

# Push and Pull

Examining the Intensity of Betsy Cain's Paintings



IMAGE COURTESY OF BETSY CAIN AND DAVID KAMINSKY.

Fig. 1. The first room of Betsy Cain's solo exhibition, *In Situ*, at the Telfair Museum Jepson Center, Savannah, Georgia, featuring the *Indigos* paintings. In this space, baffles were used on the gallery lighting to subdue the ambient light and to increase the spot-lighting on the paintings.

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BY STEPHEN KNUDSEN

IN NOVEMBER 2011, *In Situ*, a solo exhibition by Betsy Cain, premiered at The Telfair Museum Jepson Center in Savannah, Georgia. Her painting style has an ebb and flow, much like the Georgia Salt Marsh on which she lives and finds inspiration. Abstraction and figuration are always in flux in her work, with the balance of those forces keeping her painting, as she says, in an “in-between zone.” One can get a visceral sense of the marsh by looking at her paintings, but like a Faulkner novel, there is more than what first meets the eye. Discernible meaning mingles with indiscernible meaning. If one takes time, however, the paintings do eventually reveal a social conscience: Colonial slave labor, environmental

destruction and environmental protection. Using Ms. Cain as an example, we will look at the idea of this “slip and slide” of aesthetics and meaning as one strategy in giving one’s work more intensity.

## A Rothko Mood

In the first of two rooms Ms. Cain had four paintings, called the *Indigos*, displayed under dimmed gallery lighting with single spotlighting that set a “Rothko” mood. (See Fig. 1.) On initial viewing, without knowing any liner notes about the paintings, I simply fell into a pleasurable, meditative state of mind. On a second visit to the show, I observed multiple viewers

just sitting among these *Indigo* paintings for upwards of 45 minutes. As a color theory professor, it made me curious. What was causing us to linger so long?

Certainly, one facet was physiological, linked to color language in the work and its presentation in the space. In the 20th century, renowned color theorist Faber Birren demonstrated that a cool light passing into a body will temporarily reduce heart rate, blood pressure and sweating response, as well as change brainwave activity. This is an experiment I repeat in each of my color theory courses. I turn out the lights and project a blue light on the wall. Each time, I reach the same conclusions as Birren did. Likewise, a link exists between Birren's theory and Ms. Cain's large, cool works in a dimly lit room.

A second facet that, I believe, engaged us was a level of nearly indiscernible concepts within the works when viewed without the aid of catalog text. I did not initially know that, as the titles hinted and as Ms. Cain later explained, the *Indigos* are a meditation on tragedy, which overlaps with the marsh itself. I did not know that the indigo hues in the paintings are a synthetic pigment slurry that denotes the "indigo mud" that early Georgia colonists extracted from the non-native tropical plant (*Indigofera suffruticos*) that they brought with them to cultivate. I was unaware that the paintings commemorate slaves who labored on marshy island plantations and extracted the valuable and beautiful dye, indican — a toxin, which would bring death to workers after five to seven years of daily contact. Ultimately though, this initial mystery in the *Indigos* worked to an advantage encouraging me to free-fall through the paintings before I read about them.

### Multiple Levels of Unity

I also suspect that some of the tendency toward engagement had to do with an in-between zone with two very different types of unity that push and pull on each other in the work. *Tonal unity*, sometimes called tonal merging, is present in the *Indigos*. In terms of real world experience, the most tonally-merged imagery is often what we see in the distance — a fusion caused by atmospheric

perspective. The other type of unity in Ms. Cain's work is *surface pattern unity*. For example, *Indigofera #1* (Fig. 2) has pattern of vertical lines created by solvent, pigment and gravity, and the nine curves of a dark indigo made with a squeegee.

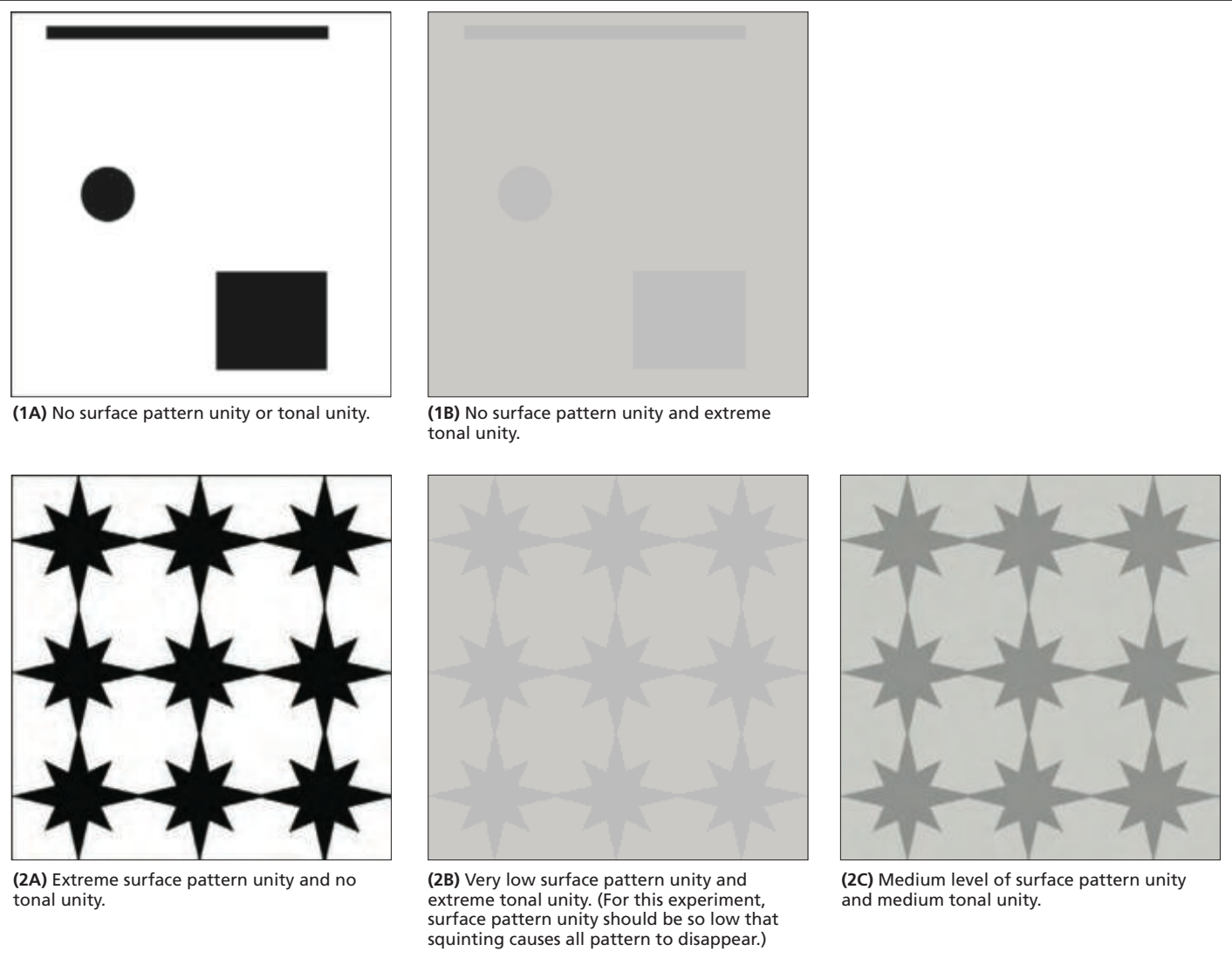
Experiments run in my color theory courses throughout the past four years demonstrate the potential of tonal unity and surface pattern unity to subtract from one another. They also show the attractive force



