



Christopher Janney, *Sound Is An Invisible Color*, installation view, Louisiana Art & Science Museum, 2019. Image courtesy of the Louisiana Art & Science Museum.

Exploring “Invisible” Color: The Work of Christopher Janney

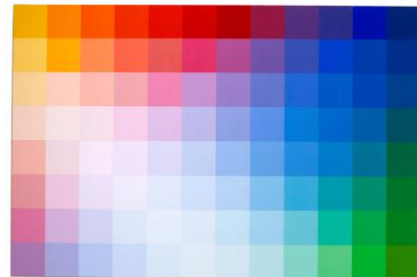
By Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein

The pioneering work of Christopher Janney, a multidisciplinary artist who resides in Massachusetts, is recognized in a solo show titled *Sound Is An Invisible Color*. Janney has been transforming architectural spaces into participatory experiences and producing multimedia performances around the globe for four decades. His exhibition is one of two concurrent shows that comprise *Harmonies in Color*, curated by Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein for the Louisiana Art & Science Museum (LASM) in Baton Rouge. Both are on view until March 2020.

Christopher Janney’s work is explored against the backdrop of the illustrious history of color and its application in the abstract art of today. His work is accompanied by *Six Contemporary Perspectives*, a group show that includes a diverse range of media, including: paintings by Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld, New York; digital works by Irene Mamiye, New York; sculpture by Pard Morrison, Colorado; and “thread-works” by Jen Pack of New

Mexico. Woven throughout both displays are notations on color theory, facts from scientific studies, and references to famous artists in history who have contributed to a greater understanding of the visual and psychological effects of color.

Color has long fascinated scientists, philosophers, and artists. The artworks on view in *Harmonies in Color* address the subject of color from various viewpoints. Gabriele Evertz, Robert Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld are associated with New York's Hunter College, dubbed the Hunter "School of Color." Jen Pack uses dyed thread or cloth instead of pigment to celebrate the limitless possibilities of contrasting colors, opposing colors, and unexpected color combinations. Pard Morrison, by contrast, uses a more restricted color palette. His welded aluminum forms, often tall totems, are embellished with geometric patterns. Taking advantage of the vast array of effects that may be created with technology, Irene Mamiye merges, alters, and combines digital photographs that she has taken to make visually stunning abstractions.



For Christopher Janney, who works with sound, light, and technology, color is both a physical property and a metaphorical idiom. His work revolves around the concept that color can be conveyed through both visual and auditory sensations. Trained as an architect and a musician, he likens sound to an "invisible color," yet another facet to the visual experience of his work. He draws upon a vast array of historical influences, pop culture, and the everyday to produce an innovative art form that he describes as "synaesthetic," a play upon both the Ancient Greek word "synesthesia," which means "unity of the senses," and the contemporary word "synth" or "synthesizer," an electronic musical instrument. In reference to his work, Janney has stated: "I think you can hear color. I think you can see sound." Indeed, to fully appreciate Janney's work, one must engage with it. Touch pads, sounds and speakers, and colored lights lure willing participants to explore his art.



Janney's first passion was music. He cites both early jazz, blues, and rock 'n' roll improvisation as well as the revolutionary work of composer and artist John Cage (1912-1992) as major influences. Much of Janney's work encompasses sound, ranging from melodic instruments to archival voices and recorded environmental sounds, like frogs or birds. While this audible component of his work has received much attention, most notably his *HeartBeat* (1998) collaboration with dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, Janney's liberal use of color warrants further discussion.

Christopher Janney first began to explore color as a component of his work in the 1970s. Living in New York, he was working as an assistant for several well-respected artists while formulating his own future practice. Among them was Jack Youngerman (b. 1926), for whom he worked on and off for five years. Janney helped Youngerman produce abstract sculptures out of fiberglass. However, Youngerman is best known for his boldly colored figure-ground compositions. At the time, Youngerman was making large-scale folding screen paintings in color combinations that make the images appear to pulsate. While Janney did not emulate Youngerman's aesthetic, he clearly benefited from the elder artist's knowledge of color theory and the visual effects of color. Janney was already building interactive sound environments. He now began to make sculptural forms that allowed him to explore ideas of color and transparency. Fusing these two concepts, he started to create what he called "combo studies."



Janney titled this ongoing series *Sound Is An Invisible Color*, hence the title of his current exhibition at LASM. The name was inspired by a quote from Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), an artist famous for questioning traditional ideas about art and for pioneering the avant-garde Dadaist movement. Duchamp claimed that "a title is an invisible color." The concept that sound could be an "invisible color" was a breakthrough for Janney, opening all sorts of possibilities about what art could be and setting him off on his lifelong quest to imbue physical form with ephemeral qualities like music and light while simultaneously transforming the ephemeral into the physical.



