

# The Temptation of Space



By  
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Why would a sculptor abandon the third dimension? What might that act of renunciation mean to him and to his viewers?

 C. Michael Norton

Any answer, in the case of C. Michael Norton, must acknowledge that the purge is never complete: some vestige of space always remains, endowing the artist's "flat" colorful paintings with both formal and psychological depth.

Norton's journey to the acrylic brightness of his mature work has been a long one, marked throughout by interaction between conceptual binaries — in short, a dialectical progress. Tellingly, the artist was born and raised in North Dakota, yet today lives in downtown Manhattan. That relocation alone — from provincial origins to dense urban life, from simplicity and clarity on the plains to cosmopolitan complexity and flux in Tribeca — is enough to alert us that his nature is divided. When Norton left the Middle American

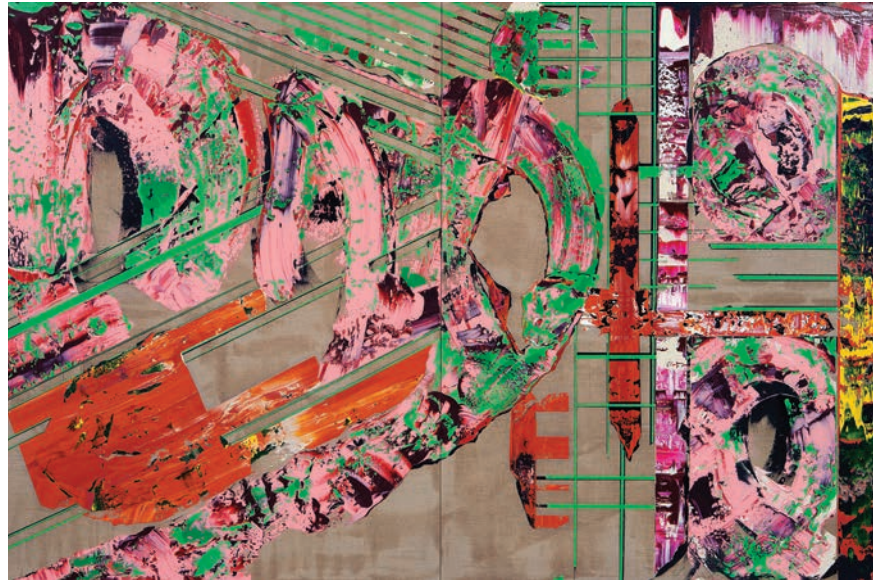
prairie for Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, he first studied bronze casting, a brute mineral-based procedure, alien to any sensibility formed by rapport with the land. Understandably, he soon grew dissatisfied with the semi-industrial process and its cult of swaggering machismo. After his BA (1977), Norton switched to San Jose State, where, earning both an MA (1978) and MFA (1981), he set about making open, sometimes latticework, assemblages of wood, wire, paper, and plaster.

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*Einsteins Edge of Winter*, 2009-2011  
Diptych, Acrylic on linen  
90 x 144 inches

↓  
*Ornette*, 2006  
Acrylic on linen  
72 x 90 inches



→  
*Pink-E*, 2011  
Diptych, Acrylic on linen  
66 x 104 inches



And here the formal dichotomy in his work becomes as evident as the psychological. These sculptures, clearly in line with the modernist heritage, simultaneously evoke various Native American constructs: litters, teepee and hut, skeletons, racks for drying or smoking (e.g., *Short Horn*, 1982). This is only natural, in a sense. As the controversial 1984 MoMA exhibition “Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” demonstrated, borrowings from indigenous cultures (seen as purer, more authentic, closer to the sources of deep inspiration) have been part and parcel of artistic modernism at least since Gauguin went to Tahiti and Picasso was struck dumb by African masks at the Trocadéro.

Equally complicated — and peculiar — is Norton’s treatment of these rough-hewn sculptural forms. In principle, their parts could have vectored off in multiple directions, their shapes could have punctuated and manipulated space in infinite ways. Some of the loosely figurative ones — such as *Chat*, 1984 — do exactly that. But, for the most part, Norton confined this work to grids and the relation of one rectangular element to another, as though the components were slightly jumbled windows — or canvases (*Yellow Wire*, 1983). Indeed, many of them are actually painted: sculptures in real space daubed with pigment, evoking paintings that, Alberti asserted, function as windows into virtual space (*American Goat*, 1983).

Around 1987, in the midst of an eight-year period (1984-92) when he was dividing his time between the U.S. and France, Norton made a definitive shift to painting per se, producing at first grotesque (though comically bright and squiggly) fantasy creatures tumbled together in quasi-patterned arrangements against placeless monochrome backgrounds. The forms, hues, and compositions bore a kinship to those of the CoBrA movement, Peter Saul, the Chicago Imagists, and the French artists Robert Combas and Herve Di Rosa. This was, after all, the era of East Village recklessness. Yet a structural regularity, angular and geometric, persisted in Norton's two-dimensional works, implying that his sculptures were, in effect, *still there* under the more organic (and orgasmic) overlays of painterly figuration. It was as if the abstract structure of Indian Space Painting — an overtly American synthesis of Cubism and Surrealism practiced in the 1940s and '50s by artists such as Howard Daum, Gertrude Barrer, Steve Wheeler, Will Barnet, Peter Busa, and Robert Barrell — had been infused with the psychedelic impulses of the Vietnam War era.

