

COMPARATIVE STUDY:

Wassily Kandinsky and Adam Stoner

Juliana Gessner



Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition VII*. 1913.



Adam Stoner.
Devontay. 2016.



Adam Stoner. *Ladder in the Garden*. 2016.

This Comparative Study compares and contrasts the work of Wassily Kandinsky (*Composition VII*, 1913) with local Milwaukee artist Adam Stoner (*Ladder in the Garden*, 2016; *Devontay*, 2016). This study centers not only on thematic elements, spirituality, and the aspects of abstraction found in the mentioned works, but also on the historical and cultural contexts surrounding them.

1. <http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>
2. <https://onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html>.
3. <https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Analysis of Formal Qualities: Kandinsky

Annotation of *Composition VII* by Wassily Kandinsky

This is an abstract piece composed of mostly organic shapes and line.

The composition is disorderly with diagonal movement from the top right to bottom left

The strongest hues are warm with accents of cooler colors (mainly blue, although there is green blended into a soft gradient in some areas).



The entire piece contrasts and contradicts itself, juxtaposing soft gradients with solid line, curves with corners, etc.

The darkest values are solid ink overlaid over the colors, and the lightest values are these white sections still tinged with various hues.

Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, Oil on canvas,
2 × 3 m

<http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

Evaluation of Cultural Significance: Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky was a Russian painter whose works stretched over multiple art movements such as Bauhaus, Expressionism, and Post-Impressionism. He was born in Moscow, Russia and moved to Munich, Germany in 1896. Kandinsky lived through World War I and died before the end of World War II, a tumultuous time of war, violence, and grief which likely contributed to the chaotic nature of his paintings.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913,
Oil on canvas, 2 × 3 m

Composition VII looks and feels like an explosion, which is apt considering it was created right before World War I as tensions were rising. Kandinsky himself was an anarchist, believing in the abolishment of government. He had to hide the political views of his paintings through **abstraction** in order to leave a shadow of a doubt over his true meanings and to avoid conflict while still expressing his opinions.

Dernbach, Alison, "Wassily Kandinsky and the Expression of War: The Zyrians, Theosophy, and Pre-War Germany" (2012). Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 242.

Griffin, Eve. "Wassily Kandinsky Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." Edited by The Art Story Contributors, The Art Story, 2017, www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily.htm.

Interpretation of Function and Purpose: Kandinsky

One large contribution to his work was his love of music; it inspired him greatly and can be seen in the almost symphonic **unity** of his paintings. Kandinsky's art can be described as **atonal**, meaning it has an untraditional and off-key style that was unconventional for art at the time. Examples of atonality include the lack of a coherent color scheme, the juxtaposition of organic shapes with sharp angles and lines, and the stark differences in value between hues.

Kandinsky demonstrates a powerful use of atonality in *Composition VII* to create unity. In *Composition VII*, it's rare to find two adjacent areas with colors that don't clash in some way, whether it be through hue, value, or shape. *Composition VII* also lacks a concrete object for the viewer to latch on to, somewhat forcing one's eye to continue to travel throughout the piece.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 2 × 3 m

There is a diagonal line of movement stretching from the upper right to the bottom left formed by the convergence of various shapes and colors, revealing thoughtful planning that gives order to the chaos.

Analysis of Formal Qualities: Stoner

Annotation of 'Ladder in the Garden' by Adam Stoner

The **hues** are predominantly warm, with orange being the most prominent. There are accents of blue in the top left corner as the only cool colors present in the piece.

Organic **shapes** are juxtaposed with geometric shapes, such as the faint checkered **pattern** center of the background and the geometric cubes in the upper left corner.



Adam Stoner. *Ladder in the Garden*, 2016, Acrylic, Drawing Media
1 x 1.75m

The left side is dark in with heavy swathes of black, while the right side is light with orange and white, creating asymmetrical **balance**.

There's a bold **contrast** between the solid black value and the bright white of the negative space

Abstract, meant to break **unity**, but the juxtaposition of chaotic elements creates its own sense of unity.

Analysis of Formal Qualities: Stoner

Annotation of 'Devontay' by Adam Stoner

The background and prison jumpsuit are a solid orange **hue**. The jumpsuit fades into the background due to a purposeful lack of **contrast** in **hue** and **value**.

Besides orange, this piece uses only tones of grey to create the face, hands, and outlines of the outfit.



A signature element of Stoner's style is this incredibly faint framework of geometric shapes that can be seen framing the figure.

Orange is a saturated color meant to catch one's attention or serve as a warning

The flat background removes him from any environment, making it seem as if he's floating.

Devontay, 2016. Mural. 8 x 3.5 m

<https://onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html>.

