

**BIG
PAINT
INGS**

**PETER
HALLEY**

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BENJAMIN COLMAN

Peter Halley (born 1953) repurposes the squares, rectangles, and grids of early abstract art to paint critical ruminations on contemporary culture. By giving precise meanings to these different geometric elements, the artist challenges viewers to examine the unspoken ideas embedded in the forms of daily life.

His practice is restrained in its use of a spare selection of geometric elements developed in the early 1980s—the solid cells, striped prisons, and linear conduits that fill his canvases—but luxuriously exuberant in its use of synthetic neon, metallic, and pearlescent pigments alongside textured surfaces. He produces work that varies in scale and media, and the small group of monumental paintings he has produced hold a special place in his *oeuvre*. In his largest works, *bigness* becomes a metaphor for the monumental task the artist sets for himself.

In the big paintings discussed in this catalogue, the artist charges the forms and compositions of geometric abstraction with an invigorated conceptual touch. In reaction to the utopian ideals of modern abstraction, Halley's art emerged out of a growing disenchantment with and detachment from the optimism of early twentieth-century art. Halley has retained and refined these geometries over three decades, and his resilient set of formal elements has proven to be a pointed tool to examine the ideas of connection, isolation, control, communication, and technology that ground his practice as a painter and thinker.

FORM

“Why is modern society so obsessed with geometric form that, for at least the last two centuries, we have striven to build and live in geometric environments of increasing complexity and exclusivity?”¹ Peter Halley, “*The Crisis in Geometry*” (1984)

Peter Halley's abstraction is notable for the precise meanings he assigns to the geometric elements representing the *prisons*, *cells*, and *conduits* that fill his paintings. In his theoretical writing, Halley articulated the goal of his work in the 1980s. He wrote in his essay “Geometry and the Social” that his paintings emerged from an effort “to redefine geometry as something that was in the world, that had a history, and that was tied to issues of power and control.” He argues that the icons of Modernist geometry—the perfect squares and unbroken rectangles he appropriated for his own art, for example—were not examples of “classical beauty,” but rather were “fundamentally linked to the goals and objectives of certain groups at certain times.”² As a postmodern mind emerged from the rubble of modern zeal, artists like Halley created new tools to give revised meaning to familiar forms from the history of art.

His solid square or rectangle is a *cell*. He wrote in his brief 1982 annotated list “Notes on the Paintings,” “the cell is a reminder of the apartment house, the hospital bed, the school desk—the isolated endpoints of industrial structure.”³ Although the nomenclature Halley adopted for his icons invoked the rigid and punitive connotations of incarceration, the fluidity of his reference

points allowed these forms to evolve with time. These cells appeared in Halley's paintings first in the 1980s as spaces of seclusion. Works like his 1987 *Two Cells with Conduit* (Plate 1) grew from the sense of isolation the artist experienced after returning to his hometown New York City following graduate studies at the University of New Orleans. In this painting, two black cells painted with a textured surface stand side by side, separated and flanked by vertical stripes of Day-Glo neon paint. The cells of this era reference the structures—apartments, studios, classrooms, or offices—that erect architectural barriers between individuals. Where there is a cell, the viewer understands it to conceal and contain an inhabitant.

Halley's paintings provide structural views of contemporary environments in two ways. These works are structural in their compositions, reflecting a deep-seated interest in architecture and urbanism expressed by the geometric, grid-like forms that fill the canvases. The Roll-a-Tex the artist uses to give texture to passages of his paintings is a common and inexpensive additive created for house paints, or as he wrote, "a reminiscence of motel ceilings."⁴ His paintings play with abstracted references to everyday architecture, and the social implications of a built landscape divided and subdivided into isolated spaces.

These paintings also provide structural views of the contemporary landscape in the realm of critical theory, deploying a sociological lens to identify underlying systems of power, language, aesthetics, and economics that shape everyday life in often unseen ways. Beyond the artist's personal feeling of isolation and disconnection as a young man in a big city, the cells in these paintings give form to the detachment and anomie that early-twentieth-century philosophers identified as a defining feature of modern life.

The striated square or rectangle is a *prison* in Halley's paintings, conceived as a direct confrontation with the legacy of modern abstraction and as a charged carrier for the theories circulating through his work. In his words, through the prisons, "geometry is revealed as confinement."⁵ The artist's position was deeply influenced by the writing of Michel Foucault, whose 1975 book *Discipline and Punish* traces the structure of modern prisons, and then identifies analogous systems for control in common locations like schools or factories. In his June 1984 critical essay "The Crisis in Geometry," Halley credits Foucault's text with sparking Minimalist artists in the 1970s to reassess the social meanings embedded in their geometric forms. At the same time, he highlights the significance of another French text, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (published in English translation in 1983), for motivating the artists of the 1980s to explore the latent simulations and representational qualities of forms once thought to be free of corrupting influence.⁶ Abstract artists of Halley's generation in the 1980s inherited a geometric language filled not with bright hopes and grand ambition for a perfect future, but with its own complicated historical legacy.

