

October 2024

Paul Mogensen

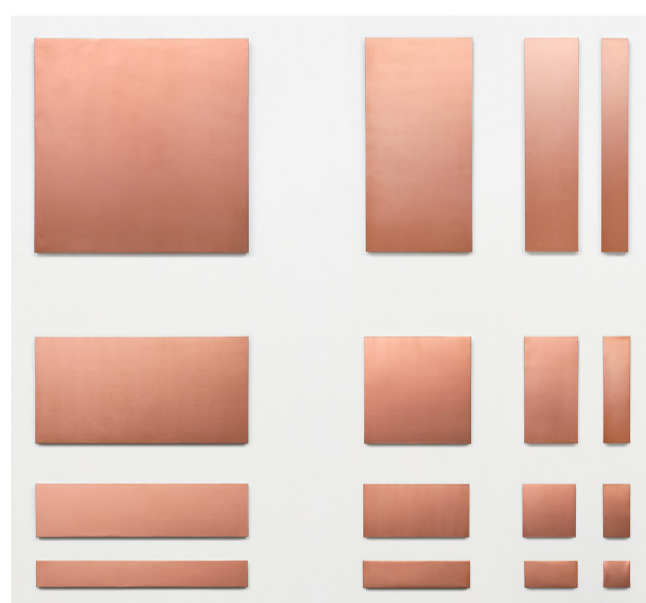
It was Robert Mangold who, in the early 1990s, recommended I pay a visit to Paul Mogensen—"He's a good painter." This is how I found myself for the first time in the loft in Mercer Street where Mogensen lived and worked. Without wasting many words, he showed me his paintings, works on paper and self-printed woodcuts. After his first successes through the 1960s and 1970s, interest in Mogensen's work had waned considerably. However, he continued painting unflinchingly, and he was proven right. Over the last decade, galleries have begun to exhibit Mogensen's paintings of the past again next to new works, and a monograph about his painting has been published by Karma in New York.



In the summer of 1966, Mogensen painted the picture *Copperopolis* for his first solo exhibition, which took place at Bykert Gallery in March 1967. The fact that this painting had a title was an exception to the rule, as Mogensen usually left his paintings without a title—even without the usual term *Untitled*—and did not even sign or date them, for in his opinion, such things only served to divert attention from the painting itself. "Leave out everything except for what is important," was his motto. The title of the copper-colored painting refers back to a trip to the ghost town of Copperopolis in California, where copper was mined during the Gold Rush with great success. This work, which is exemplary for Mogensen's practice, is addressed by a monograph that has just been published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König and Franz König in Cologne. The genesis of this picture points beyond the piece itself to the painterly context of the 1960s.



The life and career of the artist, who was born in Los Angeles in 1941, is typical of a time when existing categories were thrown into question and artists aspired to reach a new definition of painting and sculpture. Mogensen began by studying mathematics and chemistry in 1959, but graduated in the painting class. Under the influence of Russian Constructivism and Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone theory, he conceived his paintings using systematically organized elements, regardless of aesthetic rules and preconditions: "Once I decide to use a system, however it [the painting] turns out, I'll leave it. I was never upset about how it looks."



Mogensen succeeded in bringing these considerations in *Copperopolis* right to the point: a horizontal and vertical progressive sequence follows up in four steps from a small square to a large square painting. The shapes were not painted on a single canvas; instead, Mogensen fixed each one of sixteen canvases of various sizes individually to the wall, which thus became part of the picture in its own right. The color was chosen from the Periodic Table of the Elements, with which he was familiar from his studies. Chemical elements like copper, carbon and iodine in powder form were mixed in acrylic lacquer to form paints, which Mogensen then sprayed onto the canvas using an airbrush. With Carl Andre, one of his first New York friends, Mogensen debated at length the questions that their practice posed. It was through Mogensen that Andre learned about the Periodic Table of Elements, which he used programmatically as a reference for the material of his sculptures. Pure unadulterated color, neither based on subjective preference nor on color theory, was the primary visual factor in Mogensen's painting. On the sixteen canvases spreading out progressively across the wall, it unfolds the expressive power that makes *Copperopolis* an icon of American painting of the 1960s.

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