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***MCAT Strategy Session:
Critical Analysis and Reasoning***

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Passage 1 (Questions 1-7)

The movement of art away from representation of things (paintings of people, places, events, etc.) into a wholly abstract presentation undoubtedly reached its zenith in the work of the color field painters. Exemplified by the work of Mark Rothko, color field painting sought to present color in its pure state. This purity made the color itself the subject of the painting, rather than a tool used to express something else. The cubists, surrealists, and other abstract expressionists working earlier in the 20th century may have distorted, mocked, and radically reduced representation (respectively), but it was the color field artists alone who completely stripped out any pretense of painting *something* other than the painting itself. Rothko's works consisted of little more than several large squares of contrasted colors, in various proportions and arrangements.

Those artists who become best known for representing a school of art – and indeed to those outside the highly specialized world of academic high art become the only known example of the school, their name synonymous with the school itself (Pollack and “Drip Painting”, Picasso and Cubism, Michelangelo and high Renaissance fresco, etc.) – achieve their notoriety through no more remarkable means than pursuing a certain artistic idea to its very core. The stripping away of every extraneous thought and impulse guided by history and habit leaves the core truth of the movement. One cannot help but wonder, then, why no artist in the millennia before Rothko sought to pursue color itself as the subject of painting. Certainly artists the world over had experimented with how color was represented in their work. Japanese calligraphy paintings often reserved color for a single slash near the edge of the scroll. Zen Buddhist *ensō* eschew color altogether – using the purity of a single black circle on white background to represent the empty, open mind that has reached enlightenment. The fauvists, on the other hand, used a riot of colors in vibrant, jarring juxtaposition.

In each case, the color (or lack thereof) merely enhanced or commented on the representational efforts of the rest of the composition. Every work we find still relied on line, form, movement, space, perspective, and all the usual tools of a painter to represent a particular thing or idea.

Rothko and the rest of the color field artists broke away from every one of these conventions by removing more and more until only color remained. The typical color field composition has few if any lines or forms, and what forms there are – the boundaries between the different colors – are typically blurred and incoherent. This total lack of form permits no interpretation by the viewer of the painting as being “of something”.

And yet when the literature around color field art was being written in the 1970's and 1980's, we consistently see that both erudite critics and casual observers spoke of Rothko's work in terms of representations beyond color itself. The painting *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)* is simply three horizontal

rectangles of color – rust red, light blue, and navy blue. The colors are mottled, a result of the staining technique used. The boundaries between the rectangles are blurred and inconsistent. No painting could more clearly be about the colors themselves. However, in instance after instance, observers wrote of *No. 61* as evoking the ocean at sunset, the haze over a lake, the pre-dawn light seen through closed eyelids, etc.

Perhaps pure color is an ungraspable phantom. Even when presented in its purest form, it seems that most observers are unable to accept the work as it is, and ever seek for representation.

1. The author seems to think that when viewing a painting, seeing the painting as representing something is:
 - A. an artifact that most avoid when seeing the painting as an example of pure color.
 - B. a nearly inevitable part of interpreting the painting, whether the interpreter is a casual observer or an art scholar.
 - C. a result of the kind of painting first popularized by Rothko.
 - D. a fashion that went out of style in art critic circles after the runaway success of the color field painters.
2. The author's main point in the passage discussion is that:
 - A. abstract painters such as Buddhist monks painting their *ensō* still retained form and thus representation.
 - B. it is impossible for any human to view a painting solely as a representation of pure color, but instead we constantly look to interpret paintings as representations of things.
 - C. color field artists created a new type of painting that was, for the first time ever, able to wholly leave behind the elements of representation and focus on color itself as the subject of the painting.
 - D. the history of art is full of various uses of color, from mere emphasis to the total absence of color.

