

Reginato's Improvisations

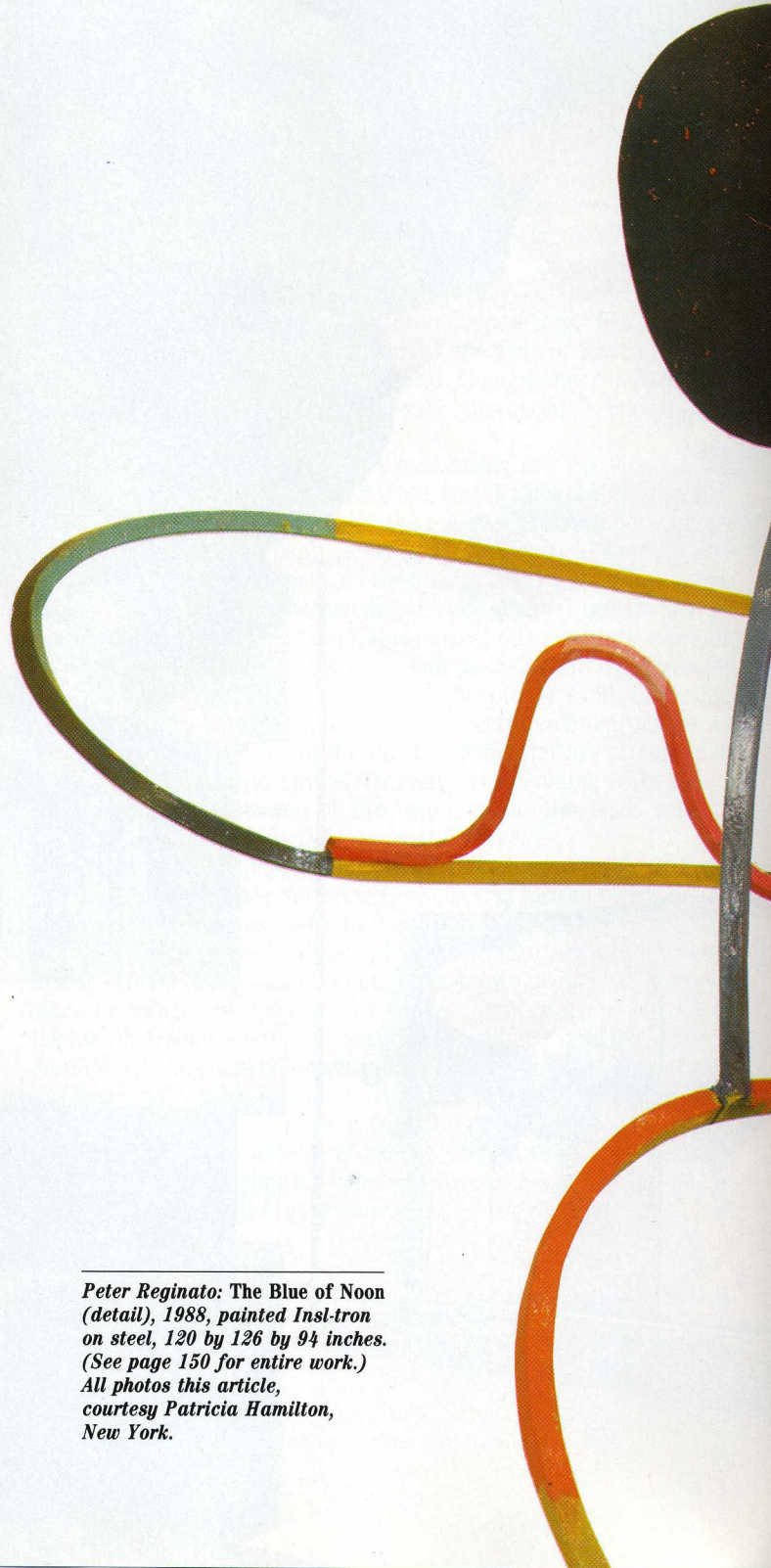
A late-'60s alumnus of the Park Place Gallery, Peter Reginato in recent years has produced a proliferating breed of biomorphic, painted steel sculptures. Below, some comments on the generative role of color in his work.

