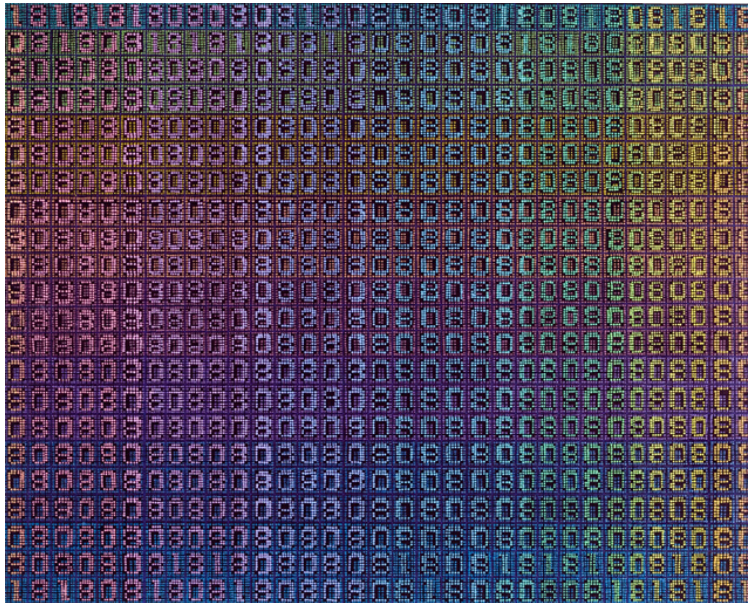


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## The Mysteries of One, Two, Three



by John Yau  
June 3, 2012



Xylor Jane, "Nox Rex #26 (Hypnos)" (2012), 16×20 inches, oil on panel (all images via canadaneuwork.com)

This is what a small group of people — most of them artists living in and around New York — know. [Xylor Jane](#) is a singular figure, and her widely spaced exhibitions are regarded as events.

While this fact has yet to be recognized by the mainstream art world, which celebrates Tauba Auerbach's virtuosity and R.H. Quaytman's cerebral opticality, Jane has done something far more extraordinary; she has integrated pure mathematics and opticality into a domain of metaphysical wonderment at once exhilarating and disturbing.

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An installation view of Xylor Jane's current show at Canada gallery.

During Xylor Jane's previous show at Canada (February 26–March 29, 2009, in [a review](#) published in the *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2009), I characterized her work as “Georges Seurat meets Alfred Jensen meets Peter Young.”



Xylor Jane, “Nox Rex #23 (Fiver)” (2012), oil on panel, 44 x 41 in (click to enlarge)

I want to build on that thought. While Jane's work has, discursively speaking, often been located in close proximity to Op Art (from Bridget Riley and Julian Stanczak to Quaytman and Auerbach), her use of pure mathematics — particularly prime number palindromes — separates her from the pack.

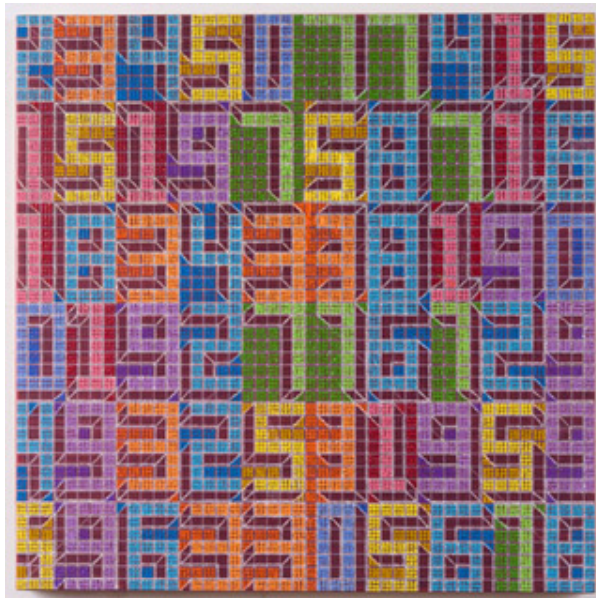
In fact, her use of numbers can be read as a critique of Op Art and Post-Op Art, and their insistence on the purely

visual. This is not Jane's intention, of course, but simply one of the byproducts of her paintings.