3. The author's discussion about painters prior to Rothko using color to comment on representation indicates that before Rothko:
- A. painters had not attempted to use color as the sole subject of painting.
 - B. the aesthetic value of black and white abstract paintings was in doubt.
 - C. artists were afraid to surrender representation entirely and thus used line, form, and color to make paintings that were "of something".
 - D. color itself could be the subject of representation.
4. The passage assertion that a single artist can come to represent an entire movement of art in the minds of the public is:
- A. only mentioned in passing and assumed to be true, with the author providing no support.
 - B. patently absurd because it cannot, in principle, be empirically investigated.
 - C. supported by specific examples of the phenomenon.
 - D. an axiomatic statement upon which the main thesis of the passage relies.
5. The passage suggests that Rothko became the foremost example of a color field artist because he:
- A. more than other prior or contemporary artists, was able to pursue the effort of non-representation to its logical conclusion leaving only color itself as the subject of painting.
 - B. was the artist most successfully able to meld traditional art techniques of color oil painting with the new artistic notion of removing all elements of representation.
 - C. took the notion of representing color itself to the highest possible level, tying color into traditional notions of form.
 - D. was by far the most commercially successful and his art was depicted in a number of important cultural contexts.
6. Suppose a museum curator discovers a heretofore unknown collection of paintings by a German artist working in the early 19th century and the paintings are little more than large blobs of color, with no discernable objects or forms. This discovery would most weaken the author's assertion that:
- A. Rothko had set aside previous artistic habits and history when creating his color field works.
 - B. Rothko and the color field artists working in the mid-20th century were the first to totally divorce color and painting from representation of objects.
 - C. color field art is continually misinterpreted since viewers seem to insist on seeing the color blobs as being paintings "of something".
 - D. audiences prior to those present in mid-20th century America were unwilling and unable to embrace color field art as an accepted art movement.
7. An experimental filmmaker in the 1980's began creating compositions that entirely removed any traces of the plot or narrative structure that had, up to that point, always been present in both film and television and created works that were little more than meditations on movement and form. The author would likely assert that such films would garner which of the following reactions from audiences?
- A. Most observers would express strong distaste for the work.
 - B. Audiences would speak about the progression of the various images in terms of narrative structures that were familiar to them from earlier film and television.
 - C. Such works would be well-received in film studies circles but would never achieve any large commercial success.
 - D. Nearly all audience members would mistakenly draw parallels between this work and the works of famous color field painters such as Roth

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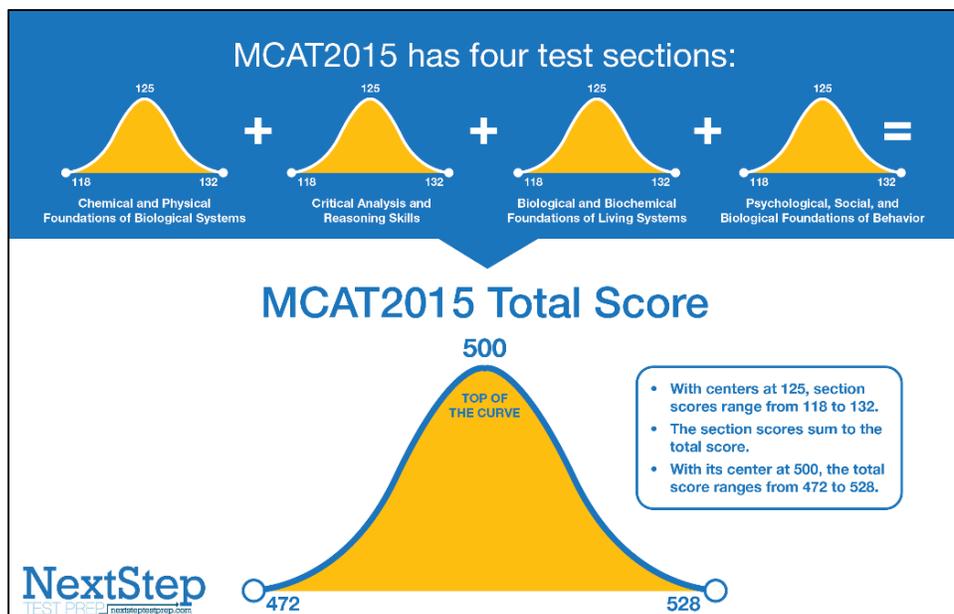
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MCAT 2015 Pre-Reqs Next Step Suggests:

