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Math Is Just Part Of What Makes This Artist's Work Add Up

BY JESSICA DAILEY / JANUARY 30, 2023





Artist Michael Schultheis relaxes in his studio.

It's a common stereotype: People adept with numbers are logical and analytical, a direct contrast to artsy, more creative thinkers. But you need not look farther than your nearest art museum to see the error in this line of thinking. From the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky to the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, math is ever-present in the work of the most influential artists. "Mathematics is the most conceptual and visual language there is," says painter and sculptor Michael Schultheis. "It's elegant, beautiful and universal."



An inspiration board holds images of paintings, sculptures and architecture.

Based in Seattle, Schultheis is following in the footsteps of the great geometric artists. He studied math and economics at Cornell University and then began his career at Microsoft. A key element from both environments now serves as the



"I treat the canvas like a chalkboard," Schultheis says. Each painting begins with a "chalk tray" along the bottom—a horizontal line from which the equations rise. To the untrained eye, the brushstrokes look like abstract figures, lines and swirls layered on top of each other. But peer a little closer and mathematical signs reveal themselves: the infinity symbol, Venn diagrams and limaçons all dance across the painting. At the top, a sweeping arch represents a sphere with an oculus—an homage to Archimedes, whose formula was used to design the Pantheon—to illuminate the mathematics. Schultheis' color palette also nods to ancient Greece, taking inspiration from the Hellenistic period with shades of vermilion, lapis lazuli and ochre. The hues take on a new life in the artist's NFTs, digital versions of his paintings rendered as videos, where they ebb and flow.

In his sculptures, Schultheis brings the geometry off the canvas and into the third dimension. Using bonsai wire, he models shapes that speak to the interconnectedness of human nature before covering them with wax and casting them in bronze. Concentric circles represent the ripples of life that expand outward from our birth. A Venn diagram shows how two people reach for each other and overlap. The elegant limaçon is a symbol of our inner and outer selves. "I tell stories with geometry," the artist says. "They are about how we connect; how we fall in love; and how we live passionately, ineffably and fully through our lives."

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