BY CARTER RATCLIFF

Many art-world eons have passed since Jean Arp and a few others persuaded an unrealistic yet undeniably organic kind of form to crawl onto the avant-garde beach. Biomorphism was born. Each variant of the style took its own direction, so great distances came to separate Arp's undulant marble statues from, say, Alberto Giacometti's early, entomological bronzes or Max Ernst's hybrids of bird and broad-leaved plant. Between the oeuvres of these artists the evolutionary niches are myriad, yet each seems to be filled. Perennially explosive, the population of biomorphs crossbreeds with abandon, obscuring early origins, generating the plenitude that Peter Reginato has harvested since 1985. His sculptures swarm into view, crowding the field of vision, threatening in a good-natured way to remain ungraspable. Resigning itself to the pleasures of an unguided stroll through a jungle of biomorphic options, the eye begins to notice signs of sculptural logic, though Reginato promulgates no all-encompassing system. He prefers local clarities—correspondences of form, echoes of color, sympathies of allusion.

With a cutting torch, he gives flat chunks of steel acutely angular outlines. Others he makes palmate and Matissean or voluptuously Arpish, with a resemblance, also, to the silhouette of Casper the Ghost. Still others are bounded by leisurely arcs and braced like the wing-parts of an aircraft. Crossing organic with industrial form, Reginato's art flourishes at the border where images of nature meet ordinary facts. Boiler tanks supply him with disks, large and sensuously concave. Internal recycling encourages each shape to assert its own point, then migrate to another work and assert a new one. Four-sided rods loop through the lower reaches of *Yo* like currents of an updraft. Sweeping the sculpture's crowd of gregarious, warm-hued shapes off the floor and into the air, this suggestion of weather provides a pedestal of sorts. In *Swing Big*, rods curve and careen in much the same way but to a different end. Making their moves near the ceiling, not the floor, they trace the path of a swirling gesture.

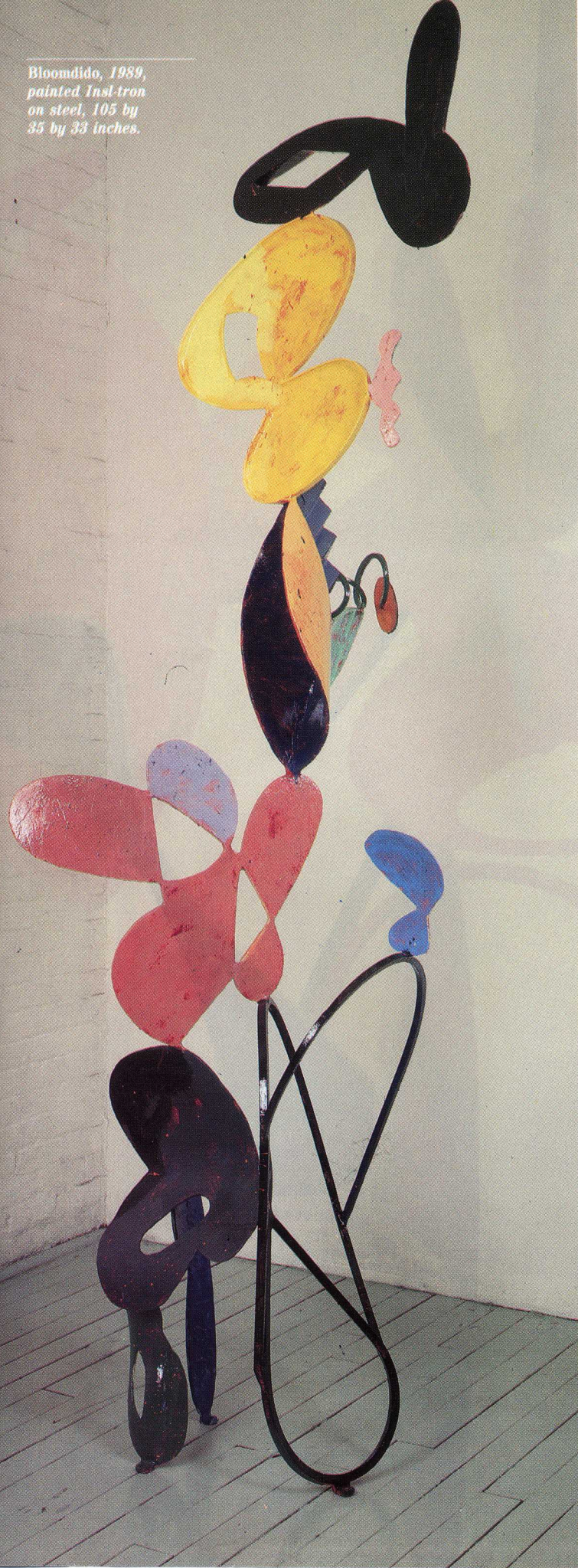
Reginato's repertory includes a form pierced by a triangular gap and sporting a zigzag edge. Though it usually plays the part of an unshod foot, it also appears as a super-watchful face in profile. Rounded and bluish-black, a biomorph in the middle regions of *Yo* suggests a lurking shadow. In *The Blue of Noon*, a similar shape painted yellow looks like a far-off source of light or maybe a sun-filled cloud. Shapes that read as body parts in dense, weblike works count as entire bodies in sculptures that sprawl, and they don't have to get any bigger to do it. The skittish vivacity of Reginato's allusions makes scale elastic. Ascending to monumental stature through the buzz of their meanings, his sculptures can suddenly look life-size and immediate. *Tarnished Angel's* title recommends that we read into this tall and alluringly gawky object an idea about the figure—Luciferian but still a rendition of the human



