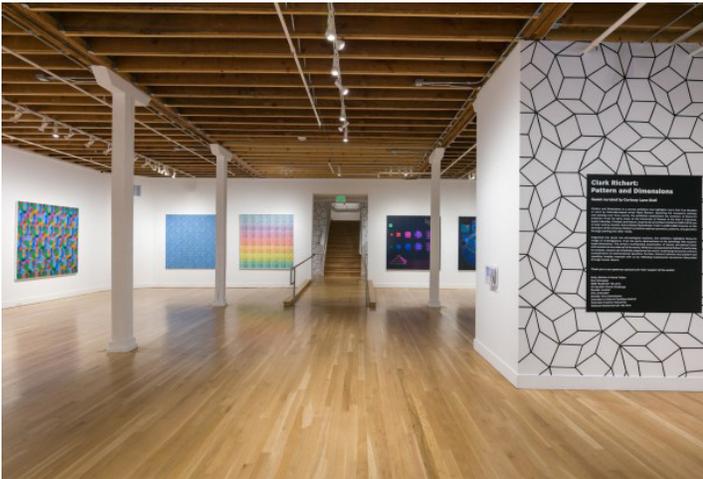


Two dueling Clark Richert exhibitions explore the career of one of Colorado's biggest painters

The revered, 78-year-old Colorado artist is the subject of two major career retrospectives at the same time

Ray Mark Rinaldi / July 12, 2019



Colorado artist Clark Richert has retrospectives at two major museums in the region. This photo is from "Clark Richert: Pattern and Dimensions" at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Photo by Wes Magyar, Provided by BMOCA)

You could form a circus act with all of the elephants milling about the rooms of the two Clark Richert exhibitions taking place concurrently in the region. One at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, the other just up the highway at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

Both shows are terrific and exhaustive and loaded with the eye-popping grid paintings that make Richert so popular with the masses. And each bravely takes on the more complicated aspects of Richert's work — the guy paints the complex patterns of speculative geometry on canvas — not an an easy thing for a curator to explain in the few words that fit on the label of a museum painting.

But each exhibit essentially does the same job, using five decades of work to piece together the conceptual ideas and career evolutions of a 78-year-old artist who is often deemed the most important living painter in the state.

A viewer could spend a lot of time deciphering the differences in their approaches, but that would be a waste of time since there's no need to see both. And they could wonder why there's very little cross-promotion going on between two institutions who clearly knew what the other was up to — after all the effort and expense, why aren't there banners proclaiming 2019 "The Year of Clark Richert?"

But those investigations would no doubt be disrupted by questions over how two nonprofits, who constantly argue they need more resources, could have achieved such a high level of redundancy. These elephants are our friends but they're stepping all over each other's toes here.

That the two curators — Cortney Lane Stell in Boulder and Zoe Larkins in Denver — managed to create such compelling attractions under the pressure of knowing they would compete is testimony to both their talents. They just did their jobs and they did them professionally.

Both establish Richert's place in regional art history, primarily as a founder of the Drop City commune, which brought a group of artists, and the self-made geodesic dome structures they lived in, to the outskirts of Trinidad from 1965 to 1969.



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Both document the lifelong influence architect Buckminster Fuller had on Richert's thinking, and both suggest his legacy is firmly established, through his paintings, as well as his years of teaching at the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design.

Both delve into his efforts with the Criss-Cross Collective of artists starting in the 1970s and both go wild-and-psychedelic with displays of his earlier patterned paintings in day-glo orange, pink, yellow and blue that were meant to be viewed under black light.

And, luckily for viewers, both make the stars of their show Richert's recent body of work, which serves to bring their narratives together: the large-scale, brightly-colored, ultra-precise renderings of mathematical concepts that he created during the past 15 years.

Giant, nearly impossible-to-produce, acrylic paintings with names like "Central Core of the Densely Packed II" (in Boulder) or "Snelsonian Motion V," (in Denver) demonstrate Richert's attempt to depict as many as 10 dimensions on the two-dimensional surface of a canvas.

The curators do a fine job of dissecting Richert's various muses, throwing around terms like "Penrose Tiling" and "quasiperiodic crystals" with as few complications as possible. Both give credit to Richert for seeing things on the cusp of discovery by physicists and chemists.

Importantly, both curators keep us from being overwhelmed by Richert's deep thinking.

Instead of letting our eyes glaze over as we consume numerous visual concepts at once, Stell reminds us in her text: "Although viewers may feel these circuitous ideas seem complicated or inaccessible, the artist feels they can be interpreted intuitively."

For her part, Larkins brings us back to basics keeping the focus on the art rather than the science. At one point, her words remind us, very simply, that Richert is just doing what painters do, and that his work represents "the contradiction at painting's core — that is the use of a flat surface to create the illusion of depth."

No doubt, the shows do have their own personalities.



Clark Richert, "Phi Tesserae," 2015, part of Museum of Contemporary Art Denver's Richert retrospective. (Image provided by the MCA Denver)



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Stell has been researching and exhibiting his work since she first curated a show by him in 2010 at the Rocky Mountain College of Art Design and her familiarity gives her a leg up. BMOCA's "Clark Richert: Pattern and Dimensions," is an intimate, if intellectual, portrait of how the artist's way of seeing the world has remained the same, even as his methods of depicting it changed.

Richert's work isn't a rare sight in the region. He's represented by top galleries, including Denver's formidable Rule Gallery, and has pieces in places like the Denver Museum of Art. Still, Stell shows us things we didn't know.

There's a room of early abstract paintings that will be new to almost everyone. They don't look like those giant, grid pieces at all. They have bold, free-form brush strokes, gobs of paint, overlapping colors. But you can see in these paintings, particularly "Pour" from 1962, that Richert is already drawn to geometry. Emerging from the chunky, abstract scenery common to abstraction from that decade are square and rectangular fields of color and the fine lines that Richert will refine even more as he continues to paint. The exhibit also has some of the most important pieces around, including "Tree of Life," from 1970, which documents Richert's noodling with the patterning concepts behind Penrose Tiling a few years before mathematician Sir Roger Penrose was credited with discovering it.

There's also a digital transfer of the "Cold Beets" video, from 1970, and a recreation of the Drop City collaborative "The Ultimate Painting," a circular, kaleidoscopic painting with a pulsating light that actually spins at the press of a button, giving viewers different ways to see its patterns unfold.

While Stell arranges things thematically, Larkins takes a more linear approach with the MCA's "Clark Richert in Hyperspace." She starts everything out with a brief and easy-to-digest, digital snippet of Richert's 1972 master's thesis at the University of Colorado Boulder titled "Modulation of Space: A Structural Esthetic" and goes on to show how he spent the years that followed working out the principles introduced. Her argument is sound and the journey is fascinating.



Clark Richert, "True Story of the QuasiCrystal," 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 136 inches. (Image provided by the MCA Denver)

"Clark Richert in Hyperspace" continues through Sept. 1 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, 1485 Delgany St. Info at 303-298-7554 or mcadenver.org.

"Clark Richert: Pattern and Dimensions" runs through Sept. 15 at BMOCA, 1750 13th St., Boulder. Info at 303-443-2122 or bmoa.org.