Evaluation of Cultural Significance: Stoner



Ladder in the Garden, 2016, Acrylic, Drawing Media
1 x 1.75 m

<http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

Stoner describes his work as being “of spiritual and theological nature” as he obscures the physical world into a dreamlike state. The ladder in *Ladder in the Garden* is a representation of a physical object, yet it isn’t realistically rendered and retains a dreamlike quality, keeping in line with the rest of the piece. His representations are abstract yet are still recognizable objects from the real world. Additionally, ladders have many different connotations, some of them contradictory: Ladders can be stable, holding you up and letting you literally climb to new heights; they can also be unstable and lead to unfortunate accidents. The superstition of bad luck after walking under a ladder is also fairly common. These contrasting associations are similar to the contrasting geometric and organic elements of *Ladder in the Garden* and further expand on Stoner’s messages of spirituality.

Interpretation of Function and Purpose: Stoner



Devontay, 2016. Mural. 8 x 3.5 m

The lack of contrast in the jumpsuit makes it seem as if he blends into the orange background, representing the how the high rate of black male incarceration in Milwaukee often fades into the background of conversation. Additionally, there's a faint network of geometric shapes physically caging the figure.

The broad sweeps of black across “Ladder in the Garden” are what drew me to Stoner’s work. The sweeping movement and deep value are what catch one’s eye. The curves create an ovular shape that pulls the audience through the piece in a circular motion. Moreover, the fluidity of the piece lends to its spiritual nature through its juxtaposition of organic and geometric shapes.



Ladder in the Garden, 2016, Acrylic, Drawing Media, 1 x 1.75 m

The environment in which *Devontay* is in both in the image and the physical world symbolizes how imprisonment can encompass one’s life. The environment in *Devontay* is completely flat and orange with no depth or dimension, leaving him floating in midair. In the physical world, *Devontay* is a mural in Black Cat Alley, an alleyway in Milwaukee for local street artists. While this particular alley is fairly well known around Milwaukee, the general connotations of alleys are “dark” and “hidden”, representing how racial discrimination is often swept under the rug.

1. www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destroyed-vandal/842399001/.
2. <https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Cultural Context and Effect: Controversy Regarding *Devontay*

Stoner has received criticism from the Milwaukee community in regard to *Devontay*, with some citing the mural as “dehumanizing” to African-Americans in Wisconsin. Additionally, some have criticized Stoner for using anti-black violence as a show or performance.

His intent was to spark a conversation about how Wisconsin has the highest rate of black male incarceration in America; however, as a white man who has never personally experienced racial discrimination, it has been debated as to if the mural should remain or be painted over.

While it did spark conversation, the focus of the conversation was Stoner’s status as a white man, once again detracting from the message and pushing the issue of racial discrimination and segregation to the side. Stoner released an apology and was open to suggestions for how to make amends. In November of 2017, the mural was vandalized with black spray paint by an unknown source. It was the only mural in the alley affected.



Snyder, Molly. “Is this Black Cat Alley mural racist?” OnMilwaukee.com, 21 Sept. 2016, 12:40pm, onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html.

Stoner, Adam. “Creator of controversial mural responds to critics.” Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, 23 Sept. 2016, milwaukeeenns.org/2016/09/23/creator-of-controversial-mural-responds-to-critics/.

Higgins, Jim. “Controversial mural in Black Cat Alley destroyed by vandal.” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 8 Nov. 2017, www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destroyed-vandal/842399001/.

Comparisons and Connections: Artists

Wassily Kandinsky vs. Adam Stoner

Kandinsky



- Born in Moscow, Russia
- Lived in Russia and Germany, 1866-1944
- Lived during both World Wars in countries that were physically wartorn

Similarities

- White men
- Both use abstraction and expressionism
- Heavy focus on spirituality
- Lived through times of war, but on different levels
- Used art to convey political messages

Stoner



- From Milwaukee, WI
- Born in the 20th century
- The U.S has been at war and has experienced attacks, but cannot be considered wartorn

Griffin, Eve. "Wassily Kandinsky Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." Edited by The Art Story Contributors, The Art Story, 2017, www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily.htm.

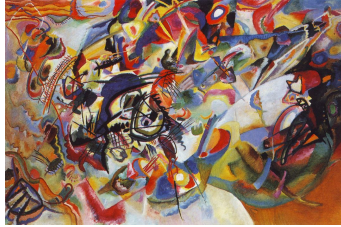
Snyder, Molly. "Is this Black Cat Alley mural racist?" OnMilwaukee.com, 21 Sept. 2016, 12:40pm, onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html.

Stoner, Adam. "Adam Stoner - art, theatre, design." Arts in Milwaukee, www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/.

