

How to structure a prism within the shape of a disc

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

The chief formal problem considered by Edward Giobbi in his impressive exhibition of paintings at the Jaffe-Friede Gallery of the Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, through Aug. 27, is how to structure the elements of a prism within the shape of a disc.

His work has striking historical precedents. Around 1911, Robert and Sonia Delaunay were both seeking ways to order aesthetic experience through the obliteration of subject matter in the basic segments of the color wheel. Later the American, Macdonald-Wright, was indebted to their color quadrants; and, of course, in contemporary art we have the related targets of Johns and Noland, and above all — in connection with Giobbi — the discs of Frank Stella, such as the *Sinjerli Variations* of 1967-68.

If Stella's discs, however, are statements about the problems of making a painting, and if the Delaunays judged their often-incomplete circles to be a manifestation of sublimity, Giobbi's forms investigate the rhythmic repetitions of concentric circles in terms of the fresco painting of the Italian High Renaissance. He is not so cold as Stella who

personifies the glories and the pedantries of pure intellect; the pictorial references of Giobbi allude to nature and, as in frescoes, to dramas of the imagination.

Like the tondi — discs or medallions — of Della Robbia and Raphael, Giobbi frequently lets the shape determine issues which it could not as a square or rectangle. "The shape of the canvas," he has stated, "is my attempt to establish a wall upon which to create a fresco, an art form I've always wanted to try in an era which affords little opportunity to do so."

The Renaissance concerns of deep perspective ("A Home for Danny Basen," 1970), of proportion and mathematical arrangement ("Birth of Venus," 1969), of scale and the classic arch ("Study for a Religious Painting," 1972), are evident in Giobbi's paintings. So is the design of Romanesque forms. The triptych, too, often organizes a piece, as in "Judith" (1971), where the panel on the left could be a reference to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the arch in the center is the color wheel become a flattened rainbow, and the panel at right denotes form stippled by pointillist brushwork in the manner of Seurat or Signac.

Giobbi's approach to the disc multiplies circles within circles, satellites of his visionary geometries, or on occasion it fragments illusionistic space, as in

"The Rape of Europa," a charcoal and oil of 1968. Here he plays with perceptions of near and far, the three-dimensional on a flat surface. But this work is only partially successful compared to the 1971 cross-hatched final version of the same title, in which the powerful rhythms of the drawing set up wholly abstract tensions.

Fresco painting of the Italian Renaissance was a public act; Giobbi's imagery, despite its referents to history, remains a strongly private affair. Thus, it is problematical. He has found a technique for using history without falling into the trap of empty eclecticism: but the kind of statement a fresco makes is often irreconcilable with the formalism of the prismatic color wheel.

