

# Art in America

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## Don Suggs at LA Louver

The show "Concentric" at LA Louver provided yet another piece of the puzzle that is Don Suggs's highly eclectic artistic practice. Suggs began his career as a geometric hard-edged abstractionist, and a cursory look at this show might suggest that he has returned to the '60s in a Kenneth-Noland-meets-Bridget-Riley style: circular paintings with multiple Technicolor bands in eye-popping combinations play all the sensory tricks of Op art and recall the pure, clean esthetics of the era. The methodology behind their construction discloses, however, that these disks are a continuation of Suggs's restless inquiry into a wide range of systems of representation and the endless ways those systems compete and interact.

As revealed in "One Man Group Show," a concurrent 38-year survey of paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures at Otis College of Art and Design, Suggs's concentric works reach back to the mid-1980s, when he reinterpreted a series of historical landscape painting reproductions by inverting the images and expressing the forms with emotive, liquid brushstrokes. Around the same time, he was superimposing sharp geometric shapes over large areas of exquisitely executed, photorealistic landscapes and portraits. These pieces attest, as does the recent work, to the critical, conceptual nature of Suggs's painting, always interrogating the devices (and vices) of the medium, and being highly conscious of its past, present and future.

For the works at LA Louver (all 2006 or '07), Suggs selected landmark paintings by both male and female artists (hence the series subtitle "Patrimony/Matrimony") such as Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Cross*, *New Mexico* and Joan Mitchell's *Moorning*. Using a complex notational code, he distills each painting's purported psychological and emotional essence, determines which colors are most prominent, and assigns them a corresponding position in his painting. Then, from a platform suspended above a mechanical turntable, he meticulously applies crisp rings of oil pigment according to his copious notes. The effect is hypnotic, dizzying, with bands of color seeming to whirl, rise, recede, ripple and reverberate like shockwaves from the center.

This retinal entertainment is amusingly analogized in large pieces such as *Watteau/Tiepolo*, a pair of stacked, tangential tondos of vibrant cobalts, oranges, yellows and reds, referring to the masters of Rococo illusionism and theatrical court painting. Suggs similarly translates a figurative sublime into a disorienting abstract sublime in several series—each containing six smaller, oil-on-panel works of circles—whose color arrangements are derived from his landscape photos of Joshua Tree, Capitol Reef and other western landmarks.

Although Suggs runs the risk of divesting original masterpieces of their mystical auras in his machine-spun, hyper-optical canvases, he has paradoxically breathed new life into perhaps too-familiar works. Sometimes a tree must be cut down before we can see what stories its rings will tell.

—Constance Mallinson



Don Suggs: *Watteau/Tiepolo*, 2007, oil on panel, 111 by 75 inches overall; at LA Louver.