

An abstract painting by George Antonov. The composition is dominated by a dark, textured background of black and dark brown. In the foreground, there are several large, overlapping shapes. On the left, a white, elongated shape with a yellow base and a red horizontal line. To its right is a large, vibrant red shape with a white diamond-shaped center. Below the red shape is a blue, textured area. The overall style is expressive and gestural, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, layered color palette.

GEORGE ANTONOV
A Retrospective

ISBN: 978-1-926772-20-2
Title: George Antonov - A Retrospective
Format: Book
Publisher: Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

THE ONTARIO
TRILLIUM FOUNDATION



LA FONDATION
TRILLIUM DE L'ONTARIO

Clarington
Leading the Way



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

GEORGE ANTONOV

Essay by **Iliana Antonova**

“At times the open fan makes all particles of matter, ashes, and fog rise and fall. We glimpse the visible through the mist, as if through the mesh of a veil, following the creases that allow us to see stone in the opening of their inflections ‘fold after fold’ revealing the city. The fan reveals absence or withdrawal, a conglomeration of dust, hollow collectivities, armies and hallucinating assemblies.”¹

The artistic production of artist George Antonov is the physical evidence left in the wake of a commitment borne out of relentless curiosity and consistent questioning: fold after fold. To conceive of a retrospective exhibition in the face of such varied experimentation and substantial output has proven to be an enormous undertaking. Furthermore, as the artist’s daughter, it has been impossible for me to remain objective through this process. Running parallel to this enormous and varied body of work are personal narratives and struggles interwoven with countless anecdotes and nuances which hinder my ability to read the work through a purely objective lens. Growing up alongside this body of work has informed not only my perception of the significance and potential of art to enrich and challenge, but also my understanding of the virtues of commitment and dedication in the face of countless obstacles. It has been enlightening to organize the retrospective exhibition of George Antonov at the Visual Arts Center of Clarington, which ran between July and August of 2016. This accompanying essay attempts to unravel the thread that runs as the undercurrent of this monumental body of work.

For the first three decades of his extensive career, George Antonov lived and worked in the then-communist state of Bulgaria, where he was a member of the prestigious Artist Union (1977–1990). In this highly charged political climate, art production was closely monitored by the state, and furthermore, the Western procession of ‘isms’ which marks much of the evolution of 20th century art barely infiltrated the highly censored cultural landscape of Bulgaria. As such, Antonov’s production from this time consists primarily of state commissions in the form of graphic logos, but also includes postage stamps, mosaics, and monumental sculptural works, almost all of which are now lost. His immigration to Canada in the early 90’s marks a radical departure from this period of production signaled by a sudden access to information as well as a newly found freedom of artistic expression. His dislocation also initiated the beginning of a previously unfamiliar negotiation with, and navigation of, the Western art market. The resulting instability and anonymity, although at times liberating, have proven to be a challenge, but never a setback.

George Antonov’s development as an artist has been neither a linear series of logical progressions, nor has it been defined by abrupt changes in direction despite his sudden uprooting and resituating. Never afraid to revisit ideas out of fear that they might undermine his current progress, his creative process is guided by a continuity inherent in a dedicated commitment to curiosity and a disciplined daily studio practice. It is these qualities which position his mode of production as independent of contemporary currents and trends. Amidst the sublimation of a structured strategy, the element of chance is nurtured within the studio, while the space of production provides evidence of a steady rhythm which is the undercurrent of Antonov’s existence and ultimately informs our understanding of the distinct visual language that comprises his diverse yet decisive brand of production.

The goal of the pictographic emblem (or logo) is to communicate an idea or brand with as little representational detail as possible while still maintaining an unmistakable representational motif. Traditionally this is achieved by utilizing hard edges through a compositional play of negative and positive space with the aim of producing an emblem which maintains its recognition and legibility while remaining impervious to scale, context, or fashion. Historically speaking, the graphic arts moved in parallel