Resin thus proved to be an advantageous material for an artist concerned with the visible versus the invisible. Resin is a clear, viscous liquid that can be poured, molded, and colored. When chemically catalyzed, the substance passes through various states from soft rubber to rigid form. While malleable, Janney works the material. Originally, he molded the resin into ribbon-like shapes but later began making the tubular forms for which he currently is known. At times, Janney twists or flips the tubes, causing the form to appear to be in motion. Tinted in shades of blues and greens or pinks and purples, the completed form can be likened to a color organ. Adding sound, custom-designed hardware and software, and allowing the works to be activated by human touch, the sculptures become "synaesthetic instruments," where form and sound, the physical and the ephemeral, combine to become a singularly unique artwork.

The interrelationship of visual art and music has a long history. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), whom Janney admires, was a painter as well as a musician. Kandinsky sought to express the essence of music through color. Similarly, Janney's *Sound Is An Invisible Color* series includes not only large-scale, audible renditions, but also smaller sculptures intended as explorations of "visual music." The LASM exhibition includes four major constructions as well as a number of these modest-sized sculptures. The small twisted forms act as both studies for larger, finished works as well as inspiration for musical compositions. Janney chose seemingly random color combinations for these improvisations, giving them the same sense of energy and emotion as actual jazz music.



The psychological impact of color is not lost on Janney. This is most evident in his large-scale architectural commissions which he calls "Urban Musical Instruments." Kiosks in the LASM exhibition provide examples of these accomplishments. Located all over the globe, these installations are situated in transitory urban spaces, often passageways, ranging from stairways and subways to airports and parking garages. Janney transforms them into what he terms "hyper-realities." Using technology, the structures are turned into sound and color extravaganzas that are "played," or activated, by passersby.



Among his most color-filled installations is the pedestrian walkway at the Miami International Airport in which Janney took full advantage of the South Florida sunshine. Completed in 2011, *Harmonic Convergence* is a 72 foot-long glass window composed in over 132 transparent colors set into diagonal patterns. Light streaming through these tall panels cast brightly colored shadows across the long corridor, creating a full-scale, somewhat psychedelic experience. Adding to this visual display are "sound images;" a sound-score composed by Janney consisting of sounds indigenous to the South Florida area. Video cameras installed in the ceiling feed information to a computer, influencing the density of the sound-score. At the top of each hour, a short composition with percussion instruments marks the time of day.

Janney's immersive environments are subsumed with color, not unlike the experience that the Color Field painters of the 1950s and 60s sought to create. For these artists, color was the subject of their work; thus, they emphasized the optical experience. Acrylic paint was the preferred medium because it could attain a more luminous effect than oil. These





artists made large paintings dominated by flat fields of color with little surface detail, engulfing viewers when seen close up. Among them, Janney cites Morris Louis (1912-1962) as an artist for whom he holds great affinity. Louis used a paint called Magma, an acrylic made with resin. He diluted the paint and poured the viscous liquid onto unprimed canvases. Janney cites the transparent, overlapping washes of pigment in Louis's late *Veil* paintings, such as *Blue Veil* (1958), to be particularly influential. Color in Janney's work is unmodulated, as seen in the four 50-foot tall glass panels in Janney's installation titled *Light Wave* (2006) for the Orlando Public Library. Each wave-shaped panel is a singular color. Yet, like Louis, Janney is exploring color in terms of transparency and luminosity.

Janney also shares a common interest in the spiritual nature of color with Mark Rothko (1903-1970), whose work is often discussed in terms of "color field" painting. Rothko used color as a means to express emotion. His paintings such as *Orange and Yellow* (1956) depict vertically-aligned rectangular color blocks that appear to glow from within and float in space. Rothko wanted viewers to feel as if they were visually surrounded by the colors. The feeling and tone of his large paintings became progressively darker over the course of Rothko's career in tandem with his growing belief in color as a spiritual pathway. This sentiment culminated in the construction of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, which houses 14 of his deeply colored paintings. People from all around the world come to contemplate them.

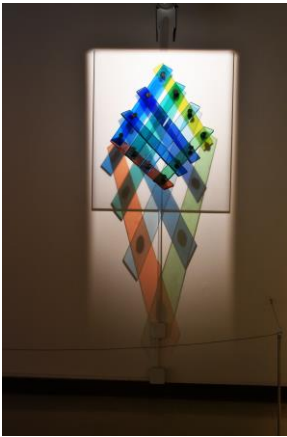


The colored panels in Janney's architectural installations often have the same effect as that of stained-glass in houses of worship. While this is unavoidable in some of Janney's installations, at other times, it is his intention. He wants to provide a respite for passersby who are willing to stop and leave their hurried existence, even for a few moments. The just-opened *Harmonic Grove* (2019) commissioned by Our Lady of the Lake for their new Children's Hospital in Baton



Rouge, Louisiana, is designed to be a place of rest. Color studies, architectural drawings, and models in the LASM exhibition provide insight into Janney's artistic process for the commission. Janney conceived this busy hospital entrance to be "a grove of color and sound." The 4,000 square-foot canopy is composed of 88 transparent glass panels, each 72 x 72 x .75 inches and tinted in soothing shades of blue, blue-green, and green. Janney chose

these hues to reference the waters and bayous of Louisiana and to create a peaceful, calm environment for all who enter and exit the hospital. As with his other commissions, there is a sound-score composed of melodic and indigenous environmental sounds that is activated by pushing touch pads located on columns holding up the canopy. Sunlight shining through the panels casts deeply colored shadows on the wide expanse of pavement below, resulting in what Janney describes as a “slowly-moving kinetic painting” that changes throughout the day.



