

# The NEW YORK Sun

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If you think of Neoplasticism as a one-way street that ended with Piet Mondrian, know that his free line, hard-edged geometry, and flat plane are alive and kicking on 57th Street in two magnificent shows: "Ilya Bolotowsky: Centenary Exhibition, Paintings and Films" at Washburn and "Charminion von Wiegand: Offering of the Universe, An Artist's Path From Mondrian to Mantra" at Michael Rosenfeld.

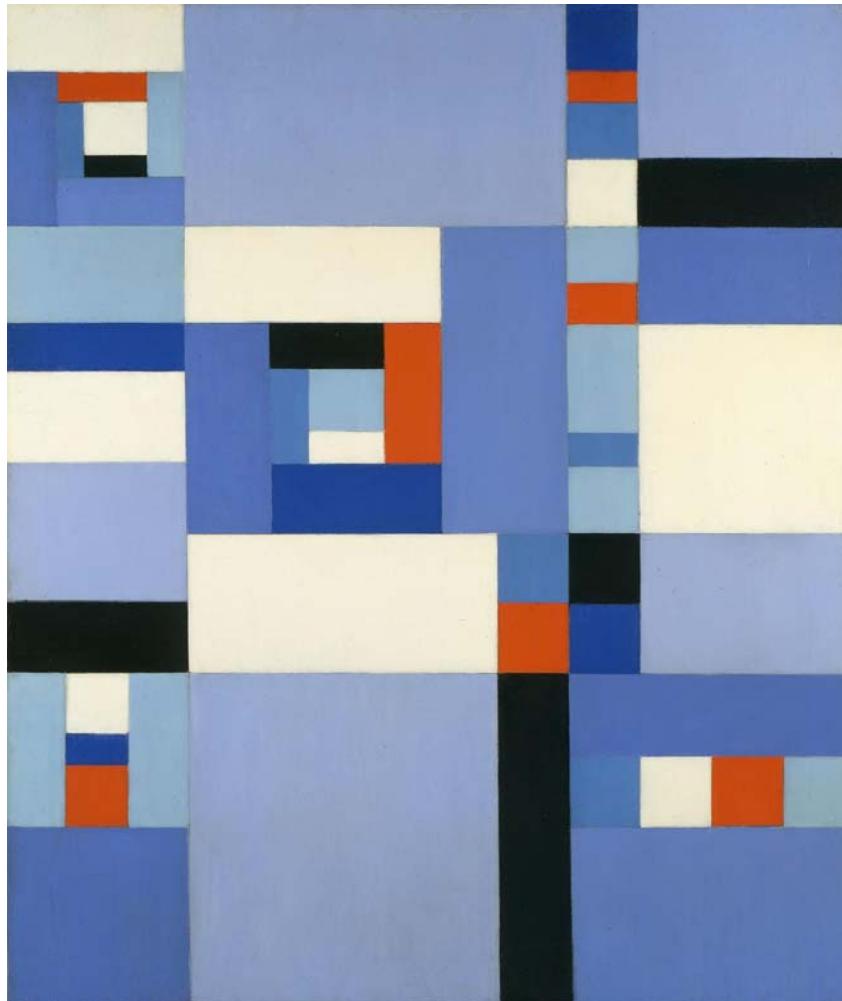
The Bolotowsky show, which celebrates the centenary of the artist's birth, is a monumental event; every painting in the exhibit is a masterpiece. Entering Washburn, one is face-to-face with the show's centerpiece, the 7-foot-by-17-foot-long "WPA Mural Williamsburg Houses Brooklyn" (1936-80). A flat, pearly violet gray field opens and buckles with flat abstract forms that are architectural, organic, aviary, and aquatic. Airy yet planar, the gray ground changes qualities as it interacts with the elements that float through and arrest it.

On adjacent walls are the strictly Neoplastic paintings, including two lozenges, an 8-foot square work, "Blue Squares With Red, Black, and White" (1980), and two ellipses, as well as an early study for a "Williamsburg" mural. In these works, Bolotowsky can keep every form in the plane as he juggles his color — which moves from bright, glossy red, deep crimson, hot orange, cobalt blue, and lemon yellow to flat black — creating explosive tensions and torsions that warp the rectangle or ellipse, stagger depth, and pull those forms and the spaces in numerous directions simultaneously.

The exhibit also includes, in an adjacent gallery, three rarely seen short films the artist made in the late 1950s and early '60s — surreal, at times abstract, collages or montages that, set to cool jazz, explore the themes, among others, of "Fire Escapes" and "Narcissus in a Gothic Mood." The films are engaging and complex but it is the gallery dense with his Neoplastic canvases that make the case for his genius.