with the major historical movements of the 20th century. Of particular interest here are the hallmarks of Modernism, which by the 50's had shed its affiliation with avant-garde artistic trends in Europe to become an international, commercialized movement. The visual simplicity and conceptual clarity that were the founding characteristics of Modernist painting, more specifically within minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, fluidly transferred between visual and graphic arts. The fundamental difference between these two art forms lies within the realm of form and function. While graphic arts served the function of branding through instant public recognition, visual arts, on the other hand, utilized modernism as a vehicle for the exploration of and experimentation with abstraction and ultimately aimed to question the objecthood of the painted surface. Produced before the emergence of graphic design software, the few surviving graphic emblems designed by Antonov during the 70's and 80's were meticulously produced by hand (Figure 1-2). Through the use of black tempera paint and measuring instruments, these emblems affirm the Modernist agenda while simultaneously operating as images with a functional end-game. Within the context of communist censorship, abstraction was rarely tolerated within the realm of public exhibitions. Interestingly, within this unique context, the otherwise sober field of graphic arts granted the artist much more freedom to push farther towards an abstraction of form and concept than may have been possible in sculpture and painting.

Representative of the earliest surviving works by the artist, these graphic emblems are an elucidatory segue into the most recent works in George Antonov's oeuvre. In the third-floor gallery space hang a series of paintings of various sizes composed exclusively of black and white hard-edge forms (page 9-11). Much like the graphic emblems, these works attest to a relentless pursuit of the generation of dynamic spatial situations within the confines of the two-dimensional plane through economy of line and clarity of form. Yet, unlike the graphic emblems, these paintings rule out any specific references to a representational motif. Furthermore, these works stand as objects independent of a larger program of functional operation and reproduction. Although the paintings are ultimately flat, they retain their plasticity. Negative and positive forms seem to oscillate in their dimensionality, at once receding and advancing, much in the way a sharp shadow might interact with a well-defined

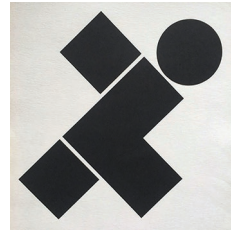
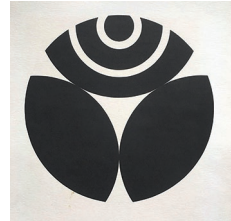


Figure 1:
George Antonov
COMMISSIONED GRAPHIC
LOGO, circa 1975

Figure 2:
George Antonov
COMMISSIONED GRAPHIC
LOGO, circa 1975



Figure 3:
George Antonov
UNTITLED, 2006.
Bronze, 7" high

Figure 4:
George Antonov
UNTITLED, 2007.
Mixed Media, 8" high

three-dimensional object in space. Although historically there was great interest shown in black and white painting by postwar artists such as De Kooning, Franz Klein, Ellsworth Kelly, Joseph Albers, and Barnett Newman, the importance of black and white in the palette with respect to shadow and light was justified by Leonardo Da Vinci centuries beforehand:

“The first of all simple colours is white, though philosophers will not acknowledge either black or white to be colours; because the first is the cause, or the receiver of colours, and the other totally deprived of them. But as painters cannot do without either, we shall place them among the others. We shall set down white for the representation of light, without which no colour can be seen... and black for total darkness.”²

Positioned in the center of the gallery upon plinths is a compendium of small-scale sculptural forms created by the artist over the last two decades (page 14–15). Produced from a wide variety of materials including bronze, plaster, wood, and wax, these sculptures represent an exploration of the figure ground/ dichotomy (in the round) through infinitely nuanced ways. The methods of production are as varied as the materials employed; traditional subtractive and additive sculpting processes are just as significant as elements of accident or chance. As an example, Figure 3 illustrates a sculpture produced when the artist gave instructions to have liquid bronze poured onto the concrete floor of a metal foundry, resulting in a work dictated purely by chance. By positioning the haphazard spill vertically on a plinth, Antonov proposes a work which reconciles the opposing notions of ephemeral liquid and permanent matter. The sculpture illustrated in Figure 4 is the result of a reorientation and isolation of a broken black clothing hanger. Although hardly recognizable as a common utilitarian object in its ruptured state, this work suggests a Duchampian gesture; a ‘readymade’ in every sense. As such, the formation of these sculptural works relies just as heavily on accident and chance as on careful planning, modeling, and refining, suggesting a non-linear method of working, not restricted by a consistency in method or materiality. Clear parallels can be drawn between the group

of multifarious sculptural works and the series of paintings which surround them. Beyond the echoing of forms and compositions within the gallery, the viewer can glean an inherent interest in collapsing notions of dimensionality. Through a heightened awareness of the interaction and interdependence of positive and negative, the painting becomes object, while the object casts doubt on the illusionistic nature of perspective.

