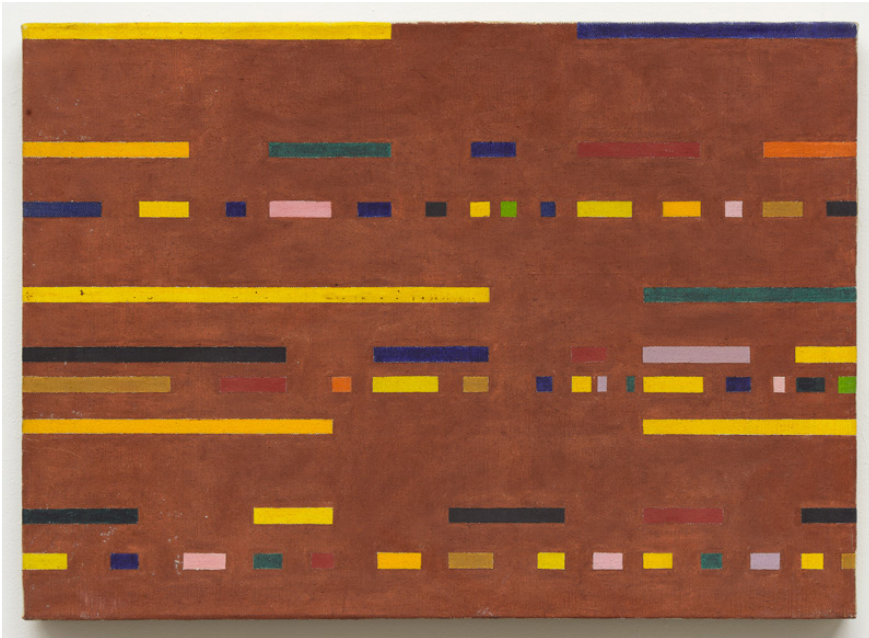


# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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### IN CONVERSATION: PAUL MOGENSEN WITH DAN GRATZ



Paul Mogensen, no title (Earth red), 1969, oil on canvas, 20 × 28 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Paul Mogensen became known for his single-color many paneled paintings utilizing mathematical ratios, which were first shown at the Bykert Gallery in New York City in 1966. Throughout his career, he continued to use mathematical principles in conjunction with basic designs and color to distill painting to its most essential nature, while infusing his work with a tension that exists as a result of inherently opposing qualities. The paintings resulting from this process seem perpetually of the moment, yet seem to transcend time.

The first time I had the privilege of seeing Paul Mogensen's work was last winter, on what felt like the coldest and windiest day in the city, to retrieve a colossal amount of paintings from his Soho loft studio while I was working as a freelance art handler for Karma. First, I was struck by the sheer amount of work and scale of Paul's paintings, many of which had to be folded to fit out the door. It was a trying day as an art handler, but his work stayed in my mind long after the cold and fatigue subsided. I eventually got to see much more of Paul's work through the gallery, as paintings he'd made over the course of decades were taken from storage, documented and catalogued. I consider myself very lucky to have seen so much of his work and to have been a small part of the process of bringing it out into the light, and luckier still to get to know the artist. Paul, as I came to learn, has never compromised. Regardless of who was watching, what trends were happening in painting or the vicissitudes of the art market, he continued to make work that he felt was important. The following interview took place over the course of several visits to Paul's studio in New York.

Dan Gratz (Rail): So first, maybe a little background—you had a studio in LA after graduating from The University of Southern California, then moved to NY?

Paul Mogensen: Well, first I went to Europe for eight months to see all the stuff I learned about in school. I studied 14th century Sieneese painting a lot, so I went to see that. Simone Martini, Duccio, and Cimabue who's Florentine, you know all those guys.

Rail: The greats.

Mogensen: Well, what was interesting about it to me was that it looked really good in the photograph, but when you saw the actual thing it was even better, and it's like 700 years old and it still looks really good. Now you see everything just come and go, everything is out of date, run down.

Rail: So you were just starting back then and you'd just graduated from USC, what kind of paintings were you making then?

Mogensen: I was just starting, I had a studio in Pasadena ... well, actually, I spend a lot of time thinking before I do anything.

Rail: Planning the paintings or thinking about ideas?

Mogensen: Not planning the paintings, but mostly figuring what I didn't want to do.

Rail: There's so much not to do!

Mogensen: That's the main thing. Once you figure that out, you have a chance, right?

Rail: I often think about what to leave out—how do you distill something to the most essential quality or qualities? I think that's what drew me to your work initially, is that I feel like it's really doing that, getting at something essential but doing it in this really interesting and fresh way. It's very hard to do as an artist. But back to the studio in Pasadena, what were you making then?

Mogensen: Well, I did some paintings which were one color, which was very difficult because everybody was opposed to it.

Rail: Just one solid color?

Mogensen: Yeah, but some are in separate parts.

Rail: So you were already on that trajectory—making the kind of paintings you would first show in New York?

Mogensen: Yeah.

Rail: How did you wind up in New York?

Mogensen: I went to school with David Novros and we shared an apartment for awhile—then he moved to NY and I stayed in LA. Klaus Kertess, who founded the

Bykert Gallery, called David to find out about who he would recommend, since he was opening a gallery. And David recommended Brice Marden and me. So Klaus offered me a show and gave me money to rent a studio in New York and so forth. So I don't have the experience that almost everybody has, you know. I was brought here, spoiled, but I saw it as an opportunity to work.

