

ON THE COVER

Idea ex Plenum by Philip Zelazo

This article is based on a video interview with the artist on July 10.

Philip David Zelazo, the creator of the cover art for this issue of *American Psychologist*, is a distinguished psychologist at the University of Minnesota. His research on executive function and its development, measurement, and application is well known and implemented broadly. But how does someone so deeply engaged in understanding how children use memory and cognition to execute the skills necessary to complete everyday tasks express these ideas through art?

Zelazo has successfully intertwined his two professional identities, as psychologist and artist, and sees a reciprocity between them. His interest in psychology stems, in part, from his family and psychologist father. However, from an early age, he wanted to be an artist, which he describes as encompassing not only art but writing and poetry. A neuropsychology course as an undergraduate majoring in English literature at McGill University inspired him to think about how both psychology and artistic expression could shed light on consciousness and how subjective experiences relate to reality.

Idea ex Plenum may be translated as “idea out of the manifold” to signify the birth of an idea. This acrylic painting has many layers, density, and depth. Its components are complex and interconnected, like neurons and neural activity and networks. In creating the painting, Zelazo starts with an

idea or image in his mind. From an architectural drawing, “pencil and straightedge,” he uses multiple layers of paint, colors, and shapes to build the image and refine its complex structure. Zelazo’s style of painting is influenced by Calder, Escher, Picasso, Magritte, Richter, and Polke but also by numerous abstract expressionists. What emerges in our minds may represent not one idea, but many, as we generate our own interpretations of the details and complexity in the frame.

Of course, the process of exploring the many parts of this painting and making sense of it is up to us and our subjective interpretations. But what might have been on the artist’s mind? Zelazo started to spend more time painting at the end of 2016, noting that the political environment in the United States prompted him to reflect more about the importance of the “birth of ideas” at a pivotal moment in history. The use of red, white, and blue, in contrast to the darker background, may be thought of as signaling the origins, development, and importance of American democratic ideals and core values. The artist’s appreciation for the development and processing of ideas has broad implications at many levels for our thinking and decision-making processes.

 Anne E. Kazak
Art Editor