The concept of “art for art's sake,” or l’art pour l’art, was first addressed in the 1830’s by French Romantics such as Victor Cousin and Theophile Gautier. Their ideas provided the impetus for not only English Aestheticism in the 1860’s, but also the development of formalist art criticism in the 20th century. The theory refers to the idea that art is an autonomous pursuit with its own inherent aesthetic value and need have no overtly moral, religious or social purpose. The emergence of this sensibility toward beauty devoid of practical value presented a corollary to the classically inspired intellectualism of the Neoclassical Movement, which pervaded Europe and America from the 1760s to the 1850s. This style emphasized austere linear design in the realistic depiction of historical themes and subjects so as to inspire patriotism and righteousness. The notion of “art for art’s sake” opposes not only Renaissance naturalism, but also some 20th century styles such as the propagandistic Constructivist movement, Dada’s blatant rejection of Western values, and Conceptualism’s emphasis on articulating ideas as opposed to pure forms.

As such, “art for art’s sake” is a term that encapsulates an aesthetic mindset in which art justifies itself and functions only to appeal to the artistic sense of the eye. The development of this ideal has been essential to the creation of not only the avant-garde but also an enduring observance of the imagination in art, since modern and contemporary works adhere to the subjective, transcendental, and visionary as opposed to the limits of reason. Those who adopt “art for art’s sake” as their credo suggested that aesthetic value lay in a work’s formal organization rather than in its subject-matter. Such paintings and sculptures therefore achieve an ornamental effect through composition and the delineation of richly patterned surfaces and lavish objects.
The aesthetic qualities of the works on view deal with non-thematic imagery that is conceived through the harmonious arrangement of color and line, rhythms and tones, and masses and curves. This lack of representational content fosters a profound contemplation of the immediacy of our sense experiences and how those sensations produce pangs of emotion. Such a keen awareness was critical to the spread and rise in popularity of Abstract Expressionism from the 1940’s to 1960’s. Those works strove for expressiveness and universality, as evidenced by Jackson Pollock’s Action Painting, the color field works of Mark Rothko, and the gestural abstraction of Willem de Kooning. Many of the artists on display share the same visual language and fascination with spontaneity as their Abstract Expressionist counterparts; however, some consciously evoke connections between art and music, which is the most abstract and arguably purest of art forms. Accordingly, they all harmonize color, line, and shape in the same vain as sound for their own aesthetic justification.