Rail: So then you were in New York starting from that point, in the mid sixties?

Mogensen: In '66.

Rail: And you maintained a studio in the city ever since?

Mogensen: Well the great thing about New York is you're always leaving, because it's so intense, you know.

Rail: Do you make sketches before you make a painting?

Mogensen: I do it in my head.

Rail: Planning the paintings, including the mathematical concepts?

Mogensen: Everything, yes.

Rail: Then when it comes time to apply the paint, do you have a system for drawing before you paint?

Mogensen: Well, I draw it out in pencil and paint it in.

Rail: Are they based on grids?

Mogensen: Sometimes—it might end up looking like a grid, but that's not how I arrive at it. I've studied a lot of geometry so this stuff is very easy—and making a painting has its own problems, but making a drawing is as much work as making a painting so I don't do a preparatory drawing—there are drawings but they happen after the painting. But once you change the medium then everything completely changes because making a painting is very different from working on a piece of paper. I've made a lot of prints...

Rail: Silkscreens?

Mogensen: Woodblocks, and I thank Yale for that. You were required to take printmaking, which I found to be excruciating. I didn't want to do it. You go through lithography and etching and all these processes and I thought this is nonsense—so at the end I just used woodblock because you could just get a piece of wood and just print it yourself.

Rail: How do you print them yourself?

Mogensen: With a wooden spoon. Take a piece of wood—and you find shelves on the street, which I do—and then ink it, put the paper under it and rub it, take it out, then you're done.

Rail: That's so direct.

Mogensen: No fuss, no muss.

Rail: I like the economy of that, too. I get a sense in your work, in general, you get a lot out of a little.

Mogensen: I think that's the way it should be. So you can get lost in the process.

Rail: So you're in New York, you had the show at Bykert...

Mogensen: As soon as I came here I put together a show of paintings—the first things were shown at the Bykert in '66.

Rail: What was the impact of having the first show? Were things different for you?

Mogensen: To me, you just do the stuff, and you find yourself in a continuum and you're not looking around at what's going on... I got a lot of attention though, because of the show. But I'm not interested in the public. I had met John Chamberlain out in California, then he came to my show in New York with his friend Neil Williams. Neil got really angry...

Rail: At your show?

Mogensen: I left out all the stuff he thought was important. From my paintings—my paintings weren't like everybody wanted them to be.

Rail: What did they want them to be?

Mogensen: Like theirs. [Laughter] One thing I found that I was doing, as I thought about it more and more I kept eliminating things which other people were doing. I had seen a book of Russian art from 1963 – 1922 when I was in school, published in 1962 by Camilla Gray, about Malevich, Rodchenko, Tatlin, all those guys... and so I saw that before I learned how to draw a nude like Rubens, so the stuff in this book meant more to me than classical art, or drawing from nature. Everything I encountered I just absorbed it.

Rail: So you absorbed all this stuff, some of which is in your work, but a lot must be left out.

Mogensen: It was left out on purpose as I thought about it more and more. And I left out more stuff, and it became pretty different without me trying to be different.

Rail: So you were taking some flak for making this work? In the show at Bykert Gallery...

Mogensen: Well anytime you make work that makes people kind of scratch their heads you'll have that reaction—I wasn't trying to offend anybody, I didn't care if anybody liked it either.

Rail: I want to hear more about why Neil Williams was offended by your show.

Mogensen: He was angry!

Rail: Why was he angry?

Mogensen: He was painting in that group of people that Clement Greenberg was influencing. Like Morris Louis, people like that. I left out all the stuff he thought was important. These are progressions, right? Well, I didn't want to decorate a canvas with progressions, you know, so I decided the only thing I really cared about was the progressions, so I just left out all the canvas, right?

Rail: So it's really about—not that it's about absence, but omission seems to be a big part of your work.

Mogensen: You don't add crap that's not important, you just concentrate on what you're doing.

Rail: So it's really about getting to this essential quality by not adding unnecessary things.

Mogensen: Yes, and I was surprised to see that people were surprised by what I was doing.

Rail: But not necessarily a negative reaction, right?

Mogensen: Well it wasn't a big deal to me, I just thought that they weren't paying attention.

Rail: So it seemed like a failure on the part of the viewer?

Mogensen: I don't think anyone failed, this just wasn't what they were used to seeing. And I wasn't trying to make any breakthroughs, but they saw it that way. Some people also thought this was a display of little paintings.

Rail: As opposed to one piece.

Mogensen: That was the great thing about Klaus, he let me do whatever I wanted to do and I didn't do anything he didn't understand. And it sort of spoiled me, I thought everybody was like that, you know. But they aren't.

Rail: Do you feel that showing the work, and entering a larger conversation...

Mogensen: The larger conversation means nothing to me. I don't want to offend people, it's just not what I do.

Rail: Another thing I really appreciate about your work is that kind of context. I feel like I've been quite lucky that I've been able to see so much of your work through working with the gallery (Karma)—I feel like I've gotten to see a bigger picture. It's its own thing, almost indifferent to external factors in a way.

Mogensen: To me, seeing all this stuff going out, which you've been seeing, my

life is unfolding in front of me. Because I know all those things, I did them...

Rail: And it takes you back to that time?

Mogensen: It doesn't take me back, it's just kind of interesting that it's all there... I had this show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, '78 – '79, there were eighty-nine things in the show, a big show, you know. I remember all the big changes I had made.