Biology: 2 to 3 semesters
Chemistry: 2 semesters
O-Chem: 1 to 2 semesters
Physics: 2 semesters
Biochemistry: 1 semester
Psychology: 1 semester
Sociology: 1 semester
Statistics: 1 semester
Humanities: 1-3 semesters

Passage 1 (Questions 1-7)

The movement of art **away from representation** of things (paintings of people, places, events, etc.) into a wholly abstract presentation undoubtedly reached its **zenith** in the work of the **color field painters**. Exemplified by the work of Mark **Rothko**, color field painting sought to present **color in its pure state**. This purity made the **color itself the subject** of the painting, rather than a tool used to express something else. The cubists, surrealists, and other abstract expressionists working earlier in the 20th century may have distorted, mocked, and radically reduced representation (respectively), but it was the color field artists alone who **completely stripped out** any pretense of **painting something** other than the painting itself. Rothko's works consisted of little more than **several large squares of contrasted colors**, in various proportions and arrangements.

Opinion: author thinks that art's movement away from representing things hit its high point with color field and Rothko

Cause and effect: because Rothko painted things like large squares of color he was able to completely remove any representation and make color itself the painting's subject

Those artists who become **best known** for representing a **school of art** – and indeed to those outside the highly specialized world of academic high art become the only known example of the school, their name synonymous with the school itself (**Pollack** and “Drip Painting”, **Picasso** and Cubism, **Michelangelo** and high Renaissance fresco, etc.) – achieve their notoriety through no more remarkable means than pursuing a **certain artistic idea to its very core**. The stripping away of every extraneous thought and impulse guided by history and habit leaves the core truth of the movement. One cannot help but wonder, then, why **no artist** in the millennia **before Rothko** sought to pursue **color itself as the subject of painting**. Certainly artists the world over had experimented with how color was represented in their work. Japanese **calligraphy** paintings often reserved color for a single slash near the edge of the scroll. Zen Buddhist **ensō** eschew color altogether – using the purity of a single black circle on white background to represent the empty, open mind that has reached enlightenment. The **fauvists**, on the other hand, used a riot of colors in vibrant, jarring juxtaposition.

Key terms: Pollack, Picasso, Michelangelo, calligraphy, ensō, fauvists

Cause and effect: taking one idea and stripping it down to its essence is what makes an artist best known for a certain school of art

Opinion: author wonders why nobody before Rothko made color itself the subject of the painting

In each case, the **color** (or lack thereof) **merely enhanced or commented** on the representational efforts of the rest of the composition. Every work we find still relied on line, form,

movement, space, perspective, and all the **usual tools of a painter** to **represent** a particular thing or idea.

Opinion: author thinks in works before Rothko, color “merely” enhanced a work that was still basically about representing something else

Rothko and the rest of the color field artists **broke away from every one of these conventions** by removing more and more until **only color remained**. The typical color field composition had **few if any lines or forms**, and what forms there are – the boundaries between the different colors – are typically blurred and incoherent. This total lack of form permits **no interpretation** by the viewer of the painting as **being “of something”**.

Cause and effect: color field painters stripped away line, form, etc. to create a painting that was only about color and could not be a painting “of something”

And yet when the **literature around color field art** was being written in the 1970's and 1980's, we consistently see that both **erudite** critics and **casual** observers spoke of Rothko's work in terms of representations beyond color itself. The painting *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)* is simply three horizontal rectangles of color – rust red, light blue, and navy blue. The colors are mottled, a result of the staining technique used. The boundaries between the rectangles are blurred and inconsistent. **No painting could more clearly be about the colors themselves**. However, in instance after instance, **observers** wrote of *No. 61* as **evoking** the ocean at sunset, the haze over a lake, the pre-dawn light seen through closed eyelids, etc.