Situated in an unexpected gallery alcove, revealed only once the viewers make their way out of the room, hangs an isolated large-scale painting at a ninety-degree angle to a similarly sized window (Figure 5). Although consistent with the artist's interest in geometrical black forms, the work substitutes the previously employed white with a broad range of warm hues. The painting references the window by virtue of its proximity and scale and is further affected as natural light spills through the window directly onto the work, casting ephemeral light and shadow diagonally across its surface, echoing the diagonals of the composition in the painting. It is as if the painting bears the trace of the transitory light and shadow upon its surface, expressed by the geometrical intervention of the window's mullions. The pivotal 1979 essay by Rosalind Krauss entitled *Grids* aptly points out that the visual structure of the grid became emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts: "Logically speaking, the grid extends, in all directions, to infinity. Any boundaries imposed upon it by a given painting or sculpture can only been seen – according to this logic – as arbitrary. By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric."³ We see evidence of the grid in the black and white paintings, and in the positioning of the plinths which support the sculptural works; we imagine the grid imposed upon the graph paper which must have been an instrument in conceiving compositional ideas for the graphic logos, and we see it instated as the support structure of the canvas itself. Krauss points out that the architectural detail of the window as a subject in painting late into the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th century gave way to abstraction unlike any other subject in the past. The window functions as "the multilevel representation through which the work of art can allude, and even reconstitute, the forms of Being."⁴ Matisse's *French Window at Collioure*

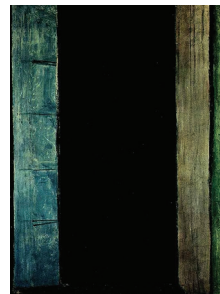


Figure 5:
George Antonov
UNTITLED, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 36 × 48"

Figure 6:
Henri Matisse
PORTE-FENÊTRE
À COLLIOURE (FRENCH
WINDOW AT COLLIOURE),
1914, France.
Oil on canvas, in the
collection of Centre
Pompidou, 46 × 35 ½"

(Figure 6) of 1914 is a prime example of the window as a subject onto abstraction. If one is to assume that George Antonov's 'window painting' is an opening which straddles the line between abstraction and representation, the monochromatic and colour, as well as the geometric and the organic, then we can certainly look to this work functioning as the bridge which transports the viewer both physically and conceptually into the second segment of his retrospective exhibition situated in the first-floor gallery space.

Susan Sontag defines art in the following statement: "Art is the objectification of the will in a thing or performance, and the provoking or arousing of the will. From the point of view of the artist, it is the objectification of a violation; from the point of view of the spectator, it is the creation of an imaginary décor for the will."⁵ The sheer reach of Antonov's reflection on his own artistic practice and the timelessness of the questions he raises become evident in the suite of works on display in this, the main gallery of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington. The 'objectification of the will' becomes embodied within a suite of sixteen large-scale paintings which are compositionally resolved, yet seem to push against the confining limitations of the picture plane. The familiar black shapes begin to take on softer edges, and become contextualized within a much broader colour palette. The surfaces of these works are encrusted with texture characterized by active, even impasto brushwork. Spills and drips seem to be nurtured and celebrated by virtue of their uncertain outcome. The content in these canvases seems to be developed through the very process of painting, implying an improvisation based on a much more intuitive approach than that of the works occupying the third floor gallery. Honest response to a personal search appears to be the driving imperative.