Rail: This was a major museum show.

Mogensen: It was huge. And when I saw all these things together, it looked like one guy did all of them even though a lot of them were different from each other.

Rail: Were you pleasantly surprised at that?

Mogensen: No, I'm just amused by all of it [Laughter]

Rail: [Laughter] That's really interesting! It seems like you're kind of an observer, concerning your work once it's made.

Mogensen: Well I was at that moment.

Rail: It's hard as an artist to take a step back—I think there's a meditative quality about your work, but maybe I'm imposing my own preconceptions onto it here. I thought about this a lot during a recent 10-day silent meditation, having just seen a lot of your work at the warehouse a week prior to the retreat. I remember thinking that it's in this one place, fixed in a particular moment which occurs in the space of a lifetime but that it also transcends time—it vibrates, in a sense. Anyway there's a definite meditative and transcendent quality in my view. I don't know if that's intentional or if I just constructed that narrative in my mind.

Mogensen: Ok good, thanks. I'm smiling because I was visiting my mother with some friends of mine—these friends mentioned to my mother that sometimes I'll sit there and just space out. And I'm not spacing out, I'm thinking about things, but I'm not connected to the conversation. And my mother said that I used to do that in the high chair, you know. [Laughter]

Rail: [Laughter] You haven't changed a bit!

Mogensen: It's there for sure.

Rail: It's important though.

Mogensen: Well, you get a lot of thinking done.

Rail: Not just to think, but to think on a level where you're very present in that thought...

Mogensen: Yeah, it's important figuring something out.

Rail: I feel like one thought can change your whole life. In a small way—in a subtle way, who knows?

Mogensen: It all adds up.

Rail: This pattern, which is mathematical, recurs a lot in your work... (Points at painting with squares)

Mogensen: It's just a simple progression  $-N+1$  1,2,3,4 and then when it crosses itself it makes all that stuff you know.

Rail: So it increases in size exponentially.

Mogensen: The copper one is geometric so it doubles.

Rail: There's a logic to it right?

Mogensen: Yep. It's a progression. It goes around the edge then it goes in the center, so it's actually squares that have a squared off spiral, that's how it works. And I like those things because it does things that I would never think of.

Rail: Just naturally, based on it's own logic. And these ones as well? Is there a progression? (Points at a painting with radiating lines.)

Mogensen: A pattern—radiating lines, you know.

Rail: That design—were you thinking about anything in particular when it came to making that?

Mogensen: Well, I was driving across country a lot when we were in Texas, and I drove up the Ohio River Valley, and there's all these mounds there that Native Americans built, all these artifacts, like seashells and so forth, and there's this image that's there and in other places in the world—it's a circle with radiating lines around it.

Rail: And the artifacts had this kind of design?

Mogensen: Cultures around the world use it—and archaeologists called it a rayed sun—they draw a circle with radiating lines around it. So I would see those and I thought that was kind of interesting. So I would see those but not draw the circle, you know. Making the lines radiating out with no circle. Then I decided to make the lines oblique, and not straight out, and I ended up making a bunch of them. There was a show of Plains Indians stuff at the Met a couple years ago—200 year old things—and there was a big deer skin with pictograms and one had a circle with radiating lines, oblique, just like this painting.

Rail: You're tapping into something bigger it seems.

Mogensen: 200 years ago, I'm glad we agree. [Laughter]

Rail: That's a great design though. I can see why you kept going back to it, because it seems quite open in a lot of ways. It could be seen as representational...

Mogensen: To others. Somebody called it a depiction of the sun, so I jumped down their throat, you know. [Laughter]

Rail: [Laughter.] Of course! I get why you're opposed to any interpretation of your work that isn't open. I can also understand your resistance to classification, identification, or even talking about it.

Mogensen: Well, for a reason. There's a lot of stuff in there so why limit it? I was in a show a few years ago and they wanted an artist statement and I said I'm not doing that—so I had them leave it blank.

Rail: I found an article online about your work recently that was basically unintelligible, and I was thinking “what are they talking about?” because it was mainly art historical language that seemed like it was trying hard to be smart. I think something like that really misdirects people because they think they can't understand the work, that the ideas are too complicated and it makes it less accessible.

Mogensen: It shows the writer didn't understand the work. I'm not making art history, you know.

Rail: Right. I also get a sense that you're really in the moment when you're painting—there are some things, for example—there was that bug trapped in the surface...

Mogensen: Well it's there, what are you gonna do? You'll ruin the whole painting trying to get it out. [Laughter]

Rail: [Laughter] But it doesn't even matter! It's there and it's part of the history of the work, too, right? Maybe I'm reading too much into it.

Mogensen: When I saw those medieval paintings in Italy, there's something really raw about them, they're not slick, you know? They're really kind of tough, really uncompromising.

Rail: You can feel a very strong presence in those, still, hundreds of years later. So this painting I'm really interested in the contrast between how matte the squares are versus the sheen of the ground. I not only think about the contrast, but also about the specific qualities of each part.

Mogensen: I started that because of my first show—some of the things were really glossy, one that was gloss white and really shiny, and next to it I put a painting that was black primer, dead flat, and people told me they liked them together. When I did my first show, I was using industrial paint in gallons—so I'd open a gallon in gloss white and then I sprayed it, you know. So then I opened a gallon of primer, which is dark grey but it looks black, and I did a painting of that. And when they dry, one of them is really reflective, like a refrigerator door—the other one was so black you get lost in it. Not just matte but really flat—beyond matte. And I showed them together—one of them was reflective and one was really flat.

