

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Thursday, January 11, 2007

## An Op Art original

Over the decades, Edna Andrade created stunning canvases of complex visual images. Now, a new swirl of attention is coming her way.

By Amy S. Rosenberg  
Inquirer Staff Writer

In the '60s, she was making art that was part of the psychedelic fabric of its day, mind-blowing optical trickery, paintings that vibrated and moved, art that anticipated a digital medium few had imagined.

But Edna Andrade was no hippie, no part of the like-wow drug culture that embraced the op art movement of the 1960s.



Edna Andrade sits in her apartment under a collage she painted on Japanese rice paper. The pillows on the couch are copies of two of her op art paintings.

She was middle-aged, living on her own on Carlisle Street in Center City, her architect husband having left her, isolated from the New York or European art scene, no starving waitress thing for her, no East Village bohemia.

"My cleaning lady was the only person allowed to clean in the studio," Andrade says. "When she would come in and say, whooah, I knew it was good."

Now, on the eve of her 90th birthday, it is, frankly, the ladies in the cafeteria of her assisted-living high-rise near 17th and Callowhill that this important but under-recognized artist more often than not eschews, with their join-me-for-dinner dance cards annoyingly booked until eternity.

600 Washington Square South  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
tel 215.629.1000 fax 215.629.3868  
info@locksgallery.com  
www.locksgallery.com

Up in her penthouse apartment, she's still reading her New York Review of Books, still organizing her fruit and vegetables in an amusingly geometric mimicry of her art, still game enough to be offering up a vodka martini, even mid-afternoon, to her guests, and still showing a cheerful edginess as sharp as the oil-painted lines she so painstakingly created with a ruling pen.

She hasn't touched the unfinished painting in her workroom - a return to the landscape painting she did as an art student inspired by the summers she spent in Maine with her great friend George Bunker, dean of fine arts at the University of Houston - for a year.

She says, matter of factly: "Right now, I have not been able to work and I don't have any ideas. I have been busy as a bird dog trying to get rid of my stuff, and trying to get ready to die. I made more money this year than I ever made. I think people are finally catching up with me."

Indeed, Andrade, whose birthday is Jan. 25, is in the midst of a renewed interest in her work, and in the op art movement in general. "I just sold this after 40 years," she says of one painting, *Interchange*, from 1966, a turquoise and red canvas of 3D-like boxes and polka dots that alternately flattens and takes on dimension as you stare at it. "I didn't sell a lot of this stuff when I did it. Now people are collecting it."

The Locks Gallery on Washington Square, which has represented Andrade for more than three decades, is planning a party for her on Jan. 20. The University of the Arts, where she taught for 30 years, is unveiling a scholarship fund in her name on March 1. And the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill will exhibit her works in a special retrospective, opening March 28.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art, which owns a dozen of her works, is now exhibiting a major painting of hers, *Color Motion 4-64*, as part of its Pop Art and Its Affinities exhibition in the American Art gallery, room 119 on the first floor. And she is a central figure in a major exhibition, *Optic Nerve*, planned for next month at the Columbus Museum of Art, in Ohio.

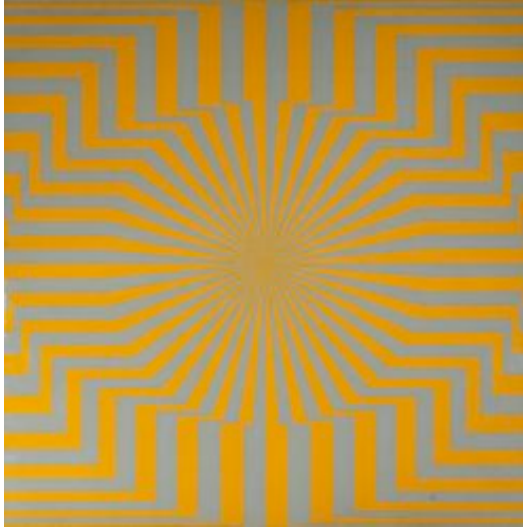
Columbus curator Joe Houston says Andrade represents "the pinnacle of what artists were doing" in the op art era, during which the viewing experience was primary, and the science of perception and visual immersion anticipated this era's light shows, film installations and other digital media. He includes



Some of Edna Andrade's sable brushes that she uses in her small studio in her apartment in Center City.