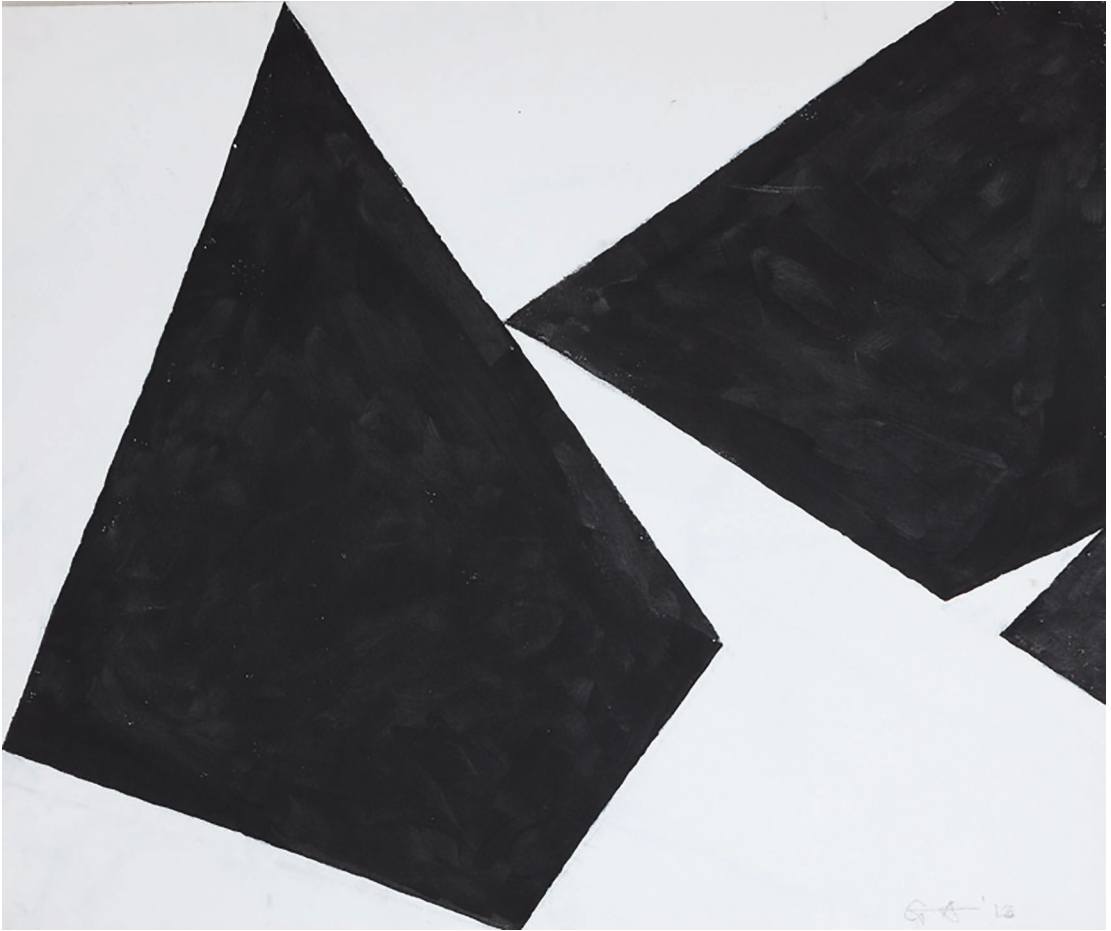
The deliberate choice made by the artist to withhold titling his works indicates a fundamental belief in allowing the viewer to assume responsibility through the act of looking. This should be understood as a generous gesture, privileging a subjective encounter. As example, had the painting featured on the cover been titled 'Reclining Figure', the viewer would naturally omit the possibility of understanding the image as a landscape, or alternatively, as a purely abstract composition. Similarly, had Matisse omitted a title from his window painting, would one maintain the same understanding

of the work's subject? The ambiguity of subject matter is suggestive not of indecision, but rather a transferring of trust onto the viewer. As Nietzsche famously declared, "There are no facts, only interpretations."⁶ Although all works exhibited in this gallery retain coherence in their active compositions and dynamic colour palette, there are clear indications of fervent experimentation in the private realm of the studio.

