

## Raymond Jonson

Art in America

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Raymond Jonson at Peyton Wright

By Sue Taylor

In 1909, Raymond Jonson (1891-1982) became the first pupil to enroll in the new Museum Art School in Portland, Ore. Although he left the following year for Chicago, his initial training under Kate Simmons, a former student of the influential art educator Arthur Wesley Dow, impressed upon the young Jonson an esthetic derived from Dow's primary passions: Japanese art and the Nabis. On this foundation, Jonson built a philosophy of art enriched by his reading of Kandinsky's *Art of Spiritual Harmony* (1911), his encounter with European modernism at the Armory Show in Chicago in 1913 and his experience as a designer for the avant-garde Chicago Little Theater. Leaving this heady milieu in 1924, Jonson spent the remainder of his career in the starkly spectacular environment of New Mexico, vigorously promoting the cause of non-objective art.

This exhibition of 50-some abstract paintings and watercolors spanned four decades, from the 1940s through the 1970s. Some of the earliest pictures, such as *Synthesis Fifteen* (1947), with its craggy, mustard-colored mountain framed by a rainbow like a proscenium arch, retain landscape elements. Jonson was awestruck by the Southwest, but searched for ways to convey the feelings it inspired in him rather than depict its appearances. He strove to create "absolute painting," which could move viewers esthetically and even spiritually through purely abstract means. At the same time, he was preoccupied with the physicality of his medium, with surface and texture and the permanence of his materials.

Two technical developments helped define Jonson's mature works. Acrylic paint became available in the late 1950s, and Jonson found the quick-drying, flexible medium so suited to his needs that he abandoned oils for good in 1960. With the airbrush, he could create subtle gradations of color and translucent layers of lightly spattered paint that suggested for him something metaphysical--the interpenetration of all things, an effect also sought by Klee in his use of overlapping screens of tiny colored dots to achieve in paint an equivalent to musical counterpoint. Jonson's *Polymer No. 37* (1970) exemplifies the beautiful luminosity and mysterious spatial effects he was able to conjure through his airbrush technique: here two dimly radiant orbs hover in a lavender fog behind an eccentric, lime-green grid that sticks close to the picture plane. With its dual zones of nebulous atmosphere and precise linear scaffolding, the painting reflects Jonson's admirable artistic persona: he was a visionary who wielded rigorous intellectual and technical control.



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