

3-D Imaging Past & Present

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National  
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# STEREO WORLD

**A Grand Show  
in Grand Rapids**



**3D-World**

**Stereo Paintings of  
Abe Fagenson**



# Opening the Other

## The Stereo Paintings of Abe

by Ray Zone

Abe Fagenson is an artistic anomaly in the world of stereography. He is one of very few painters in the world who creates work by hand, using acrylics, that is made to be viewed with cross-eye binocular freevision. Each canvas includes both left and right-eye images, horizontally reversed, as a unified work of art.

I first encountered Abe's work in the form of 35mm slide pairs that

Abe Perlstein had photographed from the canvases, isolating the left and right images in a single slide. These images were projected in 3-D with dual Carousels for years with programs at Los Angeles Public Libraries and schools where they always amazed the young audiences. When I finally got the opportunity to see Fagenson's paintings with my naked eyes, it was a further revelation.



Abe Fagenson,  
"Leaves." (All images  
here are presented in  
standard parallel  
viewing format.)



Abe Fagenson,  
"Landscape."



# Eye Fagenson

In January 2007 I included four of Abe's stereo paintings in a joint art show at the Black Maria Gallery in Los Angeles with an exhibit titled "Discover 3-D." (SW Vol. 33 No. 5, page 20.) And in July 2008, at the NSA Annual Convention in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large display of Abe's stereo paintings were on view at the Stereo Art Gallery. A 3-D slide program in the NSA Stereo Theater also showcased Abe's work. Fittingly, Abe's crossview paintings were displayed in the Stereo Art Gallery adjacent to Jerry Oldaker's crossview digital fractal images. When Abe and Jerry met it was a definite meeting of the minds.

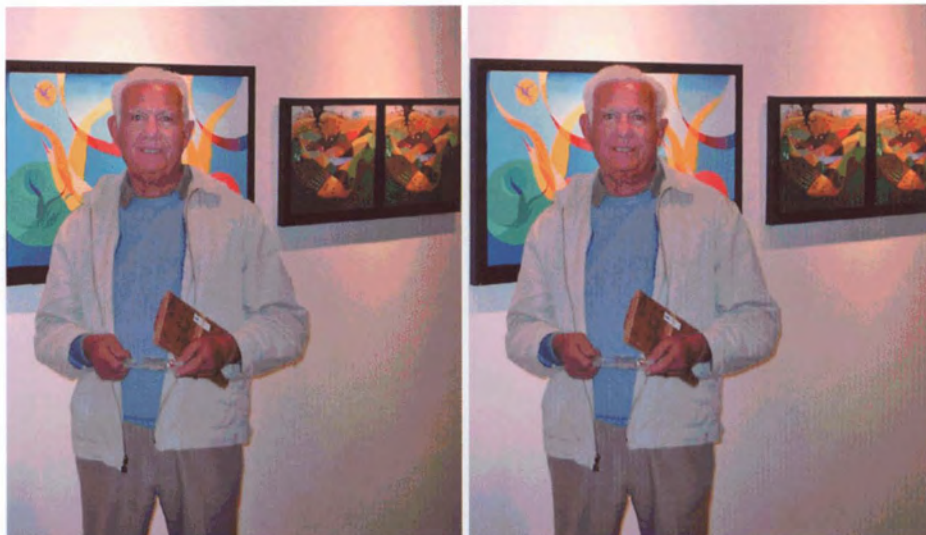
## Interview

Before shipping off Abe's paintings to the NSA Convention, I spent some time with him discussing how he began to make paintings in such an unusual modality.

**Zone:** What was your first experience of 3-D?

**Fagenson:** It was in art school. I was a GI and went there after World War II on the GI Bill. While in the Air Force, I had spent a year up in Iceland. And there was nothing to do in Iceland. I was always interested in drawing and so I started making sketches at night, drawing other guys in the Quonset hut.

I started making sketches and I realized that you sketch with one eye open and one eye closed. If you sketched with the wrong eye open, you would move one way. If you opened the other eye, it was off. It was very confusing doing a drawing with one eye. I hadn't even thought of stereo and it was the basis for trying to draw. Anyway, I did make a lot of sketches



*Abe Fagenson by some of his paintings in the Art Gallery of the 2008 NSA convention in Grand Rapids, MI.*



*Abe Fagenson, "Abstract." The original cross-viewing paintings average about three feet wide, although a few are larger.*

when there was a break in combat. I was very interested in drawing and in art.