Without the right angles, flat plane, and primary colors of Mondrian (1872–1944), who took Neoplasticism extremely far, wide, and deep, Bolotowsky's art would have probably taken a very different course. Yet Mondrian's contribution to the tradition of abstraction has proved to be fertile soil for numerous artists as various as the Swiss painter Paul Klee, the Uruguayan Constructivist Torres Garcia, and the Frenchman Matisse, in his late abstract cutouts, as well as the contemporary American masters Ellsworth Kelly and Salvatore Federico. Bolotowsky and von Wiegand are among the numerous links in Neoplasticism's chain.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, Bolotowsky (1907–81) immigrated to New York in 1923. He adopted abstraction in 1933 and co-founded the American Abstract Artists Group (1936), for which von Wiegand would later serve as president. Bolotowsky taught at Black Mountain College and he painted a number of murals for the WPA, including "The Williamsburg Murals: A Rediscovery" (1936), which is on view as a long-term loan at the Brooklyn Museum, and "WPA Mural Williamsburg Houses Brooklyn."



Charminion von Wiegand (1898-1983), I Ching Series Ta Yu: The Image of Fire in Heaven, 1955, oil on canvas, 36" x 30", signed and dated

Von Wiegand (1896–83) trained as an art historian and a journalist and wrote art criticism. She began painting in 1926 after she discovered, during psychoanalysis, that she "would like to be a painter." Like Bolotowsky, von Wiegand traveled widely in Europe. Between 1929 and 1932, she was the only woman correspondent in postrevolutionary Russia. Moving to New York in 1932, von Wiegand married the journalist Joseph Freeman, who would later become editor of *Partisan Review*. Eventually she took up the Theosophical teachings followed by Mondrian, and then expanded her interests to include Kandinsky's spiritualism, automatism, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, Taoism, and the I Ching (The Book of Changes), which led to visits to India and Tibet, where she had a private audience with the Dalai Lama.

Von Wiegand and Bolotowsky knew each other and Mondrian, who moved to New York from London in 1940 and spent his last years in the city. After Mondrian's death, Bolotowsky aligned himself very closely with Neoplasticism, and von Wiegand watched Mondrian paint his late masterpieces "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" (1942–43) and "Victory Boogie-Woogie" (1943–44). While the Dutch master was alive, she also translated his writings into English.

Yet the works of Bolotowsky, von Wiegand, and Mondrian convey temperaments as individual, authentic, and various as the artists themselves are different, proving, as Mondrian had said to von Wiegand: "that the paintings come first and the theory comes from the paintings." In the world of creativity, theories, of course, can only be applied. If theories are treated as law, rather than as parts of a tradition — which exists to be explored and to be furthered — then the theories end up ruling the painter. This was certainly not the case with these three artists.

Von Wiegand's oeuvre presents us with another interpretation of Neoplasticism than Bolotowsky's, one that — influenced as it was by spiritualism, Buddhism, and Hinduism — is symbolic and emblematic. The exhibit at Michael Rosenfeld focuses specifically on 30 works from the 1950s through 1970, when the artist was exploring Eastern imagery and symbols — shrines, mandalas, mantras, hexagrams, lotus forms, temples, chakras, magic squares. Yet her work, regardless of its symbolic content (and it is much too broad and complex to explore fully here), ultimately reads as pure Modernist abstraction.

The canvases owe as much to Auguste Herbin, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the Futurists, and Sonia Delaunay as they do to Eastern concepts or Mondrian. They feel like sacred works. They often resemble diagrams and are talismanic, totemic, and figurative (in that they can have stacked vertical structures), yet they are composed almost entirely out of overlapping or interlocking geometric forms — all of which, filtered through Neoplasticism, are held in the plane.

No matter how much Eastern thought von Wiegand puts into her work, her syncopated rhythms, structures, and torsions explore the language of abstraction. Her compositions arrive at a harmony in which vertical thrust and lateral expanse, as in the best crucifixions, are held in dynamic tension. Yet they vary greatly in light and temperament.

In "Untitled" (1952) she re-creates the dynamics of translucent, faceted light seen in crystals and diamonds. "The Chakras" (1963) suggests the phases of the moon. "Offering of the Universe" (1964), diamonds and circles and sailboat-like triangles, explores the shifting from side to side experienced in ancient Egyptian scrolls during the weighing of the heart against truth. "The Kundalini Lotus" (1968–69), transparent pink, yellow, and blue overlapping circles and squares, opens as beautifully as a flower, yet pressures forward as if it were made of light streaming through a stained-glass window. In von Wiegand's work, as in the paintings of Bolotowsky and Mondrian, the inner workings and dynamics of nature are pared down, distilled, and poetically filtered through a completely original vision.

Bolotowsky until April 21 (20 W. 57th St., between Fifth and Sixth avenues, 212-397-6780);

Von Wiegand until May 12 (24 W. 57th St., between Fifth and Sixth avenues, 212-247-0082).