Edna Andrade's "Turbo 1" from 1965, at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.



Edna Andrade's "Radiant Ellipse 2-65," from 1965, at the Locks Gallery in Center City.

Andrade's name with internationally known op art figures such as Brigit Riley and Victor Vasarely.

Andrade's mind - which for four decades has produced canvases of intricate and complex visual and geometric imagery (you want to see something deeper, symbolically or whatever else, that's your issue, Andrade says) - that mind, man, it still hums like one of her paintings.

"It's not like showing your emotion," she says of her art. "It was very cool art. It's a decision to be totally visual. A story doesn't go with it."

As to the whole trippy quality of the movement, she quips: "I was so sorry it was connected to that because I did it cold sober." (Though she did try a joint once at a party of University of the Arts students. "I took a drag and it did nothing for me," she said. "The liquor was enough.")



Kirk Schoenherr, an NYU student visiting the city, strolls by Edna Andrade's "Color Motion 4-64" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is in the "Pop Art and Its Affinities" show in the American Art wing.

Born near Norfolk, Va., Andrade came to Philadelphia to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts at the age of 16. During World War II, she worked on propaganda materials for what is now the CIA. After a brief stay in Bucks County, which her husband loved and she hated, they returned to Center City, but her marriage was soon over, she says.

artistic life to flourish, though her art was greatly influenced by the time at her husband's architectural drafting table.

In retrospect, she says, the end of her marriage allowed her

"I think I would not have accomplished as much if I'd stayed married," she says. "I was playing second fiddle, doing drafting work. I didn't really take charge of my career until middle age."

These days, there's a lot of Andrade-induced "whoa" going on over at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Color Motion 4-64 hangs.

The painting, four checkerboards of differently sized squares, never stops humming. Walk around the room and look at it from different angles, it starts morphing into an hourglass sort of thing. Look for too long, you'll get dizzy, or feel as if your eyes are playing tricks on you. How can paint on canvas be constantly in motion?

"It messes with your eyes," says Ramona Mabin, the security guard in the room, who is on guard more for finding herself staring too long at the work, with its hypnotic qualities, and its op art companion next to it, a tunnel-into-infinity kind of work of orange concentric target-like squares by Richard Anuszkiewicz, titled Knowledge and Disappearance.

Back in the 1960s, Sears took the image for wallpaper, which was what happened to a lot of the op art images; they became fabric and posters and album covers. The original artistic creations got a bit co-opted by the design culture it spawned (Andrade herself has several pillows in her living room that feature her colorful and pulsating images).

Ask Andrade to explain how she composed a work like Color Motion, and you see how this perceptually intricate work is, at its heart, a function of lines and shapes and a connect-the-dots kind of geometrical precision. "Square by square, just like life," she says, drawing a bit of deeper meaning herself. "Nice stable brushes."



Edna Andrade's "Deserted Place," 1988.

Or, more precisely: "I had already done a drawing, dividing up the canvas into four sections. I have then drawn a circle. I've mapped out the increments, drawn lines through those points, and that generated those squares. Your eye tries to appreciate this gradation. The scientists, they loved it. They understood some of the geometry of it."

While living in Philadelphia may have resulted in less recognition nationally and internationally, she says the city has been very good to her, though many times, especially during the op art decades, she felt like a community of one.

"I was about the only one doing that in Philadelphia," she says. "But I was not ready to move to New York and wait on tables. I would have wound up an old waitress - not an old artist."

#### **Edna Andrade's Artwork**

Her work can be seen at the Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art, which owns a dozen of her works, is exhibiting one of her major paintings, "Color Motion 4-64," as part of its Pop Art and Its Affinities exhibition in room 119 of the American Art wing.

She will be part of a major pop-art exhibition next month at the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio.

And the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill will exhibit her works in a special retrospective, opening March 28.