After the war, I applied to the Art Institute of Chicago and got in. Not that my drawings were any good but Uncle Sam was paying the tuition. Whoever applied was accepted. I took some courses in drawing. I still remember the first day in drawing. I was back to that one eye. Stereo was something I thought about and I couldn't dismiss it. But it wasn't what other people were doing.

Anyway, after a couple of years in art school, with courses in contemporary art with Picasso and Braque, I began to realize that they were trying to project 3-D images on the space of a two-dimensional canvas, a flat surface. There were all kinds of tricks that Picasso was doing with flat planes, overlapping surfaces, protruding and receding colors. Still, there was something in the back of my mind. There was more to it than people were talking about.





Abe Fagenson, "Cubes."



Abe Fagenson, "Circles."

You can talk all you want about three dimensions but with a two-dimensional space you just don't have it. You don't get stereo by closing one eye. You've got to have both eyes. Eventually, I got out of art school. I couldn't make a living as an artist. As a technical artist, however, creating exploded views, with nuts and bolts, showing how things are put together for

assembly catalogues, I did all right. I was getting close to 3-D with isometric drawings. That was for aircraft. The real money was in design, in drawing the thing and putting dimensions on it. I made good money as a technical illustrator and did that for years and years, making isometric drawings.

In the early fifties, around 1952, we moved to the [San Fer-

nando] Valley and started raising a family. Montgomery Ward had a big sale on 3-D cameras. It was the Stereo-Realist. I was just beginning to see 3-D in movies. "Wow!" I said. "This is real. It's fantastic!" All these artists, Picasso and Braque, were trying to get 3-D space. And all they had to do was open up the other eye! The 3-D cameras were a couple hundred dollars when they first came out. That was a bit of money at the time. But they had a pile of cameras on sale at Montgomery Ward and they were selling for \$35 each. I couldn't pass it up. I had to get the camera. I tried it. It was fantastic and from that moment on everything had to be stereo for me.

**Zone:** So, you started shooting stereo transparencies?

**Fagenson:** Yes. And I have hundreds of them. Which is also why I've got the Apple computer and the scanner, because I want to save my film. Now, of course, I'm talking about 40 to 50 years later.

**Zone:** Did you shoot on Kodachrome? Because Kodachrome is archival.

**Fagenson:** Some were beginning to fade. I've scanned them all in 3-D, at large size. I've still got the film. But now I have all the 3-D stuff on a disk.

As time went by, I remember being in an airplane. It was in the early 1990s, I was looking at a magazine and saw this random dot stereogram and it turned out to be an airplane. I stared at it a while and it came to me and I saw it. I almost jumped out of the seat. You could almost touch it. I said "I've got to learn how to do this." I started buying books on the random dot technique, anaglyphic images, anything I could find.

So I started with anaglyphic drawings. If you separate them and use a cross-eyed technique you've got stereo. I started with little sketches and sure enough, they were 3-D.

**Zone:** When did you make the first stereo painting?



**Fagenson:** It must have been 1992.

**Zone:** When you're making the work, how do you keep it precise and make the stereo correct?

**Fagenson:** Everything has to stay horizontal with the variation. So, I go from a centerline to a centerline with the spacing. It's a variation of centerlines. I finally realized that I could make a drawing, that it could be the right hand drawing and it could be just plain two dimensions. Then, I put some tracing paper on it and would trace, but move things maybe an eighth of an inch left or right. There was a limit that was at about an inch.

**Zone:** Was that an overall variation or just in one direction?

**Fagenson:** It would be two inches overall. And that was a strain. If you stand back eight to twelve feet it would be out of range, if you go beyond an inch on either side. So I tried to stay within the comfort range by going only an inch to the left and an inch to the right. Actually about 3/4 of an inch is what I really use.

There are many early paintings I made that went beyond what is comfortable. I just grew as I did this. After one painting, I would do another and started to even use variation within the colors so that there was a little shimmering between the pair of paintings.

