

# Beyond self-expression

**Brendan Byrne** explores Paul Brown's pioneering generative art

Process, Chance, and Serendipity: Art that makes itself, an exhibition by Paul Brown, National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC, to 15 July

COMPUTER art pioneer Paul Brown likes to say that his work is "art that makes itself". Brown's involvement in the genre dates from 1968, when he visited the Cybernetic Serendipity show at the ICA in London, featuring such notable trailblazers as Nam June Paik and Jean Tinguely. The impact this show had on Brown and his peers could be compared to the famous 1976 Sex Pistols gig in Manchester, UK.

Brown would go on to study at University College London's Slade School of Art, one of the few schools that had already integrated computers into its curriculum. Prefiguring the habits of a start-up culture still two decades away, Brown took to sleeping on the studio floor where he worked, as the Slade's mainframes were both in high demand and needed lots of processing time to finish tasks.

Avant-garde work such as John Cage's indeterminate music and early 20th-century movements, especially Dada, deeply influenced Brown's experiments with randomisation, chance and mathematics. The *I Ching*, a major text for Cage and Philip K. Dick among others, also played a part. Brown wrote of these years: "Self-expression was perceived as an outdated romantic notion and many artists were exploring methods for removing themselves from the production process."

A new retrospective of Brown's

*Reconfigurable Painting* can no longer be toyed with

work allows us to place it in the context of the process-oriented art of the last 50 years.

The earliest of the pieces on display, *Untitled Gouache*, was composed the year Brown saw Cybernetic Serendipity. To generate its orderly chutes and ladders, Brown opened up psychoanalyst-theorist Anton Ehrenzweig's *The Hidden Order of Art* at random, and plugged the last digit of the page number into his code.

*Untitled Computer Assisted Drawing* is populated by what look like deconstructed alien emojis. Its code was written

in the early programming language Fortran and run off punch cards. The original took several hours to print out on a drum plotter. Like several pieces, this is a recent reprint – surely one of the benefits of composing computer-generated art.

The succinctly and charmingly named *BIG DIM/0363000 200, 120/11,969* shows stages in the growth of a 3D cellular automaton under certain constraints. Those

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"certain constraints" remain invisible to the audience, and are probably indecipherable to anyone but the artist.

This is one of the problems with process-oriented art: if the underlying rules – the work's central fascination – are too complex, they mean nothing to the viewer.

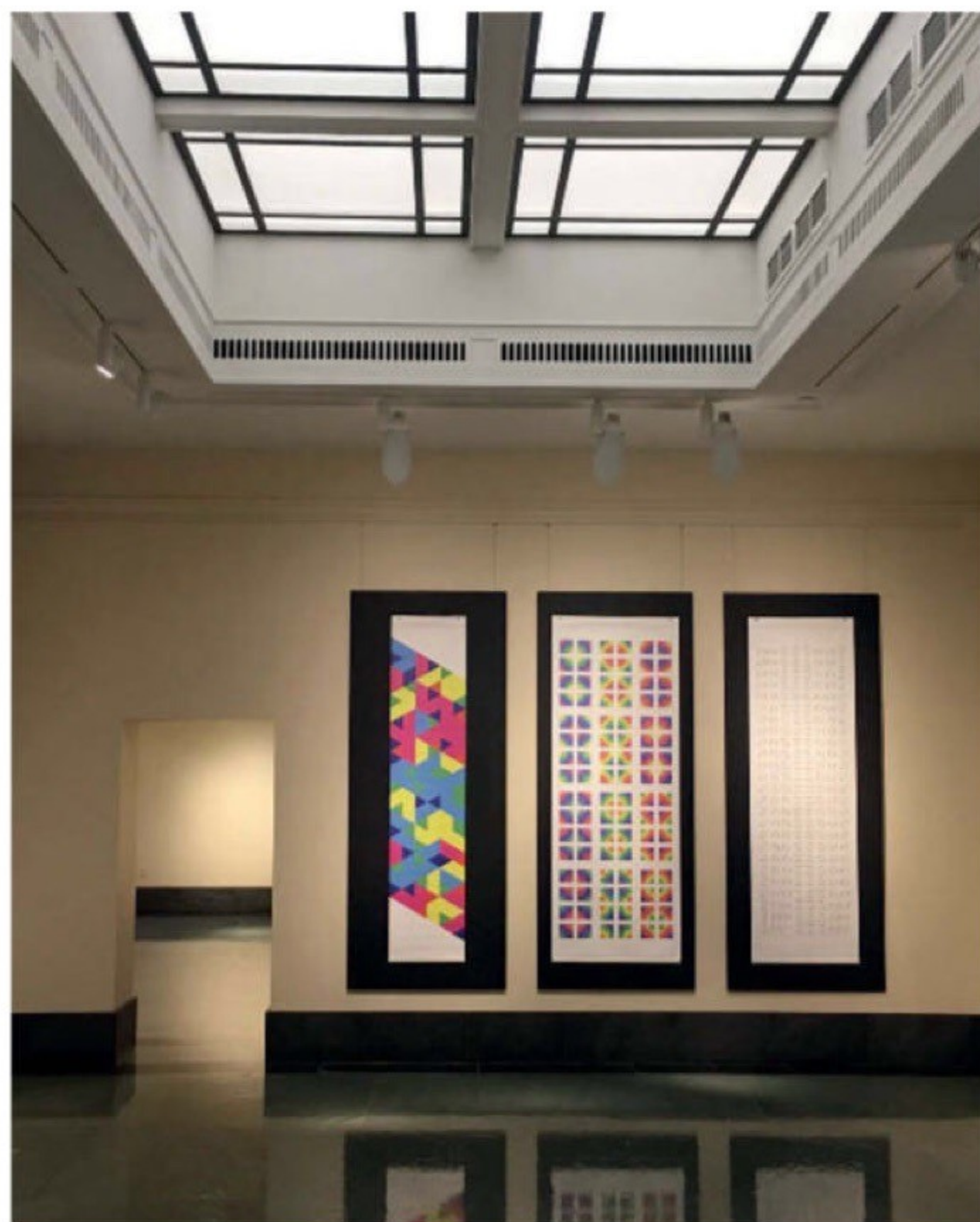
The development of the fine-art inkjet printing process known as giclée in the 1990s enabled Brown to expand his style, pushing his use of colour and depth. The colours of *Gymnasts* somersault off the wall and glue themselves behind your eyelids. *Ceiling Detail from the House of Signs* resembles a series of interlocking sigils from a Jorge Luis Borges fable. Both pieces achieve the rare distinction of being more beautiful than they are interesting.

The presentation of *Reconfigurable Painting* is less successful. Originally a set of six triangular canvases, each composed of nine sub-triangles, it was meant to be something the viewer could rearrange.

Visitors to the exhibition are no longer given this opportunity: just like punk, the insurgent art of the late 20th century has been de-weaponised.

The show is housed in a small atrium at the National Academy of Sciences and is best accessed via the building's C Street entrance. However, you shouldn't miss the chance to walk past the main entrance on Constitution Avenue to the south, if only for the glares from the goons guarding the Federal Reserve next door. ■

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