

Robin Bruch

Major Works on Paper (1972-1985) II

01.05. - 13.06.2015

In the mid '70s when I was a young painter trying to find my way in New York, I especially liked visiting an uptown gallery that has since become legendary, the Bykert Gallery at 24 East 81st Street. Klaus Kertess, the gallerist, was amazingly open and generous. I could wander back into his office and he would ask what shows I had seen and question me about my interests. He made a completely unknown painter feel included in the ongoing conversation about art at his gallery. I saw many remarkable shows there: Dorothea Rockburne, Brice Marden, Ralph Humphrey, Bill Bollinger and many others. In many ways these shows were my New York education. I saw one painting in a group show there in 1975 that especially impressed me. Asked by other painters, then and now, I often mention this painting which was by a painter who I didn't know and have never met: Robin Bruch. The mid '70s were a hard time for painters. After the discoveries of minimalism and Pop art, performance and installation, it sometimes seemed impossible to find a way to continue doing innovative work within painting. I was a committed painter but how could I achieve what I longed for? Were new forms of painterly painting possible?

The painting I saw by Robin Bruch in that group show offered new possibilities by combining geometric forms with rough direct, painterly mark making. The surface brought together two kinds of painting that seemed previously to belong in separate categories and impossible to combine. The painting's structure was made of interacting triangular forms. In most shaped-canvases, an influential method of structuring paintings at the time, including Frank Stella's work, interior forms followed the shape of the support. Robin Bruch's painting broke that model, opening up a painterly space but without denying the importance and physicality of the support on which the triangles were anchored.

Her triangular forms seemed to be what they were, but also awkward and fluctuating. They seemed to be two things at once: shapes and also representations of the same shapes. Sometimes while looking, those triangular forms seemed to be almost rendered in three-dimensions, nearly able to cast shadows, but somehow they also remained flat shapes. This tension and instability in the forms made a connection to the world. It was as if the forms were found objects that when pulled into the painting brought some of the feel of where they had been in the world with them. The odd, off kilter colors also seemed found, related to signs, interiors, and clothes.

The forms in her painting elbowed out a slight amount of three-dimensional room around themselves, both spatially and conceptually. This room allowed for the painterly and for a different kind of meaning.

Looking back I see that several other painters including Harriet Korman, Jo Baer, Lee Lozano, Lewis Stein, Alan Uglow, and Ted Stamm, used geometric forms that did not behave like traditional geometric forms and seemed to also be representations or emblems, doubling and complicating their meaning. And Joan Snyder and Mary Heilmann found other ways to combine geometry with painterly mark making. All of these artists made work that is very prescient for many of the current developments in painting. These painters and others did find a way to discover new possibilities, new ways to re-invent painting.

- David Reed

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