**Zone:** Retinal rivalry?

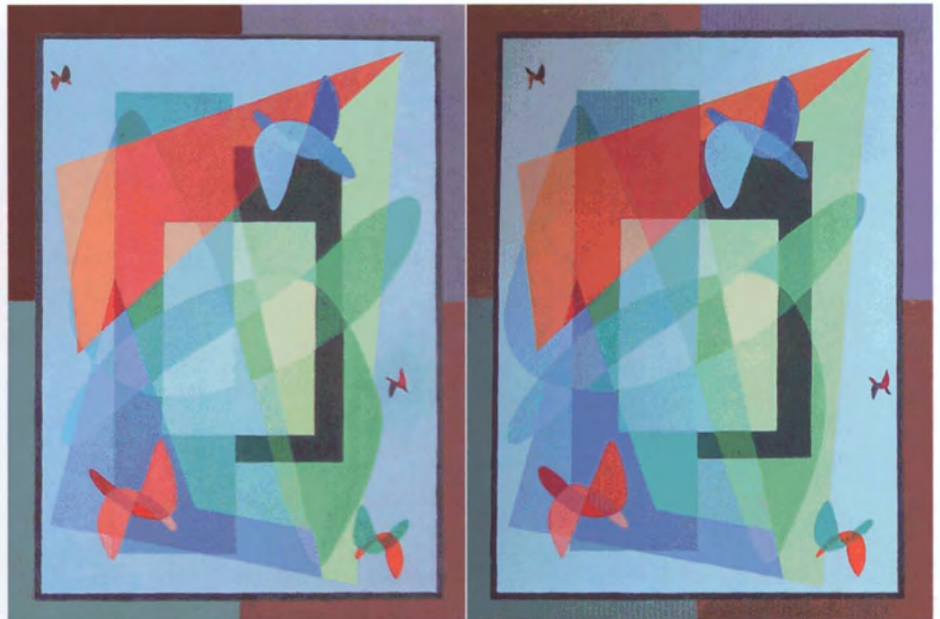
**Fagenson:** Yes. I found that it could be very pleasant. And you can get colors that you just can't get out of a tube, or by mixing colors. It was subtle but the effect was there. And I built on these things. I've got thirty or forty paintings with this and no two are alike. I would build and stretch my techniques a little more.

**Zone:** So, have you used a tracing paper technique for all of your stereo paintings?

**Fagenson:** Yes. That's the easiest way. It makes it fairly simple.

**Zone:** Do you make the right eye image first?

**Fagenson:** Yes.



Abe Fagenson, "Flight."



Abe Fagenson, "Peace."

**Zone:** And then you use tracing paper to make the left eye image?

**Fagenson:** That's right. In fact I can use tracing paper to make the right hand side and on the left hand side I make little marks on top and bottom and move the tracing paper the little extra distance. Usually an eighth of an inch to the left or the right. I like to go in those increments. It's really quite simple.

**Zone:** You have really pronounced 3-D in some of your paintings. Many are very compli-

cated. The butterfly wings in one painting, for example, are curving out at the tips.

**Fagenson:** Some of the early paintings have flat planes. Then, I made a mistake and, after looking closely at the image asked, "What did I do wrong?" But I used that mistake. Once you've made an image in space, you can add to it with slight variations and curves. You can just add an ink spot and the edges can be in a different place in space.





Abe Fagenson,  
"Rivalry."



Abe Fagenson, "Butterflies."



Abe Fagenson, "Window."

**Zone:** How did you first start showing your work to other people since you have to do cross-eye freeviewing to see the 3-D?

**Fagenson:** It took my wife Marge a couple weeks to get it. I waited for the "wow" and then it came. That's what happened when I first saw it.

**Zone:** What kind of tips do you give to other people to help them see the 3-D?

**Fagenson:** I suggest that they hold a finger out, lining it up over the middle of the picture. There are all kinds of tricks. I've also used a piece of clear plastic with a dot on it.

**Zone:** So, all your work is done with acrylics?

**Fagenson:** Yes, it's ridiculous to use oils. I look at the paintings while I work so I can make the corrections instantly. Who's got time for oils? I can make corrections with acrylics because they dry in just minutes. I work on both sides of the image at the same time and that helps. And I'm still amazed to just create something in space. 🐛🐛