Peter Reginato: The Blue of Noon (detail), 1988, painted Insl-tron on steel, 120 by 126 by 94 inches. (See page 150 for entire work.) All photos this article, courtesy Patricia Hamilton, New York.



Bloomdido, 1989,
painted Insl-tron
on steel, 105 by
35 by 33 inches.



presence. Yet we can take this piece as a landscape or, rather, as a distant, vertical region of space where form is the trace of an angelic fall. By contrast, *Yo* is horizontal—rather, explosive—expanding upward and outward to provide an airy habitat with room for nearly all Reginato's biomorphs.

Disinclined to narrow his definition of organic abstraction, he lets some clusters of form evolve toward abstraction of the geometric kind. Reaching in the other direction, a shape might become almost representational—see the dark bluish form that perches on one of *Swing Big's* limbs. Looking bulbously alive, it takes from its bristling complement of thin, spiny pipe-lengths a close resemblance to a cactus plant. This cartoony realism appears also in the striped shape peeking like a skull around what might be considered the trunk of the treelike *Free Hand*. The forms at the top of this tree writhe with élan but don't put much of their energy into the task of evoking branches. They might better be understood as the stems of red oval "flowers," a reading that's plausible enough but easily set aside the moment one sees *Free Hand's* curving metal bars as Mondrian's line under a spell of limberness. Here, Reginato grants the geometries of Neoplasticism an eel-like freedom of movement.

From 1963 to 1966 Reginato was schooled in playfulness at the San Francisco Art Institute, where his teachers included the antic Robert Hudson. His earliest mature work gathers circles, rings, slabs and bars in restless, cantilevered configurations. Made of fiberglass and wood, each form flaunts its own color. A quick and not entirely incorrect assessment would conclude that in the late 1960s this SFAI alumnus in his mid-20s was reacting with determined high spirits against the Minimalist insistence on sober clarity: Bay Area zest meets Manhattan rigidity. But not every New York sculptor of the '60s was grimly Euclidean. In 1967 Reginato showed his work at the Park Place Gallery, an anti-Minimalist redoubt filled with gesticulating forms by Forrest Myers, Mark di Suvero, Tom Doyle and Charles Ginnever. These sculptors sustained in three dimensions the vectors of Abstract Expressionist painting. So did Reginato, who was never simply a Bay Area artist. After a few seasons in New York, he had expunged from his work all signs of his West Coast past.

Dispensing with fiberglass, Reginato applied the welder's torch to thick slabs of steel. His bright colors disappeared, as sharp angles and cantilevered weights gave way to solidly braced right angles. Then curves made clear and deliberate variations on straight edges and flat surfaces. Only slowly did geometric simplicity retreat, and only with a prideful sort of tact did Reginato's complications make reference to recent work by Anthony Caro. In the mid-1970s thin metal rods appeared in places where a figurative sculptor would put arms, legs and necks. Letting allusions to Caro fade, Reginato took note of David Smith's play with the heroic figure: Some of Reginato's metal rods suggested human limbs and others mimicked in outline the silhouettes of his solid metal slabs. With this drawing in space, he recalled Smith's Cubist predecessors—Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzalez. For Reginato, to be a New York sculptor was to authorize one's art with precedents. To advance was to recapitulate.

