

ART REVIEW

# Minimalist mandalas from artist Dan Walsh

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    AUGUST 13, 2012



Dan Walsh's "Prompt" at the Rhode Island School of Design.

PROVIDENCE — “Where the retinal meets the symbolic.” That’s painter Dan Walsh’s one-line summation of his work in a pamphlet that accompanies his first solo museum show in the United States, and it’s apt. His paintings, now up in “Dan Walsh: UnCommon Ground” at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, immediately caress the eye. Yet there’s far more going on here than simple visual pleasure, in the layering of paint, and in the patterns he builds on canvases.

Walsh has his roots in minimalist painting. He mostly paints grid-based patterns. But where minimalists such as Agnes Martin, whose delicately gestural work Walsh’s echoes, were paring down to the essence of structure, this artist is building up. He has referenced Tibetan mandalas when talking about his work. Used as

meditation aids, mandalas can be seen as pictures of consciousness, and in their concentric squares and circles, they are packed with symbolism.

The paintings resemble a hybrid of computer circuitry and your grandmother's quilts, and the tension between hard-edged and handmade carries terrific energy. They're luminous, painted freehand with a soft brush, and the brushwork — steady, light, careful — captivates.

“Prompt” has a pulsating pattern of concentric squares and rectangles in green and red on a school-bus-yellow ground. The boxes have soft corners, and you can envision the painter navigating those corners with his brush; the jitters interrupting the flow of paint as he rounds each one read like little gasps. The pattern pulls you in and pushes you out almost fanatically, but those brush strokes soften the experience.

Walsh is a wiz with color. The luminous “Table” sports a brick-wall pattern, with long and shorter horizontal strokes making their way across the canvas, in hues to paint a nursery with: yellow over powder blue, against a pink ground. The haze of yellow over blue is thickest along the upper bands, fading toward the bottom, letting light in and color through.

The most mandala-like work in the show — that is to say, the most visually complex — is “Signal,” a two-panel piece in earth tones made of grids filled with dots and dashes. The left panel is mostly dots, which fan out in diagonals, and the right panel features horizontal dashes, each a single stroke punctuated with a faint dollop. Brown circles topped off with white in painterly florets provide the basic outline of the grid, like bulbs blinking in an old-timey illuminated sign.

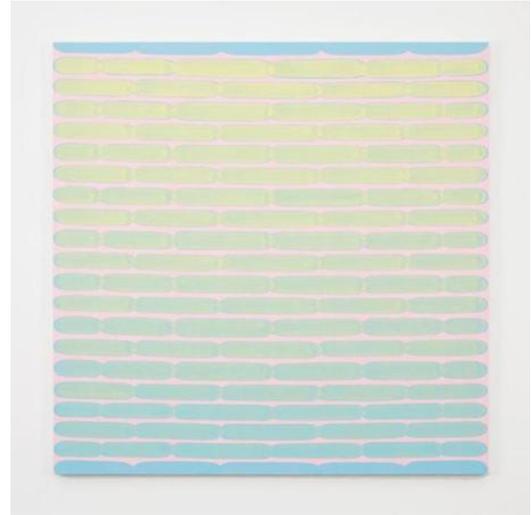
Where is the symbolism in something so abstract? As in a mandala, it's in the nuanced pattern, which here bypasses pictures and narrative and goes straight to work on the brain. Sparks fly as the eyes move from one panel to the other, shifting into gear the right hemisphere, then the left. The effect is hypnotic, but energizing. It's hard to walk away.

Walsh has placed a band of black tape around the gallery wall about 10 feet up. He displays most of the paintings below the tape, but he has mounted a couple above. Like ripples when you drop a pebble in a pond, this installation suggests that an eternal grid extends beyond the paintings, into the gallery, and perhaps on outward. It's a nifty conceptual conceit, but when concept gets in the way of seeing the work,

listen for the sad trombone. The paintings high on the wall are sacrificed to the big idea, and that's just wrong.

## Eyes on the laptop

Walsh's paintings ignite private contemplation, and "Wendy Richmond: Navigating the Personal Bubble," an absorbing video installation also up at the RISD museum, portrays it. Richmond asked several friends and acquaintances to work on their laptops in public settings with their computer cameras on. She projects that footage on three large walls that surround the viewer.



**Dan Walsh's "Table" at the Rhode Island School of Design.**

Computer technology did not create the cocoon individuals can wrap themselves in when they're out in the world. Books and newspapers have always been a handy force field on a subway. But the built-in computer camera does afford an intimate view of its user.

There's a lot of brow furrowing and chin scratching. Richmond has listed the more common gestures on the wall, a choreographic notation of privacy: touch mouth, sip, slump, smile, purse lips. An almost comical dance sometimes sweeps across the screens as first one person leans her chin on her hand, and then the next.



**"Study for Alone in Public" (2012) from Wendy Richmond's "Navigating the Personal Bubble," at the RISD museum.**

Ultimately, these videos are portraits, mostly of people so absorbed in their own activities that they are not self-conscious. But when two blond women with exquisite posture appeared on the screens on either side of me, I wondered if they were performing for the camera, the way someone sitting for a portrait might compose herself.

It's lulling to be surrounded by images of people who are lost in thought. It is safe to watch them, to study them, because they seem so unaware. Then, when someone

apparently more self-conscious appears on the screen, as in life, the game changes. Richmond's installation invites the viewer to attend to those subtle shifts. She investigates private space, but always at the edge of public awareness, an edge where we are most uncomfortable.

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