Cool Waves and Hot Blocks: The Art of Edna Andrade

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What do the following objects have in common: small white models of geometric solids; postcards, some faded, of Paul Klee's *Fire at Evening*, Piet Mondrian's *Boogie Woogie*, a Henri Matisse cut-out, a Charles Demuth watercolor of eggplants, a palace in Jaipur, and a woodcut of an actor by Kitagawa Utamaro; protractors and T squares; the breast bone of a small bird; and Benoit Mandelbrot's book, *Fractals, Form, Chance and Dimension*? The answer may be obvious to those who know the artist Edna Andrade: all can be found in her studio within easy reach of her desk. There is also one motto: "Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better," Samuel Beckett. These icons suggest both the range of Andrade's interests and inspirations, and the discipline required to produce her subtle geometric abstractions. The writings of Paul Klee and Josef Albers, mathematical theory, her travels to countries whose art esteems pure pattern and abstract design, her awareness of both European and American masters of abstracted imagery, and of the elements of pure geometric form and structure — all have been distilled in her finest work.

Wanderer, 1953
Oil on canvas
Unlocated

Edna Davis Wright was born in Portsmouth, Virginia in 1917, the daughter of a school teacher and an engineer, and she was to marry an architect, Preston Andrade. The connections between an artist's biography and visual language are always significant, but these few facts seem to explain Edna Andrade's art almost too easily. She did not create these images, however, until almost twenty-five years after graduating in 1937 with a B.F.A. from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania. She then taught art briefly to elementary school children in Norfolk, Virginia, and to college students at Tulane University in New Orleans before marriage and the war interrupted her teaching. After settling in Philadelphia in 1946 and joining the faculty of the Philadelphia Museum School of Art (now the University of the Arts) in 1958, she taught art to several generations of art students.

During World War II, she contributed to the war effort by designing everything from training manuals to exhibits for the Office of Strategic Services, and posters to sell war bonds for the Treasury Department. Her marriage in 1941 to Preston Andrade introduced her to the architectural profession. She mastered drafting, which she did on a freelance basis after the war. Her career as an artist, however, was on hold until the 1950s. Andrade did not show her work until 1954, when she had her first exhibition at the Philadelphia Art Alliance. She produced mainly landscape imagery in a realist idiom with surrealist overtones. One oil painting from this period, *Wanderer*, shows a beach with the sea beyond and a huge mollusk floating in the sky like a spaceship. Her meticulous rendering of the symmetrical structure of this com-

Garden, 1959
Cat. no. 1

plex, natural form against the blue ground of a cloudless sky seems prophetic of her later paintings with their radiating grids of pale lines against a darker ground.

