

ICA show features Andrade's

The Phila. artist's range is wide. Her paintings are at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Look up *op* (short for optical) in any art dictionary and you'll inevitably encounter artists such as Victor Vasarely, generally credited with creating this movement, Bridget Riley and Richard Anuszkiewicz.

During the 1960s, when *op* art reached the height of its visibility, Edna Andrade also made a number of paintings in this perceptually provocative style. Yet her name usually doesn't appear in reference books.

With its exhibition of Andrade's *op* paintings over more than 20 years, the Institute of Contemporary Art is trying retroactively to enroll the Philadelphia painter in the *op* pantheon.

Andrade, still active at 86, probably escaped notice during the 1960s because she worked in Philadelphia and wasn't in contact with better-known *op* painters.

Also, she wasn't a permanent recruit. Just as she moved into *op* art from figuration, she moved out of it at the end of the 1960s into a more lyrical style of geometric abstraction, less dependent on pure physical sensation.

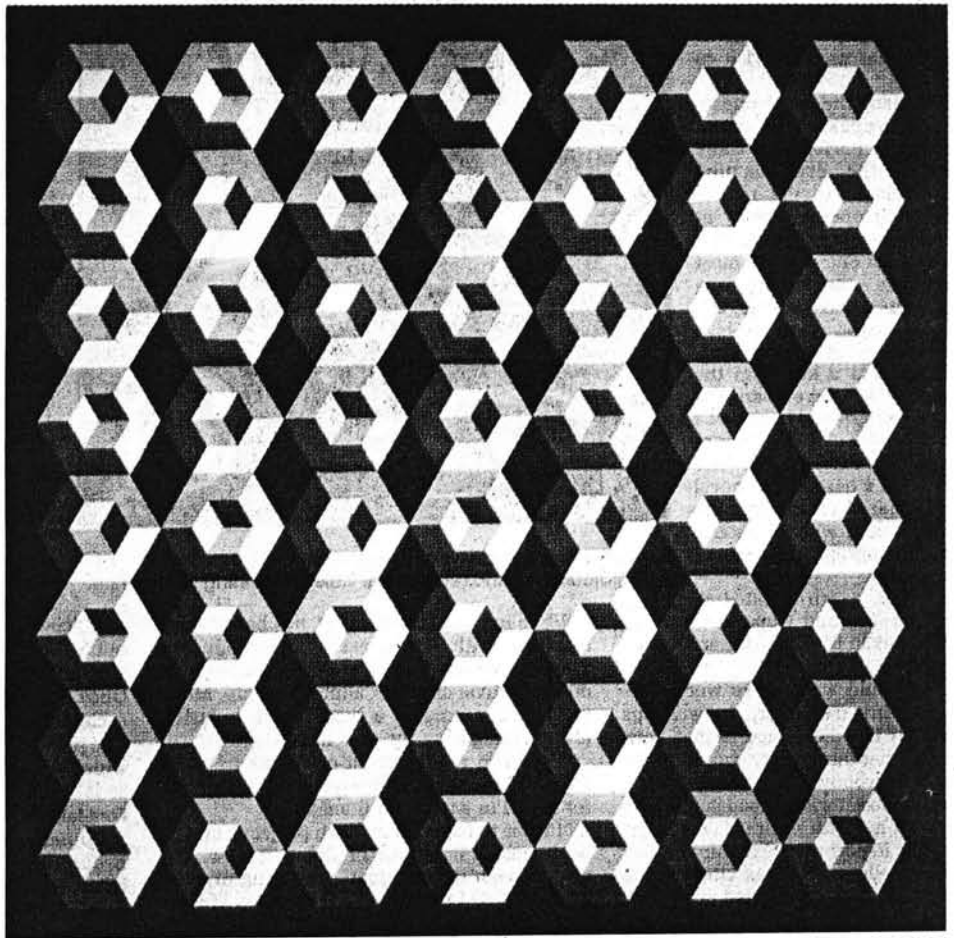
The ICA show of 49 works from 1963 to 1986, paintings and works on paper, documents this shift. While the ICA presents it as a show of Andrade's optical paintings, this description really applies only to the works from the 1960s.

After 1970, the paintings become more concerned with geometric patterns and more dependent on quiet, poetic color. This tendency becomes more pronounced in Andrade's work into the 1980s.

Optical art is so named because it confuses the eye with visual dissonance and ambiguities. The most extreme examples, such as Andrade's 1969 painting *Emergence II*, create illusions of vibration, blurring and shimmering.