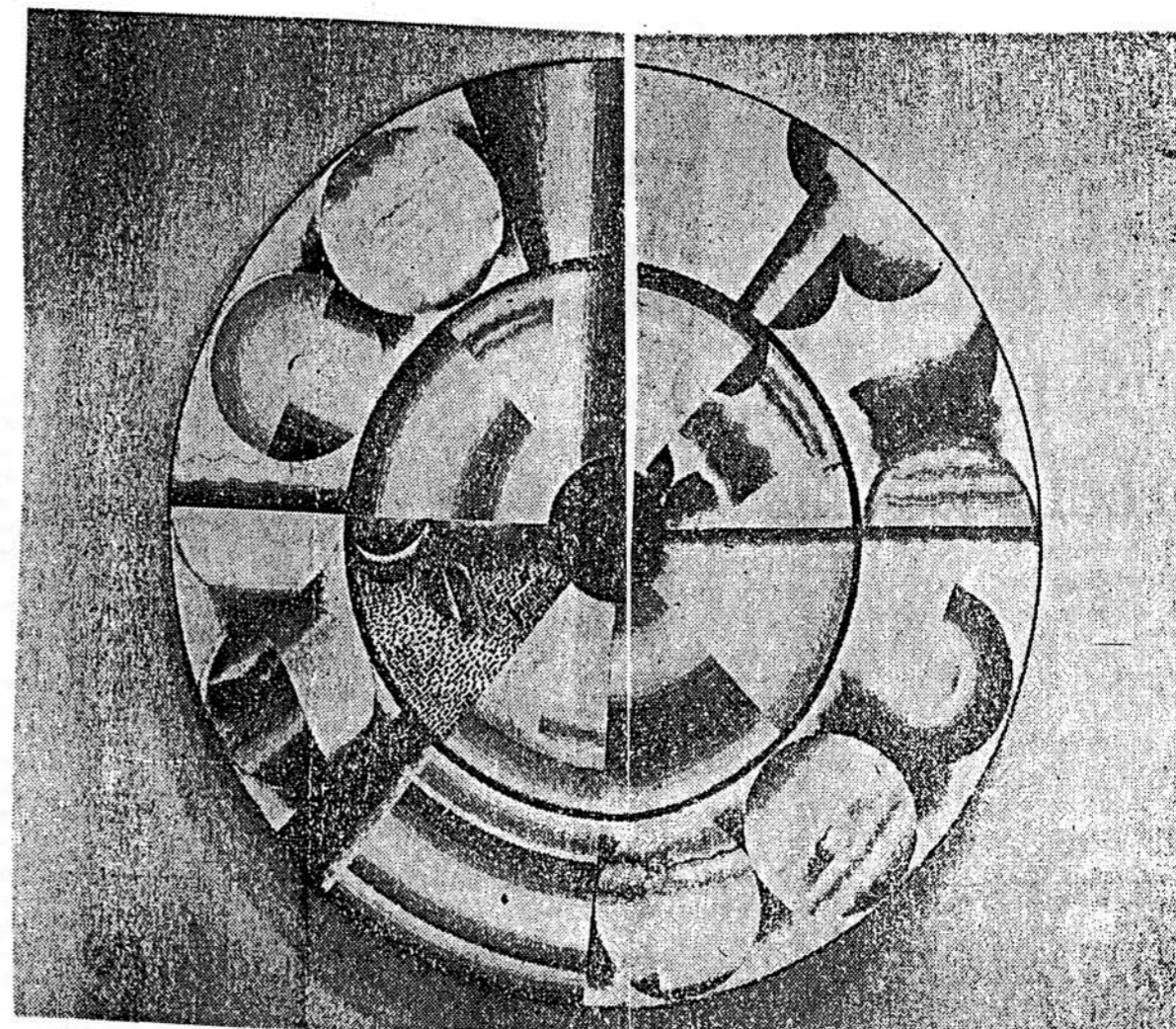
One of the most interesting aspects of the Dartmouth show is the opportunity to compare Giobbi's large-scale color ideas with his generally less ambitious charcoal and grisaille pieces. In each instance the blacks, whites and grays possess a graceful clarity now and then absent from the busier color paintings. The cosmic feeling of "A Home for Danny Basen" implies the kind of celestial vision that might be painted on a domed ceiling by Bernini, but Giobbi drives home the point by putting an aggressive temple frame around the composition. The dense, polyphonic complexity of the color discs-within-discs suggest an imagery in which the individual picture is a *scenium* of all the artist knows: crowded, diverse, intricate.

While such visual rhetoric was once appropriate to a sacred and public context — the artist was risking in his every project his chances of salvation — it seems, in the more secular private idiom of contemporary art, self-conscious. Giobbi's best work, the charcoal-on-primed canvas "Birth of Venus," the black-and-white studies for larger color pieces, are statements in which the overt distractions of prismatic vistas and heroic scale give way to a *chiaroscuro* style, muted, austere yet luminous, where the forms are epigrammatic and the spectrum is implied. He is, in any case, among the most compelling painters on today's American scene.

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"The galleries at the Hopkins Center represent a point of view rather than a fixed policy," said Truman H. Brackett, who has been director of galleries at Dartmouth since 1967 and associated with Hopkins since the Center opened a decade ago.

Edward Giobbi, Dartmouth's Artist-in-Residence this summer, is the latest in a distinguished program of artists-in-residence which has included Rauschenberg, Stella, George Rickey, Varujan Boghosian and Donald Judd. Each 10-week term a new artist is invited to the campus. He does not have to teach, is given a studio and receives an exhibition.



"RAPE OF EUROPA" (1968), charcoal and oil on canvas. By Edward Giobbi.

The artist, however, who usually chosen by Matthew Wysocki, Director of the Visual Studies program, Brackett, and Peter Smith, director of the Hopkins Center, does make himself informally available to students.

During the coming year, photographer Walker Evans, painter Phillip Guston and sculptor Robert Suttman will be at Dartmouth. Brackett is allotted from six days to six months lead time, as the case may be, to provide the exhibition; but he is also in charge of numerous separate exhibitions in spaces throughout Dartmouth. Not only will Walker Evans select prints for his in-residence show, for instance, but forthcoming events include an exhibition of 50 Kandinsky watercolors and "Master Drawings From New England Private Collections."

"With so many changing events we can't spend time on elaborate research, although we issue modest catalogues for the displays of artists in residence," Brackett said. "In terms of programming we're weighted about 60-40 percent toward contemporary work. The point of view is simply exposure to good examples from all periods. The artist-in-residence is here long enough to leave a mark but not so long that students begin to imitate him. And it's a convenience for artists, who don't have to break up their studios."