That ability to embrace contraries, holding them simultaneously in dynamic equipoise, has remained a signature feature of Norton's art up to the present day. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when his palette was dominated by blue, white, and black, he tended to create visual zones — some populated by rectilinear shapes, some by circles and curves — asymmetrically balanced like equally important but largely segregated realms of cognition and feeling (*After the Fact*, 2001-02). In these works, anxiety is contemplated as a theme and at the same time actively experienced by both artist and viewer. The images convey an existential anxiety of choice, where every option selected entails the loss of its equally attractive (and equally troublesome) alternative. Vacillation or stasis seem to be the only responses possible within this locked, internally churning, visual universe.





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*Worth the Wait*, 2009-2010  
 Diptych, Acrylic on linen  
 103 x 126 inches

←  
*Split Kick*, 2009-2010  
 Diptych, Acrylic on linen  
 103 x 126 inches

←  
*Mr Sweetheart*, 2010  
 Acrylic on linen  
 63 x 103 inches

✓  
*Slow Smolder*, 2010  
 Private Collection  
 52 x 63 inches

Compartmentalization cannot last — so at least the voices of good mental health advise us. Thankfully, for reasons that are not entirely clear (least of all to the artist himself), the log jam finally broke. Previously, Norton had devoted much studio time to working and reworking old canvases, often winning a kind of forced liberation of the gestural curves. In the early 2000s, one saw those rounded shapes breaking out of their former constraints, invading larger and larger portions of the field (*Milton and John*, 2002-03). Yet the colors remain cool and limited, tending to somberness. Anyone who has had a dark night of the soul is likely to feel the intense anguish of these works, and to fear a bit for their author.

Then, suddenly, something quite splendid happened, affecting this viewer and others with force. Revisiting Norton's studio in 2008 after a longish absence, I was greeted by a new world of color. "What a wallop!" I blurted in front of the first work I saw, a phrase that subsequently became its title. Some 12½ feet wide by 7½ feet high, featuring vertical strips of bright yellow stippled with green, white, red, and pink, the diptych pushes its picture plane forward like a caution sign that has tossed caution aside, proclaiming instead a new order of pleasure and happiness. The effect of the painting — bold as Pop art but completely abstract — was shared by several other canvases in the room and by many more soon to come. My exclamation echoed, I believe, the implicit battle cry of this newest, most accomplished phase of the artist's career.

This is not to say that the paintings Norton has made over the past decade are simple in either construction or meaning. Far from it. *Ornette* (2006), named for the free jazz great Ornette Coleman, is a broken field of seemingly random forms and colors that somehow mysteriously cohere, in the manner of Coleman's startling music. Works like *Einstein's Edge of Winter* (2009-11) and *Pink-E* (2011), with their firmly differentiated quarters, remind us that paradigms or "frames of reference" are as determinative in art as they are in physics. *Split Kick* (2009-10) is partially riddled with holes, Swiss cheese fashion, revealing the linen beneath — one of the lacunae grown large as a cartoon thought-bubble, but blank and disclosing nothing. Is this the Nothingness that seemed to impend in the earlier "blue" works? Apparently not, since similar holes appear in many cheerily hued pictures, such as *Mr. Sweetheart* (2009-10), *Slow Smolder* (2010) and, most pointedly, *Worth the Wait* (2009-10) — a work that is thoroughly upbeat in both title and coloration, although it duly notes the annoyance of delayed gratification.



In *Sidewinder* (2010-11), a ladder-like grid appears, suggesting a column of high-rise windows perhaps, but also hinting at a subtle return of the repressed: the latticework of Norton's early sculpture. Its appearance is a tacit acknowledgement of the space that has otherwise been systematically withheld from Norton's paintings through a deliberate refusal of perspective and modeling. But, as Chinese painters have long known, there are other ways to evoke space — most deftly by counterposing form with a vast emptiness. A small boat drawn on a blank expanse will seem suspended in limitless depth and eternity. Such juxtapositions may not always be comforting — “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me,” Pascal said — but confronting the void, even obliquely, is necessary to both art and reason.



In short, an emotion-laden space persists in Norton's paintings, behind the gapped peek-a-boo surfaces, around their unmodulated forms. In several of his most recent works, *Euclid* (2012-13), *Hot Enough to Melt* (2013) and many more, the empty passages have gained almost equal parity with the forms. Moreover, since his breakthrough moment at the turn of the millennium, Norton has also been making sculpture again, somewhat on the sly: familiar grid forms in wood, hemp, and plaster; tangled skeins of limp cord oddly reminiscent of dripping paint.

For this artist, space itself — *depth* in both the pictorial and psychological sense — is tempting and ineradicable. It is the compositional factor commonly associated, in Western thought, with deathly oblivion but also with the passage of time and the kind of traumas that no adult living in the art world escapes: youthful indiscretions and wanderings, intoxicants, volatile relationships, professional frustrations, divorce. Thus this work's pictorial dialogue between emptiness and form, as constant as the inner duel of memory and presence, remorse and hope.

Today, however, the painter is in a very good place, enjoying financial security, a stable and loving second marriage, a well-earned facility in his work, and the quiet respect of his artistic peers. His more disturbing concerns center now on political-economic chicanery and environmental waste — the state of the world rather than the state of his soul. To judge from the painterly emblems with which Norton currently presents us, these grim social issues remain, linen-like, in the background and margins — undisguised and undeniable, to be sure, but overridden by a brightly joyous artistic life under the sign of Matisse. ■

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*Sidewinder*, 2010-2011  
Acrylic on linen  
63 x 103 inches

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*Euclid*, 2012-2013  
Diptych, Acrylic on linen  
79 x 133 inches

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*Hot Enough to Melt*, 2013  
Acrylic on linen  
52 x 63 inches