Light, from which all color derives, is a constant feature in Janney’s work. He makes studies out of resin or glass before or after completing his large-scale installations to investigate the effects of light and shadow. These compositions do not necessarily mimic those of his completed commissions. His newest series on view titled *Slats* (2019), for instance, consists of transparent colored panes of glass, each with its own custom-made single LED light source. Positioned several feet out from the wall, the small spotlight represents the sun. When properly lit and placed in a darkened space, the light casts shadows on the wall that are larger and almost as vibrant as the form itself.

The shadows become the focal point, blurring the line between the physical material and its projected form.

At night, Janney’s *Urban Musical Instrument* installations are illuminated by manufactured light, usually LEDs. The amount of light and degree of coloration varies. *Sonic Gates* (2001) at Manchester Community College in Connecticut, for instance, consists of a portico held up by rounded columns. Vertical light strips inside the columns glow in a range of hues. In other works, such as *Harmonic Fugue* (2011) on the Hendrix College campus in Conway, Arkansas, colored lights transform a tunnel into an immersive experience when pedestrians walk through it. The tunnel changes colors and plays an ever-changing sound-score when a hand is waved in front of one of the “white dots,” the sensors that line the tunnel walls.



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The concept of an environment of colored light was explored in the legendary work of Dan Flavin (1933-1996), who pursued the artistic possibilities of fluorescent light. Originally a painter, he gave up the canvas to work with standard fluorescent fixtures and tubes. Flavin combined his light sculpture with architecture to produce seamless

environments, sometimes room-sized, that bathe the viewer in its intense glowing color. Like Flavin, Janney uses colored light to alter the sensory experience of the viewer.

Christopher Janney puts color and sound together with interactive components to empower the once-passive viewer. In Janney's words, he wants the viewer "to both experience and participate in the artistic process." To carry out this vision, Janney employs color to great effect, as seen in his sculptural forms and immersive environments alike. Regardless of whether this coloration is created by using manufactured LEDs or the diurnal play of sunlight and colored shadow, Janney takes advantage of color's innate potential to affect the viewer from a psychological and physiological standpoint. Janney's aesthetic encompasses color's visible and invisible qualities to create captivating and memorable experiences.

Author:

Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein is Director of Interpretation & Chief Curator of the Louisiana Art & Science Museum located in Baton Rouge. She has been managing the fine art exhibition program there since 2003. She has written extensively on a variety of art and interdisciplinary subjects, and has organized over a hundred exhibitions devoted to the work of local, regional, and internationally acclaimed artists. In 2019, she curated *Sound Is An Invisible Color: Christopher Janney* as part of a larger project titled *Harmonies in Color* investigating the history of color theory and its application in the abstract work of contemporary artists. eliz.weinstein@gmail.com

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1. Christopher Janney, *Sound Is An Invisible Color*, installation view, Louisiana Art & Science Museum, 2019. Image courtesy of the Louisiana Art & Science Museum, Baton Rouge.
2. Robert Swain, *Untitled*, 8x12 - 29 x 29, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 8 feet x 12 feet. Photographer: Yao Zu Lu. Image courtesy of the artist.
3. Christopher Janney, *Sound Is An Invisible Color*, 2016, colored resin, electronics (sound, interactive), 30 x 42 x 16 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.
4. Jack Youngerman, *Fire/Orange II*, 1978, acrylic on linen, 72 x 144 x 2 inches. Photographer: Gary Mamay. Image courtesy of John T. Washburn Gallery, New York.
5. Christopher Janney, *Bear Claw*, 2017, cast colored resin, 12 x 12 x 12 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*, 1913, oil on canvas. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

7. Christopher Janney, *Harmonic Convergence*, 2011, Miami International Airport, Florida. Image courtesy of the artist.

8. Morris Louis, *Blue Veil*, 1958, acrylic on canvas. Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museums), Cambridge, Massachusetts.

9. Christopher Janney, *Light Waves: Orlando*, 2006, Orlando Public Library, Florida. Image courtesy of the artist.

10. Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, oil on canvas, 91 x 71 inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

11. Christopher Janney, *Harmonic Grove*, 2019, Our Lady of the Lake Children's Hospital, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Image courtesy of the artist.

12. Christopher Janney, *Slats*, 2019, glass, LED light, 24 x 36 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

13. Christopher Janney, *Harmonic Fugue*, 2011, Hendrix College, Conway, Arkansas. Image courtesy of the artist.

14. Dan Flavin, *Untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)*, 1973, yellow and green fluorescent light, 8 feet x 8 feet; length variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Panza Collection, 1991.