Early in this decade he arranged metal planes with a finesse reminiscent of the Analytic Cubism that Braque and Picasso brought to fulfillment in 1911–12. Reginato's homage to this complex and slightly dour style became unmistakable in 1983, when he painted his angular forms with grays as diffident as any in the Analytic palette. Color had returned to his sculpture but was reluctant to declare its chromatic nature. His Cubist hues look like attempts to camouflage not a form but themselves. Even at their most coloristic, so to speak, they try to pass themselves off as aspects of welded steel—colors, yes, but only incidentally. Intrinsically, they are attributes of sculptural matter, or so they would like viewers to feel.

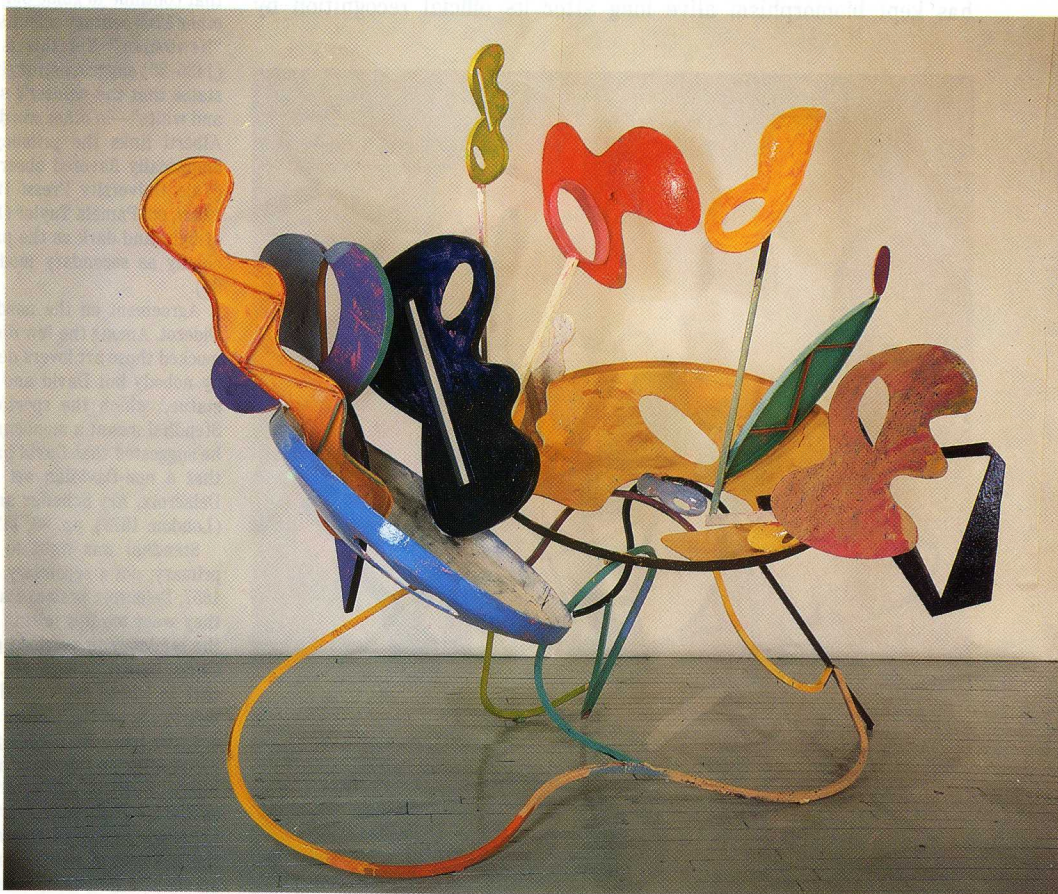
After all, we don't trust color. It's slippery. It works on our emotions. Changing as the light changes, color endlessly renews the suspicion that it doesn't really belong to objects. It is a quality of perceptions, not of things. Or is it? Where and precisely what is color?