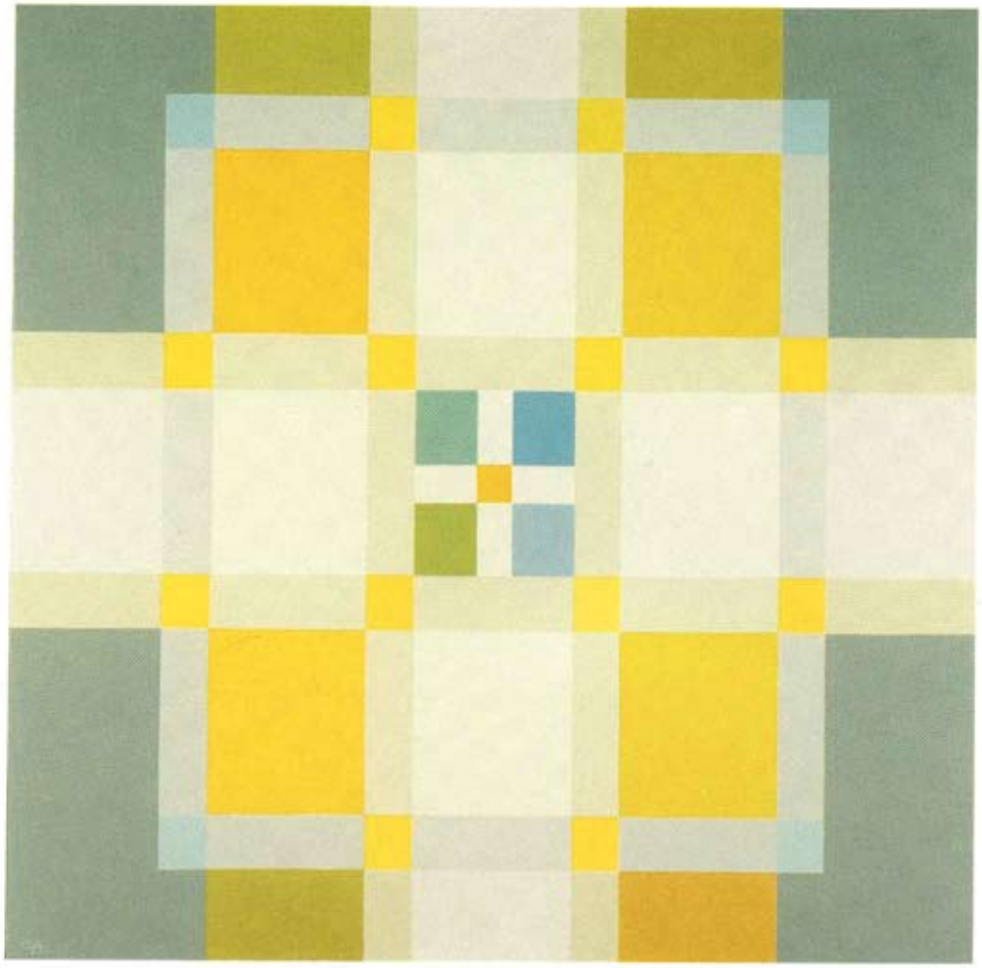
Andrade's watercolors made in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1958 show her experimenting with abstraction while still using recognizable landscape imagery. The results look like a blend of the watercolors of Paul Cézanne and Maurice Prendergast. The foliage begins to take on grid-like patterns and the rocks dissolve into textured surfaces. The oil painting *Garden*, 1959 takes the move to abstraction a step further. White shapes reminiscent of the work of Jean Arp are painted over similar forms in the colors of pansies: violets, purples, turquoise and rusty red. Without the title, the viewer would see only colors and forms; once named, the painting's roots in a summer flower bed can be sensed, but the distance between art and life has grown. Andrade has always maintained that she is a landscape painter, however abstract her imagery may be.

In 1962, Andrade began to eliminate from her paintings all obvious references to the natural world and to play with optical effects. *Cross* of 1962 (p. 10) and *Cross* of 1963 (p. 12) are key works in this shift, and use a motif developed further in

