Universal Language?

*Vasarely Legacy* (hardback, In Fine éditions d'art)

Vasarely (1908-1997) is renowned for his invention of Op Art, which paved the way for the psychedelic resurgence in the 1960s where patterns and optical illusions and delusions were not only visible in fine art galleries but in graphic and textile design.

*Vasarely Legacy* is a beautiful hardback book that documents an exhibition back in 2022 that surveys 'the entire range of artistic activities' to consider Vasarely's lasting impact. The artist was committed to 'eliminating the hierarchy between the unique piece and mass production' and was happy to share his work through printed reproductions, tapestries and the like. In her Introduction, the art critic and historian Stéphanie Pioda suggests that Vasarely created a 'universal language [which] is understandable to all', and that this language was 'composed of units that combine a square background in one colour with a geometric shape in another color.'

If that seems like a gross simplification, Vasarely's commitment 'to the power of color' is less so. He worked hard with pigments, colour and processes to create a powerful vocabulary of effects, illusions and intrigue.

Having said that, it is hard to make links between Vasaley's art and some of the work included in this volume, however intriguing that work may be. Ememem, for instance, fills in potholes in Paris and across Europe with tiled mosaic; whilst Verena Bachl's work with fluorescent bulbs seems more influenced by Dan Flavin's sculpture. Sebastiaan Knot also uses light, but in a very different way, setting up cardboard baffles and sheets which are photographed in the brief moment that lamps illuminate the constructions. They are beautiful, enigmatic images.

Elsewhere artists are working with patterns. Caroline Devreaux's 'multidimensional paintings' seem related to dazzle ships and camouflage more than Vasarely, whilst Julien Dossena's collection for Paco Rabanne makes its tribute and connections to Vasarely clear. Elsewhere there are op-art ceramics, bobbly textile wall pieces, digital art, and pattern or grid paintings made of food: oranges in various states of being cut up, biscuits and marshmallows.

Don't get me wrong, I like a lot of this work, I simply don't see much connection to Vasarely for many of the works. Clearly there is a sense of pattern, and sometimes the use of units in juxtapositions and variations. But modular systems are not an uncommon idea, and Vasarely's strength seemed to be the way he used and abused his grids of units to playfully create illusion, distortion, confusion and delight. Claiming, like musician and 'multidisciplinary artist' REYN does, that 'In Vasarely's art world, I witness the fusion of mathematics and creativity, much like the way musical notation and artistic expression intersect', or that 'Vasarely's art is the marriage of patterns and colors, akin to a musical language', seems a little disingenuous, as mathematics and creativity underpin most if not all art forms, and there are of course many similarities between visual and musical languages.

# The most intriguing work on show in this book is often seemingly the furthest away from Vasarely's influence; in fact when it is difficult to make any connection. Aleksander Bezinović's beautiful, sensuous and amorphic paintings are playfully subtle and clever. On his Instagram page he says Vasarely's continuing presence is due to the fact 'he was driven by a vision of the role of art'. Jo Hummel's wonderful wall pieces and paintings are made of torn, cut, collaged, scratched and juxtaposed coloured papers. She talks about her work in terms of improvisation and intuitive creation within the safe space of her studio. Olly Fathers paints on wooden supports, again playing with sequences and subtle variations of forms, which sometimes include making use of the wood grain itself, wooden shapes inserted into the supports, then sanded back to subtlety.

This is a wonderful collection of work, superbly reproduced and bound but it does seem one of those exhibitions and resulting publication that don't quite evidence the curatorial conceit behind it. The ideas of visual language, modular and unitary constructions, the conflation of fine and applied arts, cross-genre synthesis and influence, have been well explored elsewhere, and I would have liked to see this kind of drawn on for the text here.

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(700 words)