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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## There's Beauty in Numbers

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

It goes without saying that mathematics has exerted widespread influence on 20th-century art. From Abstraction to Minimalism and Conceptualism, artists have experimented with the possibilities inherent in reducing the act of creation to a formula or set of precise rules.

"To Infinity and Beyond: Mathematics in Contemporary Art," the spring show at the [Heckscher Museum of Art](#), offers a résumé of contemporary and modern art inspired by mathematics, geometry, statistics, number systems, computer codes and the like. About 50 works by as many artists are on view, giving a thoughtful overview of art in this genre from the last half century.

The works occupy two of the four galleries in the museum, newly reopened after a yearlong renovation. This was a good show for the Heckscher's reopening, promising more breadth and variety to the exhibition program, coupled with an increasing focus on contemporary art.

Over all the show is quite lively, with artwork hanging from the ceiling and on the walls and displayed in cases. There are paintings, sculptures, drawings and a lone video of a dancer, Polly Motley, who incorporates mathematical formulas into her routine. It takes a while to get into, but her movements invite you to think of the body in more abstract terms. Here the body becomes a machine.

The exhibition is divided into themes reflecting some of the sources of the symbols, formulas, patterns and graphs used in the works. These themes include Euclidean geometry, optics, rational and irrational numbers, linear perspective and chaos theory, though in most cases the visual representations are only vague approximations of these abstract, complex concepts.

Art inspired by mathematics tends to be ordered and without any trace of sentimentality. It is a genre usually appreciated more for its intellectual rigor than its aesthetic merits, and generally looks best installed in modernist, spotless white-cube galleries. Yet it is often defined by an inner energy and vitality, as some of the best examples of the genre here demonstrate.

Richard Anuszkiewicz's "Temple of Ochre" (1982), which opens the show, offers a stunning demonstration of the aesthetic potential of optical art. Patterns of striking beauty and power emerge from this seemingly simple arrangement of five monochromatic rectangular bars surrounded by a maze of white lines. It is hypnotic, swiftly immersing the viewer in the design.

Alfred Jensen's paintings of numbers are a precursor to much recent art that concerns itself with numerals and letters. His painting "Magneto Optical Study No. 20" (1974) is an alluring, labyrinthine arrangement of numbers inside a grid of alternating colored squares, painted in a dazzling variety of textures. It is more a beautiful work of art than a cold demonstration of some theorem.

Other works in the exhibition offer a more direct visualization of strict mathematical concepts and ideas. Sol Le Witt's "Square No. 4" (2004) is a Legolike modular structure made out of little white cubes, a geometric form which greatly influenced the artist's thinking about art throughout his career. For Mr. Le Witt, the cube

was the basic, formal building block of sculpture.

A similar attention to constructional intricacies characterizes François Morellet's "Sphère en métaux" (1968), a three-dimensional sphere made out of hundreds of little metal rods. How original, astonishing and radical it must have looked the first time around. These days it seems tame, even simplistic, though it adds a welcome sense of historical perspective to the selection.

Among other interesting historical works, M. C. Escher skillfully gives shape and form to an illustration of a continuous waterfall. Space recedes and shifts in weird ways in "Waterfall" (1961), in which water falling from a tower appears to flow upward through a series of channels so as to continue the cycle. The composition muddles perspective and defies spatial logic.

From here on out, the show broadens to include so many different kinds of artwork inspired by mathematics as to make categorization difficult.

Some artists (Roz Chast and Ouattara Watts) take a humorous view of the mathematical world while others (Jill Baroff, Janet Cohen, Agnes Denes) look at the wider cultural and social implications of mathematics as an explanatory principle.

That all these artworks are together in the same place is remarkable, for they have been borrowed from artists, museums and collectors all over the country. While mathematical art has long had an academic following, this show is likely to give it a popular audience it may not have had before.

*"To Infinity and Beyond: Mathematics in Contemporary Art," Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, through June 22. Information: (631) 351-3250 or [www.heckscher.org](http://www.heckscher.org).*

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