In contrast to the work of the first generation of Op artists, Jane's work is not graphic. The numbers compel viewers to see as well as read her paintings. They also force an awareness of the switch one makes in moving from one form of apprehension to another.

And in contrast to Quaytman, whose work is concerned with various narratives regarding the death of painting, Jane isn't interested in doubting the power of the visual. For Jane, numbers aren't just numbers, as they might be for Roman Opalka, and she is not using optical effects to comment on the weak state of painting.

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Xylor Jane, "Nox Rex #27 (Morpheus)" (2012), oil on panel, 18 x 18 in (click to enlarge)

The paintings are labor intensive. Basically, Jane divides the surface into a grid and inserts a visceral dot of paint in each cell, which in turns forms sequences of numbers and abstract patterns. Her paintings are fields of carefully placed dots, which waver between resolution and dissolution before our eyes. She breaks color down into distinct dots which can cause the field to continually shift, as in an iridescent moiré pattern. This disturbing flutter is another divergence from Jane's Op Art ancestors. It also folds in a layer of meaning that Riley

and others never could get into their work.

The experience of looking at a painting by Jane is like riding a roller coaster – enlivening and alarming, pleasurable and puzzling. The lattermost is essential, because Jane is clearly delighted by the puzzles that are integral to pure mathematics. She loves the fact that the numbers 1, 8 and 0 can be turned upside down and still be read the same.

In one room of Canada, the artist has hung four paintings, all of which contained the numerals 1, 8, and 0. These are three of the ten numerals that can be turned upside-down and still be read. Arranged in a certain sequence, they form a prime number palindrome — a number that can only be divided by itself and reads the same forward and backward.

Jane has spoken of her work as being a “mental space. It’s no place, no person, no thing. It’s just there.” This might sound like Frank Stella’s famous dictum — “What you see is what you see” — but it couldn’t be further away from that dry understanding of art.

Jane subverts that notion of pure seeing because it ignores contingency, mystery and pleasure. Stella’s authoritarianism shines through his remark, while Jane clearly intends the viewer to have a more open-ended experience.

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Xylor Jane, "Snow Globe for Roman Opalka 0–99" (2011), oil on panel,  
20 x 24

The formal issue that is central to Jane's painting is the figure-ground relationship. Made up of dots, the numbers keep moving in and out of resolution. In doing so, it is apparent to me that the artist recognizes that form and flux cannot be separated, and that the conventional boundary between the two is porous. This locates her work in the realm of the philosophical and speculative, linking it to the work of artists as diverse as Alfred Jensen and Jasper Johns.

In the largely white "Snow Globe for Roman Opalka 0–99" (2011), the artist underscores her belief that numbers are just meant for counting by starting with "1" and having "102" be the last complete number because the next one has the last number "3" cropped off, most likely because this causes the painting to end in "0" or emptiness.

This is what Jane's paintings share with Johns's numerals. There is no line separating the figure and ground. In each the numbers seem to emerge from the ground, even as they appear to be dissolving into it.

Everything Jane does — her use of numbers and her engagement with opticality — arises out of necessity. In that sense, I don't thinking of her work as possessing a



style, but conveying urgency. This includes the extreme concentration with which she applies the paint, apparently without a brush.

Is she squeezing the paint out of a tube, or is she using some instrument that she made or found? I don't know. I am reminded however that Alfred Jensen believed that color was light. He derived his palette from Goethe's color theory and squeezed the paint directly from the tube. Jane seems equally intent in her work. The dots of color evoke analogies with pixels, particles, and the dust of which we are made, and to which we will all return. And despite this awareness of the finality of our obliteration, she celebrates the mystery of things with unrivaled intensity.

This is what I want to say about Xylor Jane's work: It is deeply and satisfyingly pleasurable and, upon reflection, equally profound. She achieves this by staying direct and straightforward. She demonstrates without a trace of rhetoric or didacticism that for all we know and can do, there are innumerable mysteries we have yet to plumb.

*Xylor Jane's [3:07 AM](#) closes today, Sunday, June 3 at Canada (55 Chrystie Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan)*

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