Cross, 1962
Oil on canvas
40 x 36"
Private collection

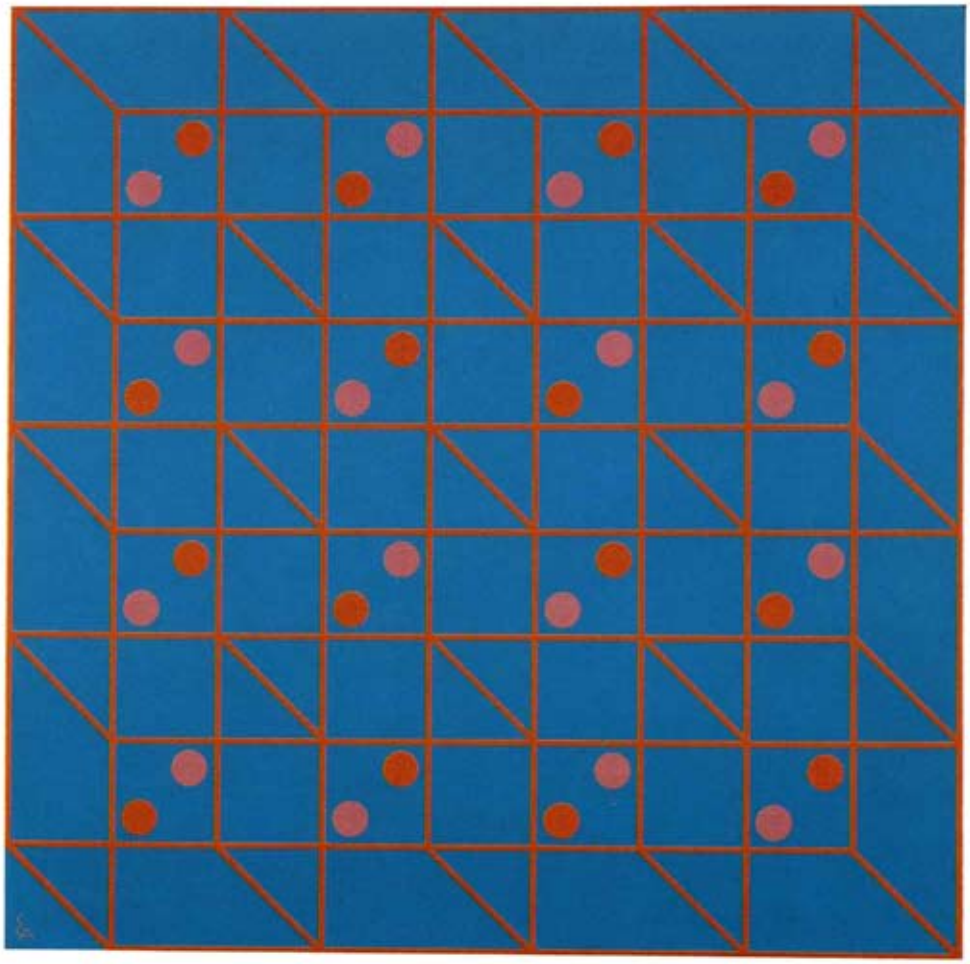
Color Motion 4-64 of 1964 (p. 11). The *Cross* paintings play with cool / warm and light / dark values within a limited range of colors, mainly neutral hues set against a few patches of brighter ochre or green. Already Andrade's exceptional sense of color harmony is apparent, especially when working with a cluster of muted tones. In *Color Motion 4-64*, a warm white ground is overlaid by a grid of black squares that shrink and expand to create the optical effect of a cross dividing the painting into four quadrants. Such elastic distortions of straight-edged forms were used extensively by Victor Vasarely, but his forms are always larger in relation to the overall format. In Andrade's painting, the squares read as pattern rather than shape, and the cross form hovers as if drawing its energy from the rest of the canvas.

Edna Andrade's abstractions continued to provoke associations beyond that of pure optical effect, and while she was included in several exhibitions that explored Op Art in the mid 1960s, she has always maintained a certain distance from that



Cross, 1963
Cat. no. 2

label. The dazzle and shimmer of an early painting by Bridget Riley or Victor Vasarely can be hard to look at for any extended time, but this is never the case with Andrade's work, which requires extended meditation for it to reveal all its perceptual effects. While she knows how to use the pure elements of line and color to make shapes vanish and reappear, vibrate and even glow, she uses such effects with discretion, more like the color shifts of Josef Albers than the bolder visual games of pure Op Art. In Andrade's paintings, the restricted range of colors and tones and the repeated lines that create patterns become metaphors for the laws of nature that the mathematician, engineer and physicist can express through geometry. Such allusions were not intended by pure Op artists, for whom the dazzling visual effects were considered sufficient. Andrade's titles quietly hint at the natural phenomena encapsulated in these disciplined patterns: *Cool Wave, Convergence*, and *Crosscurrent* (p. 13).