Rail: That's a great contrast to have together like that in the same place.

Mogensen: So after that I just started doing that in my paintings...

Rail: Both at once.

Mogensen: It adds another dimension even though it's just two dimensional stuff.



Rail: That becomes very important, right? That duality specifically makes me think about the materiality of painting, and how that changes depending on your spatial relationship to it as well. It's not fixed, in this case that becomes clear on a perceptual level, the painting always changes depending on where you're looking at it from.

Mogensen: It's another part of it. I read this, some French poet was commenting that a poem may have a million decisions in it, you know, and a painting, even a blank painting, there's a lot of different things going on, a lot of thought.

Rail: True, it all has to be very considered, even if that's subconscious—each element is very important.

Mogensen: Even if you don't know what all the elements are, if it's all blank. Because some people say it's just a blank canvas, but they're looking at their idea of what they want it to be rather than what it is.

Rail: Indeed. What about the texture?

Mogensen: All of it—texture, reflectivity, refraction, scale, and so on.

Rail: You can really focus on the particular qualities because of the contrast—how it bounces back and forth, making the other quality more intense.

Mogensen: Yep, so I've been doing it ever since.

Rail: But in one space.

Mogensen: On one painting.

Rail: So obviously your surfaces are important because there's this important contrast of matte and glossy areas, but in terms of the product, you don't really care—you'll kick them around, there might be a bug embedded in the paint, and so on, it really comes across to me as being in the moment, in a specific place at a specific time.

Mogensen: Well, at the museum in Houston we put paintings up that I hadn't seen for years, and I was looking behind some of them and I saw they had cat paw prints all over them [Laughter]

Rail: That's also part of the work, part of the history of the piece in an interesting way.

Mogensen: It's kind of interesting, actually—I'm not proud that they're messy, but I also know that it's not important to be neat, because you can lose something if you make it too neat. Like minimal art from the '60s, a lot of guys who were having things made by shops—they didn't have a lot of money so they didn't go to an art fabricator, they just went to a local shop that would make it using workmen. There was a kind of nice quality to it, it wasn't very fancy or anything, but it was still strong, and decades later I've seen these things restored by art conservators...

Rail: They lose something.

Mogensen: They're just destroyed. There's an old English word, "workmanlike," and I saw a contract for an English house in Plymouth Colony from the 1600s, and one of the demands from the owner is that it would be "workmanlike," which means you use good quality materials, everything is straight, strong, but not fancy.

Rail: No flourishes there. When I look at your paintings I get sense that there aren't flourishes in them either—some recurring things that we've talked about, including getting at this essential quality, without adding anything unnecessary.

Mogensen: It's already there.

Rail: The core of it remains intact—it's not about the one thing, it's a balance of all these different things; the texture, the sheen, color.

Mogensen: These things are all important. People talk about a one-color painting, well what does that mean? Because there are about a thousand things in there.

Rail: The actual term "minimal," is quite misleading if you think about it.

Mogensen: Of course, that was the intention.

Rail: I do remember you saying that term started as an insult—but now it's not negative but used to categorize, but I think it still is misleading if you think about all the qualities that exist.

Mogensen: Sure, one of the things that people reacted to when these things were shown was that there were no images, no gestures, nothing, right? And so that was the response. Now when you look into a glossy interior design magazine there will be a "minimal" apartment, which for them means it's empty—that's what minimal means to them, right?

Rail: The absence of stuff, but it's more about a concentrated omission of the unnecessary.

Mogensen: Right, it's the opposite of what we're going for—it's concentrated, focused on that.

Rail: At what point did people start to accept minimalist painting?

Mogensen: After the '60s then I started seeing a bunch of shows of one-color paintings.

Rail: Brice Marden was making monochromes around then, right?

Mogensen: He was doing that in the '60s but his were different because he insisted he do lots of coats and then it would drip down to the bottom and he would leave that bottom strip with the drips. Cezanne did that so a lot of people thought that was really old fashioned. I remember sitting during a screaming argument between Brice and people opposed to what he was doing, but he was holding on to that.

Rail: Do you find the intensity is somewhat diminished now? It seems like back then you could have a manifesto and you could get really mad—legitimately—it seemed like there were more arguments about art—but now I feel like it doesn't

quite happen in that way.

Mogensen: It's more diffuse. When I was at Yale, I'd never seen such competition – violent screaming and slugging [Laughter.]

Rail: You have to admire that intensity!

Mogensen: For me it was silly! The issue at Yale is that people were promoting or defending their work and I thought that it was unimportant, you know. And then, later, there were a lot of arguments about minimal art and not minimal art and so forth.

Rail: What was it about?

Mogensen: About what the hell are you doing and why are you doing this, and I had people get really mad at me.

Rail: Because they didn't understand what you were doing?

Mogensen: They understood it and they saw it as an affront to what they had dedicated years to.

Rail: Representational painting, for example...

Mogensen: It could be anything, just something different, you know.

Rail: They felt what was important to them was being omitted.

Mogensen: That's right.

Rail: It's so much more interesting to look at what is there.

Mogensen: That's how they saw it. I wasn't doing it to offend people.