Though they registered in pre-Socratic philosophy, these uncertainties didn't find modern form until 17th-century writers formulated a distinction between primary and secondary qualities of matter. Size and shape are primary. Perceive these, said John Locke, and you gain reliable knowledge about an object. Color and scent are secondary, extrinsic, negligible—not attributes of matter but sensations generated in us by matter's primary qualities. The ancients Leucippus and Democritus had their own, unfathomable reasons for arguing that the form of an object is somehow more real than its color. The motives of early moderns like Robert Boyle, René Descartes and Locke are less mysterious. They clung to the seeming certainties of form and resisted the undeniable allure of color for reasons of taste.¹ So do we. It's an esthetic preference for a universe solidly built from the features of objects that Isaac Newton found amenable to mathematical analysis—shape, size, weight, rate of motion, number. We obscure our Newtonian predilections by appreciating (even if we do not understand) the post-Newtonian uncertainty principle. Speculating on the flow of electronic imagery and the changes it appears to have wrought in the nature of palpable things, we glamorize ambiguities of form. We see freedom in Impressionist efflorescences of color, yet our taste for a colorless stability persists, and we feel a covert relief when historians argue that Cézanne was wrong: Monet wasn't only an eye; he was also a mind capable of regulating his palette with a rational method.²

Minimalist sculpture wins approval by regimenting color with starkly simple, eminently measurable form. To some contemporary eyes, the polychromed intricacy of medieval statues looks charming. To nearly all, this use of paint looks odd.³ We're more at ease with antique figures that surfaced at the dawn of modernity with their coloring rubbed off. Scrubbed naked, these objects look new or at least at home in a modern world suspicious of color and dominated by a rhetoric of stable form—architectural, sartorial, sculptural and pictorial. On a gallery wall or in the street, strong color often has the look of a labored accent, a too-deliberate exception to the prevailing neutrality.⁴ So Reginato's colors had a powerful inducement to disappear in the early 1970s, and to disguise themselves as attributes of form when they reappeared a decade later.

In 1984 Reginato made Rococo Cubism the target of his references, and his somber, Analytical palette turned bright. Having legitimized a return of polychromy, this allusion disappeared from Reginato's art. None has taken its place. During his monochrome years, he constrained himself with an esthetic of precise geometry and direct appeal to precedent. Unconstrained for five seasons, his art has become an improvisation on the genetic script that supplies every biomorphic artist with forms.

At the Indo-European root of the word "color" is the idea of concealment—a sign, possibly, of a wariness even more ancient than Leucippus's. However that may be, Reginato is happy to let a hue do its obscurantist worst, as when a large, dark blue shape engulfs and hides a small black one. The camouflaged patch of course reappears with a slight shift of viewpoint. Reginato's colors dissemble with irony and mimic with flair. For every color that looks like a shadow, another suggests a reflection. Only after obligatory analysis does one take paint dripped or streaked as proof of process. These effects make more sense—that is, they're more pleasurable—as suggestions of shifting light. Sometimes a flurry of color generates an air of anecdote. The yellow and black stripes marking the skull-face in