Fig. 2. *Indigofera #1*, 2010, by Betsy Cain. Oil on yupo paper, 56" x 40".

IMAGE COURTESY OF BETSY CAIN AND DAVID KAMINSKY.

**The chapel-like gallery lighting requested by the artist for the exhibition tonally merged the works as paintings and as objects in the room. This presentation of the works was critical to their ability to induce physiological and psychological quietness.**



**Fig. 3.** A demonstration of the interactions of two different forms of unity: surface pattern unity and tonal unity. All designs are by Rachel Johnson, with concept by Stephen Knudsen.

of just the right balance of the two forms of unity.

Consider the experiment below, run on 200 test subjects in groups of 20 at a time. In each case, test subjects were shown two designs from design patterns 1A through 2C (see Fig. 3) and asked which had more “unity.” Observe the different balances of tonal unity versus surface pattern unity and their relationship to the respondents’ selections.

In the first experiment, test subjects were asked if design 1A or 1B had more unity. Five percent chose 1A, and 95 percent chose 1B. This is expected, since neither of the two forms of unity exists in 1A, but tonal unity does exist in 1B.

Next, subjects were asked if design 2A or design 2B had more unity. Eighty percent said 2A, and 20 percent said 2B. Why? Design 2B is not the common choice because, in order to get such strong tonal

unity, the surface pattern unity was almost eradicated. Design 2A, with its strong surface pattern unity (even without tonal merging), trumps 2B since surface pattern unity is so dominant.

Subjects were then asked which had more unity: 2A or 2C? The result was 20 percent for 2A and 80 percent for 2C. In this case, 2C gives up some of the tonal unity (merging) to gain stronger

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surface pattern unity, creating a perfect balance of the two forms of unity, allowing it to trump 2A.

Ms. Cain’s *Indigofera #1* (Fig. 2) is most like 2C’s push/pull of surface pattern unity

and tonal unity. Look, for instance, at the merging of the dark rhythmic form caused by the semi-translucent curtain of paint over a good part of it.

The chapel-like gallery lighting requested by the artist for the exhibition also tonally merged the works as paintings and as objects in the room. This presentation of the works was critical to their ability to induce physiological and psychological quietness. Just as objects tonally merge more at golden hour than early afternoon light, such was the effect of the dimmed gallery lights. This push/pull of the two forms of unity gives aesthetic power and speaks to the multi-faceted meaning of the work. One feels a trace of a figure or

hair or something human, and one senses the marsh. Then again, one is also aware of this as an abstraction. The ambiguity, like the color and lighting, slows us and gives us a rest stop for thought.

## Shifting Drama

In complete contradiction to the first room, the second gallery was a burst of gallery light that put Ms. Cain's 2010 *Oil Head* paintings in full illumination. The dark gestures were left unmerged with their pristine white backgrounds as a reference to the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf (Fig. 4). Unlike the *Indigos*, which were shrouded in mystery, the *Oil Head* paintings revealed their meaning fairly quickly by virtue of the titles and some awareness of current events.

Tonal unity and quiet meditation were not intended with these works or this room. Rather, a fury of stark, quick and to-the-point movements expressed the content. Once again, two forces pushed and pulled, as the two galleries were counterpoints to each other. Walking back and forth between the rooms again evoked a high tide/low tide of light and the two human tragedies where land and water mingle.

There is potential drama and intensity when using a push/pull approach on one's aesthetics and content. Ms. Cain's work and the presentation of that work in this show demonstrate that on multiple levels. **PA**

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Fig. 4. *Oil Head #6*, 2010, by Betsy Cain. Oil on yupo paper, 26" x 20".

IMAGE COURTESY OF BETSY CAIN AND DAVID KAMINSKY.



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