Rail: I like that I've been able to see a large part of your life's work because I get a sense you never compromise. You see parallels, strong currents throughout, and this string that connects the whole thing. Often painters bounce around a lot and then they might settle on a particular thing or be influenced by what's cool at the time, but I get a sense that your life's work is one body of work, in way.

Mogensen: Well they got reinforcement—sales, or a teaching position at a prestigious place.

Rail: So you keep making the same thing after that point.

Mogensen: Well, it locks you into that. I've known people who took that bait, and it ruined them. It made them afraid—afraid to change, and afraid to leave.

Rail: Fear might be the biggest obstacle for anyone, right? What strategies have you had for not being afraid and just making your work regardless of the market, economy, and so forth?

Mogensen: In a few words, I thought they were wrong. People ask me about making art for so many years and I say sometimes when I meet friends that I've known for a long time, it's like veterans of wars talking because you've been through a lot of garbage, and you're tested all the time.

There's a lot of opposition. Which might be a stimulus. Depends on how you look at it. You can see it in little kids too: "Why'd you do that?" "Because you told me not to."

Rail: That's why I used to smoke!

Mogensen: The forbidden fruit.

Rail: Can you talk about how you arrive at color choices?

Mogensen: I see it as two separate things coming together—one is the choice of the progression and all the things that you do with that scale and so forth, and then there's color, and they're not mutually dependent, and they end up being together and if you do it right, it looks like they were meant to be together, but there's no theory that ties the two things together. When I first showed the paintings that had separated rectangles, I didn't want to put a progression on a canvas to make it look like a decoration on a canvas, I thought, just leave it out, right? And to me that was obvious but other people wondered where the canvas was because you're trained to do that, right? And punished if you don't do it. Anyway I did that for a few years and people started complaining about so many holes in the wall so I just took the different parts and bolted them together, so it could be hung as one thing.

Rail: Some of the golden ratio pieces, right? I recall seeing a white one and an orange one...

Mogensen: Yeah—and then I wasn't supporting the first issue anymore—but it got so complicated and so silly to have somebody to put these things all over the wall, so I did it all on one canvas. And that gave me an opportunity to work with more than one color.

Rail: So that led to another duality, or opposition in terms of color.

Mogensen: I like that, multiple dualities. [Laughter]

Rail: Compounded dualities—there's a lot in one space!

Mogensen: I like how it just comes out and I didn't mean for it to be like this, but because of decisions I made and the way I make them it ends up like that.

Rail: You generally don't do much mixing, right?

Mogensen: Never. Right out of the tube—I never mix—sometimes I add stand oil for gloss.

Rail: I think that's important too, in terms of directness and economy.

Mogensen: Economy, but also whenever you stir something together you don't get the intensity.

Rail: So intensity, but do you feel that the color itself is more direct?

Mogensen: The color is direct but also if you're gonna use it you might as well use what it looks like—a lot of people spend a lot of effort making these colors as they are. Some people tell me I should mix the color and do this and I say I'm not gonna do that.

Rail: That would change the whole thing.

Mogensen: Well you'd lose the intensity of the color.

Rail: I really like your spiral painting. There's so much—it's simple, just two colors, but there's so much variation and I become very aware of the variation probably because of how limited the palette is—you're not mixing or using more than two colors in one piece, but then I'm really aware of the quality of the paint and application—it's transparent in some places, some places it may incidentally mix with the other color—I just really notice the details a lot.

Mogensen: That's an issue with people, they want it to be even, and they will lose the painting to make it even.

Rail: There's so much poetry in the little things though.

Mogensen: The unintentional things.

Rail: I think it has to be unintentional in a way, because you wouldn't think to do certain things on your own, these things that just happen have to remain incidental—they're more magical that way—you can't force that. There's so much letting go and letting the materials play out here.

Mogensen I think of—there's that TV show with that character Fonzie—

Rail: Happy Days?

Mogensen: Yeah, I saw it a few times—in the beginning of each episode Fonzie would be in the bathroom in front of the mirror, and he would take his comb out and he wouldn't touch his hair because it was already perfect, right?

Rail: What would he do with it then?

Mogensen: Put it back in his pocket.

Rail: Of course. [Laughter] Do you visit museums often?

Mogensen: I go and look at everything all the time.

Rail: Where's the first place you'd go to in the Met?

Mogensen: I always end up looking at the Theodore Rousseau landscape—big brown autumn scenes with the woods—I like that painting. He painted on it for years and years.

Rail: Do you go to contemporary galleries as well?

Mogensen: I look at everything.

Rail: How about the physical painting process—it's just one layer?

Mogensen: All one layer, all one shot.

Rail: Normally it takes you about a day for one painting? For one layer?

Mogensen: Well a big painting can be very complicated, so if you're painting all those edges it takes a long time. So you get bored with it and you do something else.

Rail: Or you get distracted.

Mogensen: Yeah, well the distractions are important. You can't sit there and do the same thing like a drone. There's too much thinking involved. Even in the application. In the sixties people were saying, "well you just think it up and someone else will make it."

Rail: I feel like there's a certain austerity in your approach to painting.

Mogensen: I grew up out west. This kind of western thing is different from the east. When I first came to NY I thought everyone talked too much. In the west it's like "yep" or "nope." You just do what's essential. Which is an ethic, actually, and I grew up in that, and you're not supposed to show emotion. It's like a Clint Eastwood western.

Rail: So restraint was a part of the culture?