Comparisons and Connections: Technique

'Composition VII' by Kandinsky vs. 'Devontay' and 'Ladder in the Garden' by Stoner

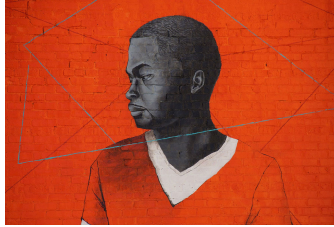
Kandinsky



<http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

- Oil on canvas
- 2 x 3 m
- Oil paints dry incredibly slowly, allowing for smooth blending and for the paint to be worked on for longer

Devontay



www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destroyed-vandal/842399001/

- Mural, street art
- Had to use construction equipment to reach
- In an alley on a building, exposed to the elements

Ladder in the Garden



<https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

- Acrylic paint and drawing media
- 1 x 1.75 m
- Acrylic paint dries very quickly and is harder to blend unless used with extender

Griffin, Eve. "Wassily Kandinsky Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." Edited by The Art Story Contributors, The Art Story, 2017, www.theartstory.org/artist-kandinsky-wassily.htm.

Milwaukee Independent. "Adam Stoner and the Color Orange." Online video clip. Youtube, 19 September 2016. Web. 25 February 2017.

Turchin, Valery. "Kandinsky and Technique. Craftsmanship and Virtuosity." InCoRM, vol. 2, 2011, doi:10.18411/d-2016-154

Comparisons and Connections: Cultural Elements and Contextual Qualities

Composition VII by **Kandinsky** vs. *Ladder in the Garden* and *Devontay* by **Stoner**



Cultural Elements

- *Composition VII* is a manifestation of tension due to war.
- *Ladder in the Garden* is not a representation of war or any particular social or political issue.
- *Devontay* is a message as to how we portray black men in Wisconsin and warns of Wisconsin's unfortunate legacy of black male incarceration

Contextual Qualities

- Kandinsky was living through the pre-World War I tensions of Germany.
- Stoner made this mural in Wisconsin, where the incarceration rate of black males is the highest in the U.S.
- “Ladder in the Garden” and “Composition VII” have no clearly stated contexts while “Devontay” does

1. <http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>
2. <https://onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html>.
3. <https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Comparisons and Connections: Formal Qualities

Composition VII by Kandinsky vs. *Devontay* by Stoner

Composition VII

- No representations of physical objects
- Relies more heavily on context and interpretation
- Uses a variety of colors and values
- Abstract, expressionist
- Visually loud, lots of movement
- Asymmetrical composition



<http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

Devontay

- Representation of a physical figure
- Clearer in meaning and symbolism
- Central composition
- Uses orange as the only hue and tones of grey as the other values
- Uses realism instead of abstraction
- Quiet, unmoving



<https://onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/blackcatmuralcontroversy.html>

Similarities

- Red/orange is the dominant hue
- No depth or environment
- Neither have truly negative space
- Portraying a message or opinion on tensions

Comparisons and Connections: Formal Qualities

Ladder in the Garden by **Stoner** vs. *Devontay* by **Stoner**

Ladder in the Garden

- Accents of blue
- The ladder is dreamlike and wispy
- Asymmetrical
- Abstract with elements of Surrealism
- Includes an object, not a person
- On a physical plane, the ground is visible



<https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Devontay

- Only orange with grey values
- Includes an element of realism by including a figure
- No visible plane, floating in midair
- Smooth, controlled
- Symmetrical, center composition
- Includes a person, not an object



www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destroyed-vandal/842399001/

Similarities

- Orange, black, and white color schemes
- Orange is the strongest hue
- Light-colored geometric shapes
- Include representations of physical things (the ladder in *Ladder in the Garden* and the man in *Devontay*)

Comparisons and Connections: Formal Qualities

'Composition VII' by Kandinsky vs. 'Ladder in the Garden' by Stoner

Composition VII

- Uses a spectrum of colors
- Little to no negative space
- More hue than solid black or white
- Contains no elements of the real world
- Does not represent a physical plane or setting



<http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

Ladder in the Garden

- Doesn't use other colors outside of orange, red, and blue
- Contains more solid black and negative space
- Represents a recognizable object (the ladder)
- Has the vague suggestion of a setting or environment



<https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Similarities

- Washes of color to give depth -- lighter areas fade into the background and darker opaque areas move forward
- Predominantly use red and orange with accents of blue
- Uses curves that curl towards the edges of the canvas
- Circular movement, ovular shape
- Asymmetrical composition

Connections to Personal Works: *Chrysalis*

Chrysalis is a digital painting about the abstract growth of our teenage years. It was inspired by Stoner's *Devontay* and *Ladder in the Garden*, as well as Kandinsky's *Composition VII*.

The color orange is out of my comfort zone. I tend to stick to cool colors, such as blue and purple, or an intense red if I want a strong accent. This was a valuable exercise in learning how to work with unfamiliar hues as not just an accent or an included color, but the main color of an entire piece. Additionally, my digital process was obviously much different from the physical processes of Kandinsky and Stoner. For one, I have an undo button, so if I make a mistake or an accidental stray line I can delete it. Kandinsky and Stoner would either have to paint over it or learn to live with it. Another thing is that it's harder to blend colors digitally without making it seem too artificial, and it definitely would have been easier to physically blend oil, watercolor, gouache, or even acrylic paint.