The viewer is granted a degree of insight into the studio process with an intimate suite of works in the adjacent, somewhat cavernous and elongated small gallery which holds a compendium of thirty-six small-scale oil on canvas studies. Encircling the entirety of the room and hung in a tight continuous row, the group of paintings invite a quick spin of the body to animate the works, much in the same way a film strip generates a moving image. At the same time, the small-scaled compositions encourage an intimate and contemplative viewing. This grouping of works primarily consists of one-offs: works created in one sitting. Although some of these works have progressed into more finished studies, most retain the looseness of an underpainting, which traditionally employs a more mercurial or watered-down medium to enable the fluidity of a quick sketch. In choosing to refrain from overworking these compositions, Antonov proffers a glimpse into a private realm, and ultimately leaves the viewer with a privileged insight into his multivalent process. Fold after fold.

Endnotes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (U of Minnesota Press, 1993) 30.
- 2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, cited in David S Rubin, "Black and White Painting: A Historical Perspective," in *Black and White Are Colors: Paintings of the 1950s-1970s*, ed. David W. Steadman and David S. Rubin, exh. Cat. Montgomery Art Gallery, Pomona College, Claremont, CA: Lang Art Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont, CA (Claremont, 1979) 5.
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1999) 18.
- 4 Krauss 17.
- 5 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 31.
- 6 Sontag 5.









Gabriel













G. Anthony '11











List of Works

Cover:

UNTITLED, 2012. Oil on canvas; 48 × 36"

Page 9:

BLACK AND WHITE COMPOSITION, 2013. Oil on canvas; 24 × 20"

Page 10:

BLACK AND WHITE COMPOSITION, 2013. Oil on canvas; 24 × 20"

Page 11:

BLACK AND WHITE COMPOSITION, 2013. Oil on canvas; 36 × 30"

Page 12:

UNTITLED, 2013. Oil on canvas; 48 × 36"

Page 13:

UNTITLED, 2013. Oil on canvas; 48 × 36"

Page 14:

INSTALLATION VIEW, Mixed media; variable dimensions

Page 15:

INSTALLATION VIEW, Mixed media; variable dimensions

Page 16:

UNTITLED, 2010. Oil on canvas; 36 × 48"

Page 17:

UNTITLED, 2011. Oil on canvas; 30 × 36"

Page 18:

UNTITLED, 2011. Oil on canvas; 20 × 24"

Page 19:

UNTITLED, 2011. Oil on canvas; 36 × 27"

Page 20:

UNTITLED, 2011. Oil on canvas; 36 × 48"

Page 21:

UNTITLED, 2011. Oil on canvas; 48 × 36"

Page 22:

UNTITLED, 2012. Oil on canvas; 30 × 36"

Page 23:

UNTITLED, 2013. Oil on canvas; 30 × 36"

Publication to accompany the exhibition *George Antonov – A Retrospective* at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, from July 17 to August 14, 2016. The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington is supported by its Members and Donors, the Municipality of Clarington, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ontario Arts Council.

Photographers:

Jean Michel Komarnicki
Iliana Antonova

Executive Director:

Dionne Powlenzuk

Exhibition Curator:

Iliana Antonova

Editor:

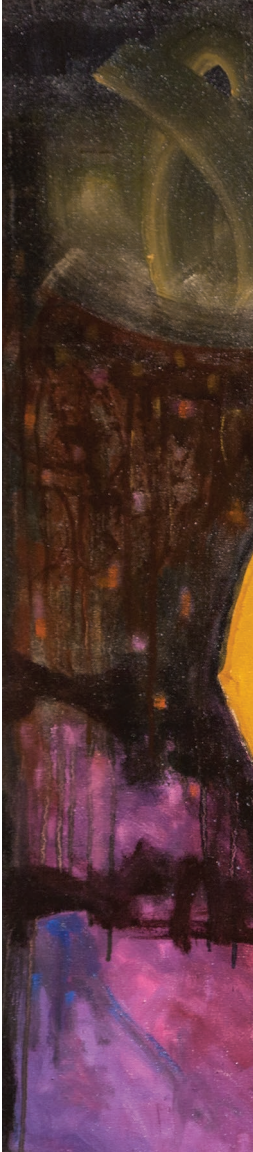
John Oughton

Catalogue Designer:

Karen Henricks

Printer:

Moveable Inc.



The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington
P.O. Box 52, 143 Simpson Avenue
Bowmanville, Ontario Canada L1C 3K8
(905) 623.5831 fax (905) 623.0276
website: www.vac.ca