Mogensen: When I grew up you'd hear the name Rembrandt, and that was an insult. Like if you're making something and it's a bit fancy people say, "Hey Rembrandt."

Rail: Interesting—so when you came to New York were you surprised at how much energy was spent on things that seemed to be superfluous?

Mogensen: No, I grew up in LA, which has plenty of superfluity.

Rail: Can you talk a bit about your Golden Section paintings?

Mogensen: The ratio is this side to this is the same as this to this so it goes infinitely up or down, and it's always the same ratio and each figure is a square—the ratio is 1.618 (sort of) but infinitely repeating, and it's not a square and it's not 2/3rd—it occurs in nature, all over the place—other cultures have been using this thing for thousands of years. People see this as Greek because they did it. I just took the figure from the mathematics and just painted it all one color—the first one I did was white.

Rail: Was it important doing white? It seems like the absence of color might be a factor.

Mogensen: It's not an absence of color, white's a color, you know. I figure if it's in a tube it must be a color.

Rail: Could it be slightly different compositionally?

Mogensen: No. Well, you could turn the whole thing around. Being from out west where the horizon is really prominent there, and when I was a kid we'd go for drives in Arizona and I could see things from 125 miles away, so I see everything as horizontal, even though it may or may not be.

Rail: So that's a factor in how you think about painting.

Mogensen: Well, it's obvious to me—it's nothing I planned.

Rail: It just seems natural.

Mogensen: I don't know if it seems natural, it just seems wrong if you're not doing it that way. I had this thing in a show awhile ago, a circle, black, with black like this on it and they displayed it like this (vertically), and I said I'm from out west we do it like this (horizontally).

Rail: If you're from the city the vertical orientation might make sense...

Mogensen: Yep. And this is another version of Golden Section. Each of these squares, these rectangles, is a golden section rectangle.

Rail: And the empty space here?

Mogensen: There was no more to do—I don't need to fill it in with something else.

Rail: A Rubenesque figure for example? [Laughter]

Mogensen: Actually that brings up a point—this kind of thing, before you figure it out, it's hard to do it like this, because you've been conditioned to always fill it in. So to leave that out becomes really hard.

Rail: It seems like an omission.

Mogensen: This is a plan for a room, which I did, I showed it at the Houston Museum. This is reversed—these are all blue, cobalt blue, and each part is a wall.

Rail: That makes sense—a top view of the space.

Mogensen: Right. So the Houston Museum built the room to that dimension and they showed this painting, and each piece is 8ft high.

Rail: It's all one piece though.

Mogensen: Yes, and this is eleven by eight feet high.

Rail: Those are enormous paintings. Or an enormous piece, I should say. So it was quite important that the room had to be a specific size.

Mogensen: Yep, because the space in between is part of the thing and if it's different, why bother?

Rail: Of course, that's integral to the piece. Was it satisfying to see that it finished?

Mogensen: Well, I thought of it for a long time, and then I made it, at huge cost, then showed it at the museum and it was nice, you know, but I'd already gone on to something else.

Rail: So it didn't change your perception of the piece or your trajectory?

Mogensen: No, I don't spend a lot of time looking at my work—you do it beforehand, make a decision about what you're gonna do, and sometimes it turns out a little differently which I always accept, you know. Anyway it was nice, you walk in a room and there's all this cobalt blue all over the place, it surrounds you. I got the idea in the '60s when I was in Paris and went to L'Orangerie, a building with an elliptical room, and all the walls are covered with Monet water lilies. So you're surrounded with it. And I'm not painting water lilies, but I thought it was a pretty good idea.

Rail: You're immersed in it and it becomes a more physical experience.

Mogensen: Or maybe it's just that you can't get away from it. [Laughter]

Rail: This painting with the progression of squares in the center—I don't think I've seen one quite like it. It's new, right? Usually the progressions are around the edge of the painting.

Mogensen: Right, usually I've done these paintings with progressions along the edge, this has it along a coordinate.

Rail: So it's all centered?

Mogensen: Centered on a line.

Rail: So then the space between the shapes and the edges of the painting becomes important too?

Mogensen: I divided the thing into these parts. There are four verticals and five spaces. Each shape is centered on those spaces. And this is exactly what we were talking about before, I didn't know it would look like this, I just did it and that's how it came out.

Rail: That seems very important in your work, to take a leap of faith, to just make something based on an idea and see how it comes out. Certainly a lot of people work this way, but I think it's especially important in your work because it diffuses any rigidity that could happen if it was too planned. And I think that's communicated to the viewer, they can share in the openness of the experience.

Mogensen: Well you never know it could be better than anything you've ever done.

Rail: For the early shaped pieces, was your process different? Would you have a better idea how it would turn out?

Mogensen: Specifically which one?



Rail: I saw a shaped orange one at the gallery—

Mogensen: That's a square on it's side so it's a diamond, and it's divided into 8 parts, diagonals, lines through the center, you know. And since there's 8 things left by all those lines, I just took one of the eighths out. There was another one were I took two of the eighths out, 1/4th out, and it looks different. This one has three of the eighths out.

Rail: That's really interesting, just one small move and the piece is completely different.

Mogensen: The piece is called minus three eighths.

Rail: I'm really fascinated with that, when you're using such basic forms, you change one thing and it's vastly different. It really opens up a space of possibility. It's almost infinite, right? You could almost do any variation on one basic shape.

Mogensen: You could—but you select what you want out of it and move on.