Interchange, 1966
Cat. no. 10

Examined in chronological order, Andrade's paintings reveal a sequence of variations on contrasting themes: curved forms after doing straight ones, bold tonal contrasts after a phase of muted colors, neutrals after bright colors, big patterns after small ones. *Turbo 2*, 1965 has two large ellipses side by side defined by zigzag green and turquoise lines on an orange ground. The cool / hot colors seem to shift the ovals like turning gears, a bold, quintessential op-art image. Its curves and bright colors contrast with the black, gray and white geometry of *Space Cage* which preceded it, and *Space Frame D* (p. 29) which followed. *Convergence* returns to hot colors — turquoise and orange — packed into nested rectangles of varying sizes. *Hot Blocks* (p. 3) then uses big, bold, three-dimensional hexagons of black, white and gray to create the illusion, and *Falling Cubes* (back cover detail), a quilt-like baby-block grid peppered with red and white dots on the neutral tones. Finally *Interchange* has a more linear design mixing red lines and dots on a turquoise ground. They make

Moon Rise, 1983
Cat. no. 25

a stunning sequence of images, like the best musical compositions based on variations on a theme, and reveal Andrade's infinitely inventive play with the pure elements of art — line, form, color.

If Edna Andrade's work in the 1960s can be seen as a part of the Optical Art phenomenon celebrated in several exhibitions and since then regularly slotted into art history survey texts, her work since the early 1970s has abandoned these visual games for a more complex play with geometry. The first works by Andrade that I saw were exhibited in 1974 at Marian Locks Gallery and in the first major survey of work by contemporary women artists organized in this country, *Woman's Work, American Art 1974* at the Philadelphia Civic Center. She was exploring the effects of pale lines on a dark ground but not white on black. The grounds are midnight blue or charcoal gray and the lines have a hint of color too — cream, pink and aqua. The effects of

dim light shimmering at the convergence points of radiating sequences of lines that flip and roll like turbulence or waves, or soar across the night sky grounds, are seductively beautiful. The connections with natural phenomena are noted in the titles *Night Sea, Cloud Plan I,* and *Ebbtide* (p. 7). These works still use optical effects to enhance their message, but the difference between these op-art images and the most characteristic products of the movement are like those between classical chamber music and Heavy Metal Rock.

A trip to Arizona in 1981 and to India in 1984 gave the artist a new set of color and environmental experiences to translate into painting. In *Arizona Celebration I,* 1981 (p. 15) bright colors and flat shapes — many of them circles — celebrate the sunshine, flowers, and even the saguaro cactus of the Arizona desert climate. The Stuart Davis and Henri Matisse cut-out images on her studio wall and Paul Klee's Moroccan gardens are the ancestors of this painting, which contains an intricate harmony of color, shape and line. *Moon Game* and *Moon Rise* (p. 16), both of 1983, tone down the bright colors and bring back black for night and dusk effects that remind us once more of the artist's claim to be at heart a landscape painter who is above all fascinated by light.

Of all the visual experiences that she had in India, none left a more powerful impression than the eighteenth-century observatory of Jai Singh in Jaipur. A structure beside his palace like the ladder of a child's slide allowed the Maharajah to climb up to a viewing pavilion from which he observed the stars. Tourists cannot climb it today. They can only look up the treads to the summit and imagine the owner, brass telescope in hand, ascending to watch the stars on a clear night. The Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia now owns the largest, most spectacular work inspired by this structure (*Observatory I and II,* 1985, p. 17). The rosy sandstone of the original building is translated by Andrade into a pale pink. The observatory becomes a fantastic structure of curves and steps that span the lower part of this pair of exceptionally large canvases. Beyond on a purple-blue ground are forms that look like a splendid mutation of fireworks and snowflakes. The colors become a tribute to the extraordinary palette of India — the rainbow silks, the tropical fruits and flowers — but also can represent the spectra of the elements that astronomers can detect from the light waves of stars. The painting also seems to be a metaphor for aspiration, a call to dream and look beyond our familiar horizons, as Andrade did when she traveled to a country where conditions are often difficult and identified with the creations of an architect who fulfilled the dreams of his star-gazing patron.