Like his cells, Halley's prisons deploy abstract geometry to representational ends. As he wrote about his paintings, he uses simplified geometric forms to illustrate structures in which "space is akin to the simulated space of the videogame, of the microchip, of the office tower."⁷ That is to say, they are abstracted suggestions of generic contemporary spaces that are at once familiar and indistinguishable. His prisons do not represent sites of incarceration, but rather simulate the structures that invoke prison-like order in the way they enforce rules and order the behaviors of their occupants. Works like *Clockstopper* (Plate 6) engage directly with both theorists Halley acknowledged in "The Crisis in Geometry." These works play with both hard and soft geometries. For the hard geometries of concrete control derived from Foucault's analysis,

Halley refers to the classic examples of “hospital, prison, and factory.” The soft geometries of deterrence and representation he found in Baudrillard’s writing are typified by “interstate highways, computers, and electronic entertainment.”⁸ In Halley’s paintings, these soft geometries are indicated by the connective elements of his composition.

The thick lines that connect many of Halley’s compositions are conduits used to link different prisons or cells to the wider world beyond their walls, the avenue through which “vital fluids’ flow in and out.”⁹ Halley uses this element in his paintings to indicate connections between isolated spaces that may otherwise be invisible. The “vital fluids” can represent any number of threads linking otherwise restrictive spaces: utilities like electricity and water, telephone lines and radio waves, or heat and conditioned air. In paintings like *The Acid Test* (Plate 4) the networks of conduits radiating from the two textured cells diagram complex networks of communication and exchange chipping away at previously impervious geometric forms. *The Acid Test* consists of a composition the artist dubbed a “figure and ground,” in that like a Renaissance portrait, it is organized with a central figure positioned against an atmospheric background full of illustrative details. Unlike his earlier painting *Weekend* (Plate 3) that examines a condition of isolation, Halley’s figure and ground paintings diagram a dense milieu defined by interconnection. Through conduits used to indicate communication and interconnection, the artist’s icons of isolation are situated within studies of social landscapes.

COLOR

“The Day-Glo paint is a signifier of ‘low budget mysticism.’

It is the afterglow of radiation.”¹⁰ Peter Halley, “Notes on the Paintings” (1982)

The bold synthetic color palette Halley uses is one of the most instantly identifiable features of his paintings. He arranges optically charged combinations of artificial hues to challenge the eyes of viewers. Punctuated by passages of Day-Glo neon, metallic, and pearlescent colors alongside the Roll-a-Tex additive that creates a rough textured surface, Halley uses paint to play with ideas of simulation and artifice.

Day-Glo pigments were invented in the 1940s for the Fluor-S-Art Company founded by brothers Robert and Joseph Switzer to augment their line of ultraviolet fluorescent paints that glowed under black light to capture the eye of consumers in commercial displays. Day-Glo colors absorb ultraviolet wavelengths invisible to the naked eye, but fluoresce in intense colors the human eye can see.¹¹ The result is an augmented color glowing with an intensity impossible to achieve with traditional pigments. Halley began using a range of Day-Glo paints in the 1980s in the focused color palette of his spare compositions. In the 1990s Halley also began to use metallic and pearlescent paints in his work, a reaction to the prevalence of similar surfaces on commercial products.

This use of pigments that create a chemically intensified viewing experience is in keeping with Halley’s interest in the “hyperreal” inspired by his readings of Baudrillard. In Halley’s writing, the process of hyperrealization occurs when the forms and signifiers of one generation—he deploys the example of a small row house divided into family apartments built

when New York was an industrial hub—are amplified, magnified, and transformed to suit the demands of a new age—the residential apartment tower, for instance, built to service a post-industrial city.¹² With his neon, metallic, and pearlescent paints, Halley changes the geometric forms of an earlier generation of artists, the “real” forms of 1960s color field paintings, into hyperreal compositions to match the critical ideas of his prisons, cells, and conduits. The “low budget mysticism” of his paintings comes from the bold optical manipulations of the intense synthetic pigments that are commonplace in the everyday visual landscape.