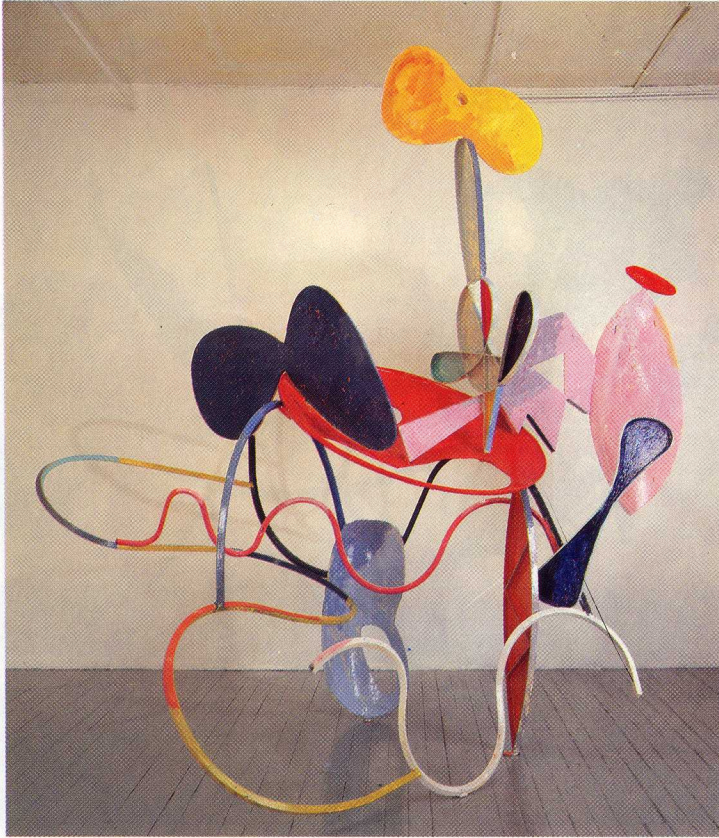


Yo, 1988, painted Insl-tron on steel, 9½ by 126 by 102 inches.

Free Hand, for instance, hint at shadows cast by a set of bars. At their brightest, Reginato's colors masquerade as light sources. Dimmed a degree, they suggest translucent matter. However they address us, they transmit their energies to form, keeping it supple. In Reginato's sculpture, colors are primary qualities, and his most recent works are his most gracefully energetic because their colors are the most confident of their primacy.

Reginato makes no mention of Locke's philosophical (and our intuitive) distinction between primary and secondary qualities. I raised the subject only to get at deep attitudes. Aside from the untaught, all modern artists must accept or reject, consciously or not, the Newtonian policy of privileging form over color. Fresh from the San Francisco Institute of Art, Reginato wanted no part of that policy. Then, working in New York, he reversed himself, dispensing with color the better to grapple with the historical lineage he deemed pertinent. Now, he is again a non-Newtonian, at ease with

color. Reginato's return from mono- to polychromatic sculpture was not programmatic. He makes no objection to the prestige enjoyed by form in 17th-century theory or in the 20th-century world as we habitually perceive and adorn it. Nor does he mix his colors with contentions, like the German Expressionists of the Brücke group who admitted a debt to Germany's Middle Ages but not their obvious dependence on the Parisian Fauves.⁵ The Expressionist habit of dismissing Fauvist color as too coolly cerebral recalls 18th-century arguments by German Pietists and proponents of *Sturm und Drang*, who insisted that their irrationality was superior to the reason cultivated by the French Enlightenment.⁶ Reginato doesn't primitivize with color, nor does he intellectualize about it. Instead, he deploys his reds, yellows and oranges with the impromptu wit that has kept biomorphism alive long after its official recognition by



The Blue of Noon, 1988.

curators and historians. In his art, colors play the role of generative forces. He must, of course, build his sculptures before he can paint them. Nevertheless, none of his sculptural shapes looks as if it has been assigned a color. Instead, each of his colors seems to have felt the need for a shape, and then elicited it from the drabness of raw steel. □

1. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities is defenseless against skepticism and useless to physics. Consult its strongest formulation, in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), I, book 2, ch. 8, esp. sections 8–10, and one finds that Locke doesn't argue for the greater reliability of form. He merely asserts it, signaling that it is a preference, not the conclusion of a train of thought.

2. See, for example, Robert Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," *Art in America*, Sept. 1979, pp. 90–108.

3. This judgment is long established. Etienne-Marie Falconet, who worked on the equestrian figure of Peter the Great, in St. Petersburg, from 1766 to 1779, wrote that, though polychromy is possible in sculpture, it can be "disagreeable, even shocking.

The sheen of gilt, the sudden clash of the discordant colors of different marbles might dazzle a populace attracted to tawdry glitter. The man of taste will be disgusted." Falconet, "Sculpture," in Denis Diderot, Jean de Rond d'Alembert, et al., *Encyclopédie [1751–76]: Selections*, trans. and eds. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer (The Liberal Arts Press: 1965), p. 315.

4. In his notes on the Salon of 1781, Denis Diderot wrote of Jacques-Louis David's *Belisarius* (1781) that the painter's images of faces are "expressive without affectation, poses are natural and noble, the artist knows how to draw, how to arrange drapery in attractive folds, and his colors are beautiful without being too vivid." Quoted in *Diderot & l'Art de Boucher à David. Les Salons: 1759–1781* (Paris: 1984), p. 161. Diderot praises David for a thoroughgoing order that, in the realm of the pictorial, regulates and integrates emotion, gesture, clothing and physicality itself. The last of these is governed by the collaborative efforts of proper drawing and of color sober enough to remain subordinate to draftsmanly line and tonal modulation.