Indian architecture, colors and patterns kept Andrade occupied for several years. *Indian Sea,* 1987 (front cover) divides a square using a horizontal band, bisects it with an eccentrically placed right-angled strip, and then fills each field with a different color harmony of intricate rhomboids and zigzag lines. What shall we imag-

ine with these forms and this title — a poetic sea of Indian patterns and colors, maybe, that in this case recalls the exquisite technique of Mughal miniature painting? *Philosopher's Garden*, 1987 and *Observatory*, 1988 (p. 21) combine buildings made from geometric solids, while the former also includes a patterned ground like stars, carpets and tiles paying tribute to the palace of Jai Singh at Jaipur. Even *Fortress* of 1992 (p. 27) extends this meditation with a fairy-tale palace against a black sky where the still air is host to tiny floating cubes and roundels. It is so unfashionable today to make art to which the spectator wants to react by exclaiming, "How beautiful!" that to do so flagrantly and continuously, as Andrade has, is almost enough to qualify her as avant-garde. These Indian-inspired paintings are gorgeously beautiful, among the finest of her career, and will give anyone pleasure who will admit that as a legitimate aim of art.

Andrade's collaboration with her husband, for whom she made architectural scale drawings for many years, gave her a way of preparing her paintings that might seem to deny any element of spontaneous creativity. Her first idea sketches (rarely kept) were transformed into a careful scale drawing in pencil or ink that laid out the geometric schema. Experiments on graph paper with small sections allowed her to test various tonal and color combinations before painting a miniature version of the final design. These impeccably rendered paintings resemble an architect's model, but instead of allowing a client to see a reduced image of the final design, they allowed the artist one last chance to test out her plans for a canvas or mural on a much vaster scale and make sure that her concept would work. The design was then transferred to the canvas, and meticulously rendered by Andrade herself; she never uses assistants to paint her designs. In characteristically self-deprecating style, Andrade has said that she devised this working method because it cut down on the creative anxiety. Since all the key decisions were made long before she started to paint, her painting could be stopped and, despite interruptions, started again, like knitting. It would be a mistake to underrate either the creative impulse or the extraordinary self-discipline required to plan and bring to final resolution one of Andrade's complex geometrical designs, or to imagine that the process denies "creativity" of the kind that is supposed to flow down the arm of Jackson Pollock and into the stream of paint he spun from a pierced can onto his canvases. If the process allows architects to transform their first vague imaginings of form into a functioning building without robbing them of creativity or originality, then it can do so for a painter as well.

Her small model paintings and slightly larger independent paintings on paper are among Andrade's most satisfying works. Her most intricate color harmonies are explored in these works, which richly reward extended meditation. Some recent works inspired by Islamic tile patterns, which mix metallic and plain acrylic paints, are as intricate and beautiful as a full-page illumination in a medieval manuscript. The

viewer is drawn into the precious surface and begins to explore the design, analyzing the elements, trying to understand the secrets of its effects, and imagining the patient process required to create it. The models for recent paintings such as *Akbar*, 1985 (p. 19) and *Pavilions*, 1987, are especially fine, tributes from Andrade to the ingenious designers of Islamic architecture with its ornaments of interlaced patterns.

Andrade has never flooded the market with a trademark image and is not comfortable promoting herself. She has attracted support mainly from an appreciative audience of connoisseur collectors in Philadelphia. Her situation could be compared with that of other artists working away from the major art capitals whose work is not flashy or fashionable, but which has firm support with a small but knowledgeable group of patrons. Some of these artists only find their public centuries later. Johannes Vermeer of Delft is the most famous example of this kind of artistic reputation, but other artists such as Georges de la Tour of Lorraine and Caspar David Friedrich of Dresden have only recently received extensive attention from scholars and collectors. Thirty years ago, their names were known only to specialists, who would never have predicted that their introspective art would ever attract international admiration. I like to imagine that the quiet perfection of Edna Andrade's art will, tortoise-like, also succeed in overtaking the reputations of the fast hares of the overheated art world, and that its serene magic will eventually receive the much broader admiration that it deserves. The final word should come from the artist herself:

> I find myself in the ancient tradition of all those anonymous artisans who have painted pottery and tiles, laid mosaic pavings, woven baskets and carpets, embroidered vestments and sewn quilts. Our tradition reaches back through eons of time to that genius who first drew a circle and used its magic.[1]

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1. Quoted from catalogue entry by Anne d'Harnoncourt in *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976, p. 637.