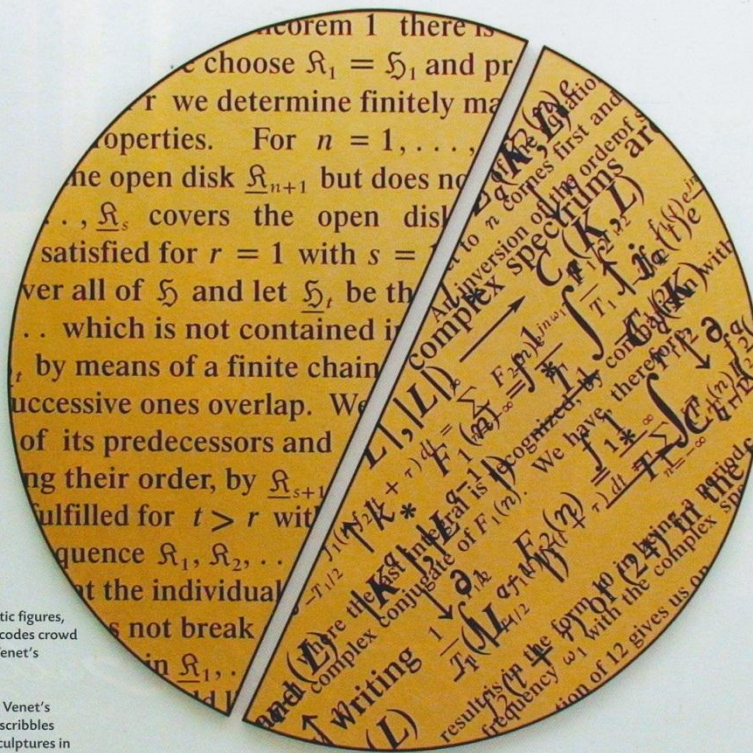


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THE HIDDEN ALGORITHMS OF ART

FEW DISCIPLINES SEEM AS DIFFERENT AS MATHEMATICS AND ART. WHEN THEY MEET, IS IT THE ULTIMATE IN ABSTRACTION? **WOON TAI HO** SPEAKS TO BERNAR VENET, THE FRENCH MASTER OF LINES AND NUMBERS.



Mathematic figures, signs and codes crowd Bernard Venet's canvases.

Opposite: Venet's signature scribbles are now sculptures in torch-cut steel.

The year was 1915: Russian painter Kazimir Malevich shocked the art world by revealing a monotone Black Square against a white background. Its stark simplicity and open incomprehensibility challenged any existing art form and predictably created a storm in the art world. It was possibly the first time that the whole notion of “anti-painting” was introduced.

Fast forward, 2012: Bernar Venet’s first solo exhibition in Singapore at Art Plural Gallery. It’s a collection that brings to mind what Malevich did so many years ago. The series on display includes canvases full of what looks like mathematical formulae and sculptures of his signature flowing scribbles in torch-cut steel.

The French conceptual artist has always been outspoken about his “anti-art” stand – a blank refusal to do anything that resembles conventional art. His controversial works have involved piles of charcoal, smears of tar and photographic media. His unconventional approach has won him much recognition and many awards, not least of all the 2005 Chevalier de La Legion d’Honneur, France’s highest honour. Many art critics have hailed Venet as one of the most intellectual artists alive today.

Standing taller than six feet in height, Venet dominates physical space as easily as he seems to have dominated the art world. His grey hair is tousled – this is clearly a man who has little interest in how he looks. Yet his energy and enthusiasm for his art is unabated, his curiosity about the world around him unflagging.

“I like to explore things I know nothing about to see if they can spark ideas on things I know something about,” Venet says as he explains his inspiration behind his latest works. “I don’t understand math well and I get fascinated by what I cannot understand. So I express that through abstract paintings.” He started by painting an equation on the wall, he says, and has been defining and redefining this language into a strong, coherent and innovative form ever since.

THE NUMBERS GAME

A deeper look at his works – canvases covered with figures, graphs and diagrams; murals made of mathematical formulae and the many geometric shapes – immediately draws the viewer on a primal level. There is clearly a straightforward dimension to Venet’s approach, without the need for any deeper understanding than an attraction to the aesthetics alone. The 71-year-old artist himself doesn’t pretend that his art hews to mathematical principles, despite his liberal use of its language and symbolism.

“Are El Greco’s religious paintings art or theology? Are Malevich’s paintings of squares art or geometry?” he asks, as he looks at one of his giant canvas-wrapped, clock-like works on the wall. “It is their abstraction, as with any abstract art, it is what it is to the viewer.”

It is in this context that you start to understand Venet’s mind. American art critic and poet Donald Kuspit, author of *Bernar Venet Art and Mathematics: In Search of the Sublime*, summed it up well when he described the artist’s works as being “more sublime than mathematical, or rather use mathematics as a springboard to the sublime”.

Says Carole de Senarclens of Art Plural: “His choice of mathematics was a rejection of any artistic language used before... opening new fields of possibilities and the way to reach the ultimate abstraction in art.”

A QUESTING MIND

Precocious Venet started painting as early as the age of 11. He keenly admired the legendary French artist Marcel Duchamp, who rejected formalism and convention. Duchamp held that to think differently and make thoroughly original work, the artist needed to go to a country where he did not speak the language. Venet promptly headed for New York.

This sense of thinking outside the box has remained with Venet to this day. To him, the process of creation is more important than the end product. His mind is constantly prowling for fresh inspiration and he doesn’t produce what the eye recognises or sees every day. His decision to base his work on the laws of disciplines like physics and mathematics is an attempt to free art from familiar elements of formal compositions.

Still, for people more used to traditional expressions of creativity, Venet’s art can come as something of a shock. He admits: “People tend to have antipathy for what is not familiar. But it is precisely the unclear and unfamiliar qualities that give life to art.” ◀

The Paradox of Coherence is on at Art Plural Gallery, 38 Armenian Street until Nov 24.