Diderot's comment presents, in a summary manner, the judgments and attitudes that continue to guide our habitual responses to color and form. Because Newton and other 17th-century scientists gave them their present definitions, I call those attitudes "Newtonian." Yet this is anachronistic, for Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* (1435–36) suggests strongly that form is more basic to an object than color, hence he states that the painter's success with colors depends on "knowing how to use black and white"—in other words, in knowing how to regulate color with line and tone. Thus Alberti links the primacy of tone over color, in painting, to the primacy that empirically flavored observation gives to form over color. See Alberti, *On Painting* (Yale University Press: 1966), pp. 81–82. See also *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Pamela Taylor (New American Library: 1960), p. 33–41. Leonardo sees tones of light and dark as the primary means of defining objects, and acknowledges colors chiefly as secondary modifications, as tintings, of these tonal definitions (pp. 34, 36).

Agreement on the need to restrain color with form joins Alberti, Leonardo and Diderot. Among the few dissenters from this still-powerful consensus is Stendhal, who mocked those art lovers determined, in 1824, "to stand for classicism, that is, to swear by nobody but David and to proclaim: 'Every painted figure must be the copy of a statue,' which the spectator must admire even if it bores him stiff." Of course, Stendhal meant a monochrome statue. Later in the same article, "The Salon of 1824," he suggested that David had influenced sculpture more powerfully than painting, and that a non-Davidian art was appearing in the work of such painters as Eugène Delacroix, Ary Scheffer and others. See *Stendhal and the Arts*, ed. David Wakefield (London: 1973), pp. 90, 117.

Stendhal was right to claim importance for Delacroix, who treated color as a primary, not a secondary, quality of the things he pictured. In a journal entry from 1857, Delacroix praises David and his school for reforming the Rococo, then says that they went too far, letting admirable simplifications become mere attenuations, as in the tendency to overload greens and blues with black and earth colors—"umbers or Cassel earths, ochers, etc. Each of these relative blues and relative greens plays its part in [their] attenuated scale, especially when the picture is placed in a strong light . . . but if the picture is placed in shadow . . . the earth becomes earth once more and the tones no longer play, so to speak. Above all, if it is placed alongside of a picture having full color, as do those of Titian and Rubens, it shows up the thing as it really is: earthy, dull, and without life. *Dust thou art to dust returning.*" *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: 1972), p. 609. With his biblical tag (Genesis 3:19), Delacroix goes beyond the obvious point (that, because it rests on the premises of Newtonian taste, a powerful tonal apparatus sacrifices liveliness) to an obscure hint that, because it is so consensual, official, supra-personal, Newtonian taste has something deathly about it. At the least, it requires individuality to sacrifice a degree of its distinctiveness.

As I've noted, in our time the Impressionists are sometimes praised, not for the liveliness of their colors, but for the ability to control that liveliness. This control was of little interest to Impressionism's early admirers, Theodore Duret and Felix Fénéon, whose delight in the style's luminosity led them to approving remarks on its neglect of traditional line, tone, volume—the painter's means of producing pictorial equivalents to Newtonian form. Writing in the 1870s and '80s, they saw such form as, simply, Western, and argued that in jettisoning it, the Impressionists approached a Japanese understanding of their art. See *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: 1877–1904*, ed. Linda Nochlin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1966), pp. 9, 108.

5. See, for instance, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "Cronik der Brücke" (1916) in Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (University of California Press: 1957), pp. 320–21. Also, Kirchner, letter to Botho Graef (1916), *Twentieth-Century Artists on Art*, ed. Dore Ashton (New York: 1985), p. 24.

6. Isaiah Berlin, "Hume and Anti-Rationalism," *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Penguin Books: 1982), pp. 162–87. Friedrich Schlegel joins an early 19th-century counterpart of Kirchner's chauvinism to a Romantic variant on *Sturm und Drang* irrationalism. See Schlegel, "Descriptions of Painting from Paris and the Netherlands" (1804), *German Essays on Art History*, ed. Gert Schiff (New York: 1988), pp. 60, 70–72.

Author: Carter Ratcliff is writing a book on Jackson Pollock.



*Free Hand, 1989, painted
Inst-tron on steel,
98 by 58 by 60 inches.*