The eye can't totally resolve complex patterns caused by shifts in planes, interrupted lines or the inside-outside puzzles made famous by the Dutch graphic artist Maurits Escher.

Andrade's paintings *Falling Cubes* and *Hot Blocks* are prime examples of the Escher tactic, which is to create a geometric form that can be read logically in two ways, each the converse of the other and both equally plausible.



JOHN MCINERNEY

"Hot Blocks" (1966-67) by Edna Andrade creates a geometric form that can be read two ways. She was intensely involved for most of a decade with *op* art, which often plays games with viewers' eyes.

Op art reached maximum exposure in the United States with a 1965 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called "The Responsive Eye." Andrade explained at the time that she wasn't included in the show "because I didn't know that so many people were working on the same visual problems until it was too late."

Her reference to "visual problems" is instructive. Forty

years ago, some critics denounced *op* art as little more than superficial visual trickery that involved physiology and psychology more than aesthetics. And besides, it was decorative, more of a pejorative than now.

The Andrade show revives the issue. Are paintings such as the distorted checkerboards called *Color Motion 4-64*, *Hot Planet* and *Cold Planet* just games, or can they engage viewers on a more intellectual level?

Andrade's *op* schemes represent the latter. Superficially they're ingenious, as *op* paintings must be, but they also demonstrate that *op* can dig into geometry and optics in a way that makes viewers think about pictorial architecture, color relationships, and even the nature of reality.

Andrade didn't often practice *op* art that was so extreme as to induce vertigo. *Tribute to King of 1968*, concentric squares interrupted by a cruciform shape, is one work that does. *Emergence II*, a grid of small circles that sets up an insistent spatial dissonance, is another.

Andrade doesn't seem primarily interested in confounding perception, but in encouraging viewers to accept the ubiquity of visual ambiguity intellectually: to understand how inexact direct observation can be.

Her paintings also extol the sublime allure of repetitive geometric patterning. This became apparent in the late 1960s, when she introduced sinuosity into her work with images such as *Cool Circuit*.

With *Spring Veils* and *Winter Veils* of 1973, undulating vertical bands of soft pastels added an emotional dimension to the geometry.

The paintings that follow through the mid-1970s strike me as a more significant and enduring contribution to geometric abstraction than her *op* paintings. They are actually anti-*op*, soothing rather than disturbing.

Luminous canvases such as *Blue Carpanel*, *Updraught*, *Red Sea* and *Night Sea* generate subtle spiritual overtones. Their resolutely programmatic designs and ethereal light suggest fundamental physical phenomena.

If You Go

"Edna Andrade: Optical Paintings, 1963-1986" continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 36th and Sansom Streets, through April 6. The ICA is open from noon to 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is \$3 general and \$2 for artists, senior citizens and children over 12. Information: 215-898-5911 or www.icaphila.org.

op art and more



LUCY GALLUN

Edna Andrade in front of her 1969 painting "Emergence II." She continues to paint but has long since moved beyond op.

na of the kind produced in particle chambers.

These works, bright lines over dark grounds, depend on exceptionally meticulous and precise technique. Fan-shaped patterns of thin lines appear to have been drawn with a drafting pen.

The convergences of these lines produce concentrated bursts of light that suggest stars or tiny suns. No other painter with whom I'm familiar has coaxed such beauty out of geometric rigor.

The paintings that follow are more concerned with color interactions; they remind me of Josef Albers, an early influence on Andrade's art. The show closes with several abstractions in which geometric form and volume become more insistent without diminishing the impact of vibrant color.

Why guest curator Debra Bricker Balken stopped here is puzzling, given that the show she selected already extends well beyond Andrade's op period.

She might as well have kept going for a few more years and included later abstractions, particularly those from the *Observatory* series, which move beyond flat geometry into schematic landscapes.

A more comprehensive checklist would have made clearer the fact that, while Andrade was intensely involved with op for the best part of a decade, she has been much more than an op painter for a good part of her career.

The ICA, in turn, should have tried harder to give Andrade's paintings a sympathetic setting. The cavernous first-floor gallery looks like a warehouse, with most of the works hung around the perimeter.

Andrade no longer paints geometries, but she continues to work precisely. In the mid-1990s, her art reverted to realism, particularly rocks observed along the Maine coast, which she renders in acrylic pigments and pencil. (Locks Gallery recently mounted a show of these.)

When these are included in her next retrospective (the last one was in 1993-94, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), they will make clearer that her primary concerns throughout her long career have been structure, light and color rather than optical phenomena.

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