

Al Loving (b. 1935 Detroit -2005 NYC)

“To be an artist is a really absurd thing to do. If you put it on a rational level, and that’s why the only people who do it are people who absolutely have to.”

Al Loving was born and raised in the Detroit area. He received a BFA from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, before earning his MFA from the University of Michigan. While in Ann Arbor he worked closely with Al Mullen, a former student of Hans Hoffmann (1880-1966), a German painter who was an early formative artist in the American Abstract Expressionist movement through his painterly and expressive rectilinear forms. At Michigan, Loving developed his signature image of illusionary cubes made out of prismatic color planes in varying tones and shades of light, which are edged with thin zinging or separating lines.

Al Loving had said that the cube is universal and permanent. And that “In the beginning of intellect, it’s a sort of building block.”

After being introduced through his teacher to artist circles that included Any Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Van Buren, and Howardena Pindell, Al Loving relocated to New York in 1968. Less than one year later, Loving famously held his first one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a historic achievement for a young artist of color. His works in this show, comparable to the work we have on display here at the 1970s Abstract Art exhibition, offered large abstract geometric shapes—often hexagonal or cubic modules. In these paintings, Loving concentrated on tensions between flatness of the art surface and spatial illusionism between shapes and varying colors. Then, perhaps even more importantly for Loving than this early career achievement for a young black artist, Loving chose to abandon this practice, saying he “felt stuck in a box” that was unreflective of his life or political environment.

From his geometric abstraction, Loving soon became most well known known for his large-scale fabric constructions and paper collages, all of which continued exploring relationships between colors, surfaces, and shapes. His later 1970s work thus shifted from hard-edge geometric paintings towards soft sculptural canvas and paper works. In these immersive artworks, he composed hundreds of cut and torn textiles and papers into dazzling patterns and shapes, with rich and sun-faded colors sewn together into irregular, organic shapes that spiraled outwards into the artwork’s surrounding space.

His work as an artist engaged with colors, shapes, textures, and patterns in artworks across different representational modes—from crystalline geometric structures to undulating plant-based materials and grains—to explore the creative limits of human expression and the natural world. The geometric abstract paintings in a way precipitated the radical rupture in Loving’s artistic practice, turning him away from the major currents of Minimalism and Color Field paintings towards a more personal and intimate way of artmaking.

[He continued abstract painting in a style of his own—one that rejected the formalist rigidity of his mostly white male peers]

Frank Stella & Kenneth Noland

Color Field artists: Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, and even Agnes Martin.