Contrast: author thinks color field art, especially *No. 61* is purely about color, but other observers always talked about the painting representing other things like the ocean

Perhaps **pure color is an ungraspable** phantom. Even when presented in its purest form, it seems that most observers are unable to accept the work as it is, and **ever seek for representation**.

Opinion: author speculates that people may need to see representation in artistic works and that we can't accept a painting that is only about color

Main Idea: Color field painters, especially Rothko, were the first in the history of art to make paintings that were solely about color itself, rather than an attempt to use color to represent something else; they did this by stripping away line, form, and all the other tools normally used by painters; despite these efforts observers continue to see color field paintings as being paintings that represent something.

1. B is correct. The author tells us in the final two paragraphs that, even in the case of paintings the author sees as unambiguously about nothing more than color itself, viewers still wanted to see the paintings as representing something else. Rothko's blue squares were interpreted as the ocean or the light over a lake, etc. The author suggests at the end that we always seem to look for representation in our paintings.
- A: Given that color field art is relatively new in the art world, it's much more likely that most painters are painting representation, not pure color like the color field artists.
- C: Rothko painted pure color, not an attempt to represent something.
- D: Even the color field artists are still being interpreted as representations of something.
2. C is correct. The author introduces the main theme in the first paragraph, telling us that color field artists focused on creating paintings in which color itself was the subject of the painting. He then emphasizes further down the passage that the color field artists were unprecedented in that regard.
- A: The passage only mentions the Buddhist painters in passing as a supporting detail.
- B: The author himself seems to think he can interpret Rothko's work as pure color, so it is too extreme to say that it is impossible for "any human" to view a painting as pure color.
- D: While the author does discuss the history of art, the focus is strongly on the color field artists and Rothko in particular.
3. A is correct. Throughout the passage the author emphasizes that the color field painters were unique in breaking wholly with any traditional representation or the tools of representation (line, form, etc.). Thus, before Rothko and the other color field painters, other artists were not making paintings that were solely about color itself.
- B, C: Neither of these statements are found anywhere in the passage.
- D: This is the opposite of the passage, as it was Rothko's breakthrough to make color itself the sole thing that the painting was an image of.
4. C is correct. After stating that a single artist could come to serve as the symbol of an entire movement, the author provides a series of three specific examples.
- A: The author provides support in the form of examples.
- B: The claim is given support in the passage and that support could, in theory, be empirically investigated (by, for example, asking members of the public to name the artist who worked in a given field of art).
- D: The main thesis could still be true even if Rothko was not the most famous color field artist; the author is more concerned with color field art in general than whether or not Rothko was, in fact, the best example.
5. A is correct. The author tells us that artists can gain their fame simply by pursuing a particular artistic idea to its extreme, final conclusion. Thus, in the case of abstract art and a focus on color, Rothko succeeded by totally stripping away all historical ties to representation – shedding line, form, etc., leaving behind pure color.
- B: Nothing in the passage suggests that Rothko was using traditional oil painting techniques.
- C: Rothko got rid of line and form; he didn't meld it into his work.
- D: The passage never discusses other cultural contexts.
6. B is correct. Part of what the author finds so remarkable is that no artists in the millennia preceding Rothko simply created painting that was about color itself, and that it was left to the color field artists to make paintings that were solely about color itself. If a new trove of paintings showed that other artists in the prior century had done just that, then the author's contention would be wrong.
- A: Since this collection of works was recently rediscovered, it would not have been part of the art history that Rothko would have known about and set aside. Thus the new discovery is irrelevant to this statement.
- C, D: Nothing in the passage or the question tells us how audiences in Germany reacted to the newly-discovered works.
7. B is correct. The passage tells us that viewers insisted on seeing Rothko's color field paintings as being paintings of something when the author (and presumably Rothko himself) sees the work as being meditations on pure color and not of anything. Similarly, a film that has no plot at all and no narrative would likely be incorrectly interpreted by the audience as attempting to present some sort of narrative.
- A, C: We have no idea if audiences would like the work.
- D: We're being asked to extrapolate the author's reasoning beyond the passage and nothing suggests that the films described would actually be like Rothko's paintings.