Rail: Of course.

Mogensen: The first painting I showed at the Bykert was a painting I did in LA, four big blue rectangles in a progression, eight feet high. I also showed a small orange three part progression. I wanted to make the orange really flat, but I couldn't find any kind of paint that was really flat. So I sprayed on gouache, and it cracked. Brice saw it and he was laughing at me, because I was always trying all this stuff. [Laughter] He was always using traditional art supplies.

Rail: [Laughter] That's great! It seems like you were always pushing things on a material level. I get a sense there's always been a lot of experimentation in terms of "what will this do," or "what will that do" to achieve a certain effect. I was recently talking to Suzan [Frecon] about you and she suggested I ask you about your pioneering use of materials, specifically the metallic pigments early on. Another thing she thought should be mentioned was the way you'd make the shaped substrates, which are quite complicated from an engineering standpoint.

Mogensen: Well, what I told her as far as the substrates, if I wanted someone to make this it would take forever to explain and cost a lot of money, so I would just make them myself.

Rail: Indeed, but it seems really important how you make the things. Finding excess materials, sometimes scraps, whatever's in the studio or on the street—it's almost like the objects assembled themselves.

Mogensen: Well it reflects how you're thinking about it, then you find something that fits. There's a little one at the gallery, a really old one, two blue triangles that are stuck together, and people ask me if I did that before a larger one with the same design. Because people think I did the small ones first then the big ones, but it's from the leftovers from the bigger painting.

Rail: [Laughter] There's the sense of economy again!

Mogensen: I didn't want to throw it away, you know? Canvas is nice so why would you throw it away?

Rail: Certainly someone put a lot of effort into making it. So it's not only economy, but respect for the materials.

Mogensen: Brice showed me this article Meyer Schapiro wrote on non-mimetic art, things that don't look like other things, and in the article he was talking about monkey paintings. You put a monkey in front of a canvas and he just paints it—he said it looks like a painting because everything about it except for the monkey is a product of thousands of years of human development. The canvas, the stretcher, the paint and all that stuff. So the last thing, putting the monkey there means nothing. It's all the other stuff that makes it what it is.

Rail: That's really interesting. I think it changes your perspective a bit to think about that. So much of what's made is quite circumstantial if you consider the conditions in which it was made, the history of the materials and history of thought processes leading up to the moment of execution. So back to some of the materials you were using early on, can you talk about your use of metallic type pigments? I recall seeing some progressions with copper, gold and graphite and so forth...

Mogensen: Those were all based on the periodic table, which is why I did them. I had come to New York and I was making these paintings, and since I'd given up the canvas and they were all just progressions, I realized it didn't make any sense to paint with the colors that I was using, because there was something very different about this stuff (the progressions).

Rail: So it seems like you were searching for the most impact with these pigments.

Mogensen: I wasn't necessarily looking for impact, I was looking for some way for these things to have a material that wasn't just a color.

Rail: So you wanted them to have more meaning?

Mogensen: Well I just saw that it wasn't conventional anymore, so it didn't make sense to me to just paint a color. Because there they were broken up in the way they were, they seemed elemental, so it made sense to make them elements from the periodic table. It was automatic for me because I had studied both math and inorganic chemistry.

Rail: So the specific pigments you were using became really important, to distill painting to a level that was elemental.

Mogensen: At the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, they found pigments used in some of the paintings that were 200 miles away from the caves. It's been important for a very long time. Did you see those triangle paintings in storage? Those were Manganese Violet and Cadmium Yellow Pale.

Rail: Those were great—I'm glad you mentioned the triangle paintings, it seems like there's a different kind of space in those...

Mogensen: It's purely an artifact of the shape.

Rail: They really suck you in, spatially.

Mogensen: When I did those paintings—you have people you talk to all the time—they do a certain thing, and if you do something a little bit different then you see the disapproval, or lack of interest.

Rail: Did you experience that with those paintings?

Mogensen: With everything, but with those I figured that a lot of people don't like yellow. Anyway, I tried to find a purple to go with the yellow that looked purple without adding white to it, you know. Because most of the purples look like black when you put it on. The only purple that looked like purple when you put it on was manganese violet, so that's what I used. So anyway when I did the purple and yellow paintings, I found out that people not only don't like yellow, but they don't like purple, either. [Laughter]

Rail: So they weren't very popular?

Mogensen: Well when that happened I thought maybe I was onto something here. A guy from LA was visiting me when I was working on them and he called them "an acid trip on route 66." [Laughter]

Rail: I could see the acid trip part but I would go into outer space more.

Mogensen: Well you're in California, so you're on a road.

Rail: They seemed more interdimensional to me—but they still seemed pretty open. You're not making those anymore though?

Mogensen: Those are from the 80s.

Rail: But everything here in the studio is recent?

Mogensen: Hot off the press.

Rail: In terms of what you were thinking about in the past, do you find that themes often reoccur years later?

Mogensen: Well the implication is that you stop something, do something else and then it reoccurs, but the fact is that all this is parallel, so you know. You don't give something up and do something else, you're still thinking about these other things, 10 things or 100 things.

Rail: So it's all on the same continuum.