“The image of history is no longer the rough-hewn, well-defined road winding up the mountain’s side. Its image has become instead the swamp, a morass criss-crossed by the myriad muddy paths that go nowhere, that disappear into the fogged-in horizon.”¹³ Peter Halley, “Notes on Nostalgia” (1985)

HISTORY

Peter Halley’s paintings are deeply entangled with the modern forms they adopt and reshape. His squares and rectangles evoke the birth of geometric abstraction in the hands of artists like Josef Albers (1888–1976), for whom geometry represented a clean break from a romantic tradition. As discussed earlier in this essay, Halley’s adoption of abstract formal elements hints at the iconoclastic and democratic goals of his project. Whereas geometry represented purity and uncorrupted ideals for modern artists with bright hopes for the future, by the time Halley began painting his squares in the 1980s, artists questioned that optimism. In his reaction to the art history of geometric abstraction, Halley set out to critique the past while using a language of bold form and color that could be easily legible for a wide audience.

Perhaps because Modernism and painterly abstraction have de-emphasized biography, the relationship between Halley’s own history and his painting has received little discussion. The earliest paintings illustrated, like *Rectangular Prison with Smokestack* (Plate 2), reflect the artist’s exploration of urban isolation in the 1980s. This period saw Halley return to New York as a young man and react to an urban landscape of divided streets, blocks, buildings, and apartments that organized the lives of their inhabitants into discrete spaces. The works made in the 1990s and early 2000s grew from a very different atmosphere, one which saw Halley thrive as an artist, a publisher of *index magazine* (1996–2005), and director of graduate studies in painting at the Yale School of Art (2002–2011). His figure and ground compositions of this era like *Cartoon Network* (Plate 5) suggest a varied social milieu of exchange and interconnection evocative of Halley’s career in this period.

Halley has achieved something different with the mixed grids of his most recent paintings like *Laws of Rock* (Plate 7), and *Accretion* (Plate 8). These works seem to reflect the artist’s engagement with a new cultural and technological landscape. In his 2000 essay “A Utopian Moment, I Guess,” Halley observed that while a cultural landscape of internet-driven communication allows artists to maintain varied and collaborative practices, the celebratory language used to describe new technology masks its potential to entrench existing conditions. If the internet promises instant communication and global connection, its urgency and necessity can create new types of prisons and cells.¹⁴ His mixed grids seem to reflect this new experience of

isolation in an era of the internet and social networks. The prisons and cells are closely packed, and the conduits of connection between them are invisible. These recent paintings diagram a contemporary condition of endlessly networked, connected, and isolated lives that Halley—with remarkable prescience—began to explore decades before it became commonplace.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," Peter Halley *Selected Essays, 1981-2001* (New York: Edgewise Press, 2013), 92.
- 2 Halley, "Geometry and the Social," *Selected Essays*, 157.
- 3 Halley, "Notes on the Paintings," *Selected Essays*, 68.
- 4 "Notes on the Paintings," 68.
- 5 "Notes on the Paintings," 68.
- 6 Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," 92-93, 99.
- 7 "The Crisis in Geometry," 102.
- 8 "The Crisis in Geometry," 99.
- 9 "Notes on the Paintings," 68.
- 10 "Notes on the Paintings," 68.
- 11 American Chemical Society National Historic Chemical Landmarks. DayGlo® Fluorescent Pigments. <http://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/education/whatischemistry/landmarks/dayglo.html>
- 12 Halley, "Notes on Abstraction," *Selected Essays*, 139.
- 13 Peter Halley, "Notes on Nostalgia," *New Observations* 28 (1985).
Reproduced <http://www.peterhalley.com/ARTISTS/PETER.HALLEY/NOTES.ON.NOSTALGIA.FR2.htm>.
- 14 Halley, "A Utopian Moment, I Guess," *Selected Essays*, 254-255.

ON LINE 1985 PETER HALLEY

Suddenly, in '60s art, images of circles began to appear. There were Noland's targets, the circular arrangements of Smithson, the ring-shaped configurations of Morris and Serra. The '60s assigned to this impetus to the circle the meaning of unity—the circle was held to be an orb, an image of completeness, a sign for unity. But the appearance of these circle motifs represented something more complex. In almost every instance, the center was empty. The character of these circle-images turns out to be not solid but linear. This art announced that, from that time on, line was to turn back in on itself, that the linear had ceased to cut its way through the undergrowth of Nature. The linear was complete, and that henceforth line would flow into line in endless circularity.

The Interstates. They wind majestically through the cities — elevated disinterestedly on pale concrete piers. They course through the open land, bridging chasms, leveling hills, skimming over swamps. Along these routes, advertising is prohibited and all buildings have been removed. The broad right-of-way is landscaped with well-kept lawns and orderly rows of trees, as befits a ceremonial site.

They span the nation along evenly spaced north-south and east-west routes. The north-south routes are labeled 1-5 to 1-95 in intervals of ten, while the east-west routes are numbered 1-10 to 1-90. A third digit prefix is added to the code to denote the interaction of the Interstate with a city (as a beltway, a by-pass, or a business-district extension). The system makes of the country an all-encompassing Cartesian grid. It is our greatest monument to the linear.