Chrysalis. Juliana Gessner.
Digital painting, 2017

Connections and Comparisons

Composition VII, Devontay, Ladder in the Garden, and Chrysalis



The greatest influence of Kandinsky's and Stoner's work on this piece was in the color; mainly, orange. It's a color that I don't usually work with, but I feel that using a color outside of my comfort zone enhanced the message about maturation. Kandinsky's *Composition VII* inspired the use of the abstract shapes seen in the window of *Chrysalis* which represent the unpredictable side of growth. The plants lining the bottom, however, are fairly regular, and represent the more linear progression of development.



Devontay inspired the use of a black and white monochrome figure as the main subject of the piece. Their expressions are also fairly similar, but the figure in *Chrysalis* is looking straight at the viewer instead of off to the side.



Chrysalis. Juliana Gessner.
Digital painting, 2017

Ladder in the Garden has hints of blue and green to act as accents. I used a teal green in *Chrysalis* to counteract the orange in the top. Additionally, I used the sweeping strokes of black from *Ladder* as a background for the plants and to create a border along the bottom.



1. <http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>
2. www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destroyed-vandal/842399001/.

3. <https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

Connections to Personal Works: *Surveillance*



Surveillance. Juliana Gessner.
Gouache on watercolor paper, 2017

Concepts and Ideas

Surveillance is a representation of the constant surveillance that parents put their children through, inspired by Stoner's *Ladder in the Garden* and the themes of George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. For example, I have friends who've had their own bedroom doors taken off by their parents who say because they've misbehaved they no longer deserve privacy. Additionally, some parents even go as far as to install spyware on their children's phones and control everything they're doing. However, this only creates an environment of fear and mistrust for both the children and the parents. This is why I chose to have two figures, who represent the parents, standing in an empty doorway. Other symbols of surveillance or being watched are the flies on the wall and the 5 floating outlines of eyes.



Connections and Comparisons

Surveillance and Ladder in the Garden



Surveillance. Juliana Gessner.
Gouache on watercolor paper, 2017

Technique and Medium

Surveillance was painted with gouache, a type of watercolor paint that can be made extremely opaque as well as extremely transparent. I've worked on a small scale with gouache before; however, *Surveillance* is 90 by 61 cm large and required new application of previous techniques. This included working faster in order to counteract the faster drying times due to the larger surface area.

Ladder in the Garden was created using acrylic and drawing media, yet looks as if it was painted with ink and watercolor. The most likely explanation for this is that Stoner diluted his paints with water or a similar thinner in order to achieve the fluidity of line and transparency of color in the final product.



Adam Stoner. *Ladder in the Garden*. 2016.
<https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>

The dreamlike quality of Stoner's *Ladder in the Garden* contributed to the surreal approach I took for *Surveillance*. The distorted environment with transparent washes of color is entirely unreal except for the ladder. Both the ladder and the figures stand as the only solid objects in their respective pieces.

Comparisons and Connections:

Composition VII, Chrysalis, Surveillance, and Ladder in the Garden

2. <https://www.artsinmilwaukee.org/profiles/2036/>
3. www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2017/11/07/controversial-mural-black-cat-alley-destruction-vandal/842399001/

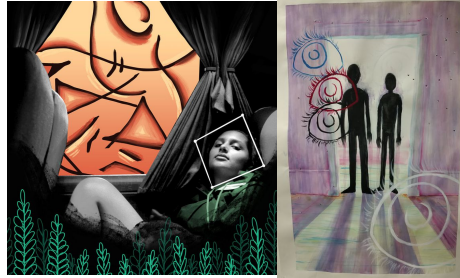
Kandinsky



1. <http://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-36.php>

- Based on the trauma of war and other events during Kandinsky's lifetime
- Spiritual and music-inspired

Personal Works



- Messages specific to teenagers and technology
- *Chrysalis* is more spiritual than *Surveillance*, as *Chrysalis* is about growth

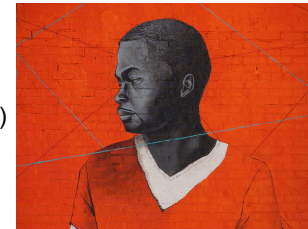
Stoner

(2)



- *Devontay* connects to *Chrysalis* more in technique than in conceptual meaning
- *Devontay* is also based in current events, while *Ladder in the Garden* is spiritual and has no specific context

(3)



Similarities

- Predominantly the color orange for *Composition VII*, *Chrysalis*, *Ladder in the Garden*, and *Devontay*
- Features the abstraction of shape, line, and environment
- Heavy contrast between hue and value