Mogensen: That's right. You know who Cusanus is? He was explaining the fallacy of the Greek concept of geometry where you study circles and ellipses as two separate entities—he said that a circle is just an ellipse with two congruent centers, so as the ellipse gets closer together they become more circular. So this is very different from the Greek thinking that there is two separate entities, that everything is actually in a continuum which is actually the way things are. And he also said that a straight line is a special case of an arc with an infinite radius. As the radius gets longer it gets

straighter until it becomes a straight line, you know. And you could see how jarring that would be if you learned only the Greek thing, which is wrong.

Rail: I think the Greek thinking would have made more sense intuitively, which is misleading because our intuitions are so often wrong.

Mogensen: Well, if you're learning something like that it's not your intuition, it's what you were told.

Rail: Can you talk about the spiral paintings?

Mogensen: These are from—the last show I had at the Bykert, I showed some of these and another kind of spiral, so they're all bright colored spiral paintings, you know, and I thought that was interesting because everyone I knew was doing rectangles, right? And I did a spiral—the first thing I did was this thing in 1965—and the people that I knew didn't want to see curves, they just wanted to see squares. So I just showed the other stuff for a long time but then I decided I was just going to do it, so I did a bunch of these things. I did these, then I did these with a narrow spiral.

Rail: These are really interesting. So you did these both in a square and a tondo—so you'll do multiple iterations of the same idea?

Mogensen: Yeah so you have the two spirals in the same thing that meet.

Rail: Are those relatively new?

Mogensen: Within the last year.

Rail: That spiral shape—it seems difficult to transfer that, do you have a way to do that?

Mogensen: I use a compass.

Rail: So it's just drawn on with a pencil and compass?

Mogensen: Well the way these are constructed, it's actually a quadrant, and each arc has a diminishing radius, so it automatically makes that, and I found that if you use four centers that works up to about here, and then it starts to not meet right, and you get arcs that meet like that, so then I go to eight centers down here and it's a smoother transition.

Rail: So for a tighter spiral there are more centers.

Mogensen: Yes.

Rail: There's a quality about your work that operates on a deeper level. I went on a different kind of meditation retreat, which may or may not have involved the use of psychedelics when I had this sort of vision of your work. I saw your paintings as shields—in my mind I was transported back in time to this Homeric scene, and you were the guy who painted all the shields while the battle raged around the walls of the city. I remember thinking, someone still has to paint the shields, it's so important! I still think about your work in that context, in terms of the directness of the designs, the quality, the surfaces, even the shapes of the substrates...

Mogensen: It's been important to people for thousands of years.

Rail: There's a timeless and ancient quality there, but it still seems fresh.

Mogensen: Well you're dealing with basic principles and they're known to everybody. Some people find it inaccessible which I find interesting. That you learn yourself out of it.

Rail: Exactly! You become too educated, too sophisticated, which can be detrimental to seeing things clearly.

Mogensen: Or understanding things. Anyway the paintings were getting complex in certain ways. In the narrow spirals I had paired contrasting colors around the spiral, and then I thought about changing the space of it physically so I made them on a bent plane...

Rail: I did see those paintings as well, with the curved substrates, which made me think of shields again. Did the curvature of the plane have to do with the mathematics of the design?

Mogensen: No. But some have varying textures—there's a progression of fineness to coarseness of the canvas and the paints over that.

Rail: So there is another point of contrast in the texture of the weave. By breaking things down to their most essential components you're more aware of those components—if it was more complicated you probably wouldn't notice.

Mogensen: True, you get lost in it. People always think we did it but we're just part of this continuum. I had no art background when I was a kid, but they put us on a bus to the Southwest Museum in LA when I was about eight years old—and it's a 200 year old collection of Native American stuff, and I still remember it. I didn't know it was art but I still remember.

Rail: There's something direct and resonant about those designs—basic but quite powerful—and obviously there's a spirituality inherent in Native American art. Do you think about your work having any sort of spirituality?

Mogensen: Never. That's what people bring to it, they tell me. It's not me though, I gave that up a long time ago.

Rail: What about when you're working, is there any kind of spirituality in the process?

Mogensen: No. Well, when you're working and it's going ok, that's good. [Laughter] You don't throw it away and start again. But that's modified by my attitude about not caring what it looks like.

Rail: But that seems to be an important part of your process

Mogensen: It is.

Rail: That being present in the process is far more important than the result of the process, which is communicated in the work.

Mogensen: That's one way of looking at it—I know what I want to do, and I'm doing it and if it comes out differently then that's ok. I know people who follow all these rules—elaborate mathematics and stuff, then they don't like how it looks so they just erase it—they wanted the final appearance.

Rail: I think the hand in your paintings is very important though. Maybe that's another duality? Whatever it is, it creates a kind of tension—the hand is so present, but you have this mathematical basis that seems opposed to the handmade.

Mogensen: We joked back in the '60s when we were spraying on paint that art historians would try to determine who made the painting based on the way they sprayed it.

Rail: In terms of your painting process, do you have any rules you follow?

Mogensen: I don't acknowledge any rules.

Rail: I feel like some of the rules in painting are imposed by physics—drying time for example—you're working with physical laws like the drying time of a pigment, or your own body—you might paint a certain way sometimes because it's more comfortable in that position, so that makes a different kind of painting.

Mogensen: Sure, that's good. I was thinking about an M&Ms commercial where an M&M fell on the floor and says he couldn't be eaten because of the rule . . .

Rail: The five second rule? Depends on where it fell! If it was on the subway platform for example...[Laughter]

Mogensen: Doesn't matter just a rule. That's one thing I like about art is that it's in flux, there's no fixed anything, which is the way life is.