Line*, 2013. HD color video with sound, 9'15".

demise of the Soviet experiment, but also the very petrification (and preservation) of it as an archive of ruins. *Blue Flame* reads as a mediation between the archive, and the present-day context of the artist's practice. A lineage can be traced from *Blue Flame* to the subsequent series of works: *ORRA* (2017–ongoing) and *VIEW* (2018–ongoing). Both *ORRA* and *VIEW* use Matyushin's color theory approach (which he established through his Visiology Center, Zorved) as a point of departure; *VIEW*, in that sense, represents the latest manifestation of the artist's continued exploration into the ways historical memory can be re-animated, and interpreted in a contemporary context.

Noting that form, in his works, "develops through interaction with the surrounding context, with history, with material properties of objects and events,"⁹ Ginzburg's latest body of work straddles dual modernisms, synthesizing the formal methodologies of the Constructivists with that of contemporary realities. The exhibition represents an evolution of the artist's investigations, exploring the generative potential of conceptual, material, and historical strands. ♦

⁹ "Anton Ginzburg Blue Flame: Constructions and Initiatives," Exhibitions, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://saag.ca/art/exhibitions/0713-blue-flame:-constructions-and-initiatives>, para. 5.