

## **Willem Hussem's Electrified Late Abstractions**

By Alex Bacon

**Willem Hussem was born in 1900, at the end of one century and the beginning of another. In a sense he was always straddling the past and the future, aware of history as well as interested in new developments, while always following his personal impulses. One example is how, from the end of the 1950s, he had embraced both the floating, relational geometries of the constructivist art of an earlier generation, epitomized by the work of Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky, as well as the impastoed, gestural execution of contemporary Informel and CoBRA painting. In the final years of his career, from around 1970 until he passed away in 1974, Hussem was engaged, consciously or not, with international developments in hard-edged geometric abstraction and Color Field painting.**

**Having lived through the historical period of constructivist art in the 1920s and '30s, as well as the gestural turn in work of the 1940s and '50s, Hussem was also drawn to the new type of constructivist art that emerged in Europe in the 1960s, which was channeled through new technological developments like the computer, and was practiced by a younger generation of artists, especially his former assistant Peter Struycken, who Hussem counted as a friend and whose work he had championed since the early 1960s.**

**Accordingly Hussem's technique shifted at the beginning of the 1970s. Instead of freely executing the forms in his paintings, he started to use masking tape to establish strong demarcations between forms, sometimes buffered by thin bands of a neutral color, as well as to retain one of his central approaches, of using facture as a way of energizing the canvas. In a sense the sharply delineated geometric forms in Hussem's paintings, which can perhaps partly be traced back to him visiting the seminal exhibition 'Vormen van de Kleur' in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1966, show the artist's awareness of the visual language of art of this period, as in its use by artists as diverse as Kenneth Noland, Ruprecht Geiger, and Jasper Johns. However, his retention of facture, which fell out of favor in the thinly executed stain paintings of Color Field painters like Noland, Jules Olitski, and Morris Louis, allowed Hussem to mark out his own territory in distinction to this group.**

**Hussem's reason for retaining facture was his desire to create a sense of energy in his paintings. One way that he did this came from Malevich, whose work is often noted for its graphic quality, but key to the Russian artist feeling**

comfortable pushing painting to a then-unprecedented level of reduction was his retention of the brushstroke, and indeed his multiplication of it into the numerous small, regular strokes that make up one of his surfaces. This reveals a continuity with the atomized surfaces of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting that preceded Malevich's Suprematism. This is not evident when viewed from a distance but, seen up close, every centimeter of a Malevich painting is in fact highly worked. This serves to charge the surface, as well as make legible its handmade quality, underscoring the visual rather than conceptual orientation of such painting.

The same way that Malevich saw in the atomized brushstroke of the Impressionist art that preceded him a device that could be put to new ends in service of abstract geometric compositions, Hussem saw a way of sublimating the gestural abstraction of the 1950s generation of Informel and CoBRA painters into the programmed, mathematical geometry of the '60s generation, that then also aligned with the energized surfaces of Color Field paintings and hard edged abstractions by the likes of Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, and Carmen Herrera, who also made use of geometric shapes like triangles and squares and a palette of bright hues to affect the viewer's sensorium. Informel painting's use of impasto provided Hussem with a technique that could be used to activate the geometric surfaces of a new generation of geometric compositions.

Similar to how Malevich had completed the program inaugurated by Impressionism of decoupling the mark from its traditional descriptive function, rendering it as a block of color and a unit of energy, Hussem unlinked the gestural mark from being an index of the body that made it. Hussem realized that the energy suggested by the gesture, via the body implicated in making it, still resided in the mark even when it is used to compose a geometrical element, like a square or a triangle. Indeed, the fact alone that such a surface is variegated and thus shimmers with the passage of light across it is enough to suggest the sensation of movement and energy that Hussem prized. The 1970s paintings use a reduced repertoire of forms compared to the works that preceded them, however they retain an emphasis on the suggestion of movement, and specifically vectors of force that pulsate across the surface. In this context the use of impasto is an additional element of charge in an overall electrified surface.

Hussem's late works draw from a vocabulary of geometric forms suspended or placed on monochromatic backgrounds, variations of which populated his different canvases in the 1970s, including: stripes, bars, squares, diamonds, and

triangles. Sometimes there is a sense of cropping, as in *Composition (WH2-12)*<sup>1</sup>, whose yellow forms we can read either as squares or triangles whose full form exceeds the limits of the canvas, or as irregular quadrilaterals, if we take the canvas edges to be its boundaries. Part of the optical play that Hussem builds into his works is based on how he leaves this ambiguous, such that how we read a given form in a late Hussem painting like *Composition (WH2-12)* oscillates between at least two possibilities. Further, there are different optical sensations of speed and tension that adhere to the different readings, meaning that the shift in our reading of the forms changes the entirety of the canvas before us.

Some works from this period continue to explore Hussem's signature floating forms, as in *Composition (WH12-31)*, where green and white squares float in front of a blue background with two black stripes. There is essentially three kinds of space in the 1970s work. The kind of shallow space, like in *Composition (WH12-31)*, in which angled geometric elements seem to float just before a backdrop. Then there are paintings like *Composition (WH3-12)*, where the forms read as flat forms laid directly on top of one another such that they seem tessellated. Finally there are works, like *Composition (WH2-15)*, where the space is two-dimensional but charged, like a piece of fabric pulled taut. Such tension arises from the way in which forms butt up against one another holding one another at bay, like two magnets, electric in their standoff.

The types are closely related, and there isn't always a clean division between them. For example, *Composition (WH12-27)*, which can be read as either a floating or a tessellated space. Or *Composition (WH3-2)* which, at first glance, appears to be a work with a charged space, since the off-white passages initially read as cutting through a red ground, like bolts of lightning, splitting it open. However, time with the painting allows us to also read the red portions as shapes of their own, which shifts our understanding of that space to a tessellated one, as the off-white passages come to take the form of a tilted square, and further as being slid under a similar red one, like one sheet of paper under another. Like the famous rabbit-duck optical illusion, we can see one or the other, but not both at the same time.

<sup>1</sup> Willem Hussem titled most of his works 'Composition'. For this essay a specific numbering has been used to clearly distinguish between the different works mentioned in the text. This numbering stems from Paul Andriessen's 1977 inventory for Galerie Nouvelles Images in The Hague, Netherlands.

Composition (WH3-2) is also a good example of how, even in these hard-edged, geometric works, made with masking tape, the execution of the off-white parts is laid on thick, with a palette knife, the gestures of which are legible on close inspection. This physicality is another reason why the off-white passages jump out at us first, and it is also a place in which Hussem is able to incorporate a degree of gesture and presence of the hand, however minor. As with the brushstrokes in a Malevich painting, they signal the hand, but it could be any hand, and the purpose is not to register any of its idiosyncrasies, but rather serves to humanize the work by clearly demarcating it from something machine made.

What we discover is left when the presence of the human is separated from any sense of artist's psyche or personality, is the energy of human invention, which also appears in the charged compositions of a Hussem painting. Even towards the end of his career we find that Hussem continued to look equally to the past, present, and future. Responding to the geometric language and bold colors of an international coterie of hard edged and Color Field painters from Newman, to Herrera, to Georg Karl Pfahler, while retaining the facture of earlier generations of European artists, from Malevich to Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, forging his own uniquely electrified fields right up till the end.

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