

The art that plays tricks with our eyes

AIDAN DUNNE

Thu, Jul 31, 2008

An ambitious revival of the work of Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely reminds us how much he has influenced the fields of architecture and design, writes Aidan Dunne.

VICTOR VASARÉLY may not be a name that rolls off the tongue, but he was, not all that long ago, one of the most famous artists in the world. He lived from 1908 to 1997, and he attained the height of his fame in the 1960s although, since then, the public profile and significance of Op Art, the movement he more or less invented and which is closely identified with him, has diminished in importance to the point where it's all but disappeared.

All the more surprising, then, that the Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny, together with the Glebe Gallery at Churchill, should take on the task of mounting a Vasarely revival by organising and hosting a retrospective exhibition of his work. It was an ambitious thing to do, but it was worth doing: the show is terrific, both fascinating and easily accessible to a wide audience.

As the art historian Jasia Reichardt observed: "A unique aspect of the movement was its nearly simultaneous arrival on both fronts – the esoteric and the popular." Op Art could be described as a companion to or even a special case of kinetic art, which entails the use of movement. Nothing actually moved in Op Art, but our eyes are often led to believe that something is moving. Op is short for Optical and Op artists exploit the mechanics of vision to create variously intriguing and unsettling effects, turning two dimensions into three, making pictorial space advance and recede, or making it impossible for us to focus and grasp a single image.

Given all that, you can immediately grasp the appeal Op Art holds for everyone, including children. It plays games with our eyes and makes us think about looking and seeing. It is essentially an abstract art, extensively employing geometric patterns. Vasarely worked with black-and-white but he was also brilliant with colour. The other acknowledged precursor and shaper of Op was Joseph Albers, best known for his open-ended project *Homage to the Square*, which explored the limitless optical possibilities offered by the juxtaposition of colours in a simple geometric format. Vasarely was temperamentally inclined towards greater complication, generating extraordinarily complex virtual worlds of abstraction, though he was not always or exclusively an abstract artist.

VASARÉLY WAS BORN in Pecs, Hungary, in 1908. Initially he studied medicine but switched to art, attending an academy informally known as the "Bauhaus of Budapest" before moving to Paris in 1930. One year later he married Klára Spinner, and he found employment as a graphic artist, working for a number of firms. He was already interested in the ambiguity of perception, and made a number of graphic pieces reminiscent in some respects of MC Escher's elaborate optical illusions. His representational drawings have a poised, Art Deco quality, and over time he was open to a number of influences, including Surrealism and, more pertinently perhaps, Cubism and Futurism, though he characterised much of his early work as consisting of *fausses routes* ("wrong roads").

While it is striking that his work depends on the exposition of a flawless geometrical logic, rendered with machine-like clarity and precision, the great advantage of seeing his paintings in the flesh is that we can immediately see that they were made by the human hand.

Part of their essence, in fact, is the tension between the nuance of the human touch and the inexorable schemes of order so carefully mapped out by means of that touch. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Vasarely developed a visual language that, while applied to subjects derived from everyday life, was really abstract. The paintings from this period are really beautiful.

Usually quite small, they employ bold though toned down, slightly burnished colours. Their compositions are made up of interlocking networks of flat colour planes. Although relatively simple in that each features relatively few elements, they are very sophisticated in the way they keep our eyes busily engaged. One would never tire of one of these pictures because there is always some other aspect to discover, another combination of colours and shapes to focus on. Nor are they predictable in a wider sense. Some take off in entirely unexpected directions and are as fresh and immediate as though they were made yesterday.

At the same time, he was working on more challenging, overtly theoretical pieces in black-and-white, and they led on to what might be termed the classical phase of Op. The general trend of his work was crystallised in a group exhibition, *Le Mouvement*, that took place at his instigation in the Galerie Denise René in 1955. As the title might suggest, the show was a landmark in the development of kinetic art, and included works by Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely and Alexander Calder.

Vasarely himself, though, while he moved quite happily into three dimensions, didn't go on to embrace the fourth, time, in the same way as Tinguely. Time becomes a relevant factor in relation to our perceptual experience of Vasarely's work, rather than the work itself changing over time.

AS HE WENT on to create fantastically complex elaborations of grid-based patterns based on circles, ellipses, squares, rhomboids and triangles, it might seem that the images became increasingly abstract and, in a sense, inhuman. Certainly, the association of abstraction with Modernism, and the pronounced swing away from abstraction and towards exclusively social and psychological meaning in art that came with Post-Modernism, have contributed to Vasarely's drift into relative obscurity. But as curators John Cunningham and Adrian Kelly rightly point out, his art was always profoundly social.

In 1958, he famously wrote that: "I believe that I am able to point to the existence in my works of an architectonic, abstract art form, a sort of universal folk lore, whose language is readily adaptable to the highly developed techniques of urban construction."

It is true that his art is inherently architectonic, and it has been influential in the fields of architecture and design, to the extent that it has entered into contemporary consciousness and is part of the way we see things. It's also true that his notion of modernity and the contemporary have, as is often the case, dated. The present is rarely the future we imagined.

In a wider sense, he was an artistic democrat in that he believed that art is for everyone and should not only be available to everyone but is an essential part of daily life. With his background in design and mass-reproduction, it makes sense that he sought to make his own work generally available by means of high-quality printing processes.

Some of his serigraphs are included in the exhibition and, in their richness of colour and the subtlety of their tonal modulations, they bear out his belief that the essential qualities of his art would come through in reproduction. They are gorgeous objects.

In a way, he anticipated a world of computer graphics and the depthless space of the digital television screen, but what is especially fascinating about the exhibition is the physical actuality of the work. When, in making a black-and-white composition made up of myriad circles and circular fragments, he has to amend a few outlines with white gouache, it heightens rather than diminishes the overall effect. He was clearly taken with the purity of edges, how one colour abuts another, yet the perfect edges, and the objective geometry of the compositions, are especially fascinating because they are dreamed up by a mind and fashioned by hand.

• Victor Vasarely (1906–1997), a retrospective exhibition, the Regional Cultural Centre, Port Road, Letterkenny, and The Glebe Gallery, Churchill. Until Aug 30.

© 2008 The Irish Times