

press release

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**bodies of resilience | gary kuehn**

**30 november 2023 – 17 february 2024**

max goelitz is pleased to announce Gary Kuehn's first solo exhibition *bodies of resilience*, which highlights the physical and emotional dimensions of the artists' works, exploring the tensions between constraint and release, gesture and geometry and softness and rigidity. The solo show brings together selected sculptures, paintings and drawings from 1969 – 1972 and beyond.

As a well-known representative of American Process Art, Gary Kuehn (\*1939 Plainfield, New Jersey, US) contributed significantly to the radical change in the concept of art in the 1960s. His artworks demonstrate a deep understanding of material properties. Simple shapes such as circles, squares, and triangles form the basis of his artistic investigations in conjunction with a variety of handcrafted and industrial materials such as fiberglass, wood, plaster, and steel. The geometric bodies are often subjected to deforming forces or kinetic energy, spatially displaced, knotted, or bumped, always generating an emotional value to Kuehn's formally abstract works.

At the center of *bodies of resilience* is the two-part sculpture *Untitled* (1969), which combines elements from the *Box – and Mattress Pieces* series and confronts the viewer with its own physicality. The same yellow, rectangular body made of fiberglass appears soft and malleable on the right side, its geometric properties loosening and dissolving, while on the left it is encased in a wooden box, both confined and supported. In this way, Kuehn explores the nature of sculptural bodies and the vulnerability of structures that can be translated into psychological states and feelings, raising questions about resilience and social structures. His gestural drawings and paintings also test the physical limits and freedom of thought.

In Gary Kuehn's *Black Painting* (1969) and *Untitled* (1970), the geometric shapes of the circle and square do not seem to match the size of the canvas. The painted shape seems to extend beyond the edges of the canvas, or rather the canvas seems to withdraw at certain points and find its own form. Like a game between autonomy and power, both elements follow their own wills which run counter to each other. Kuehn awakens a feeling of anxiety and questions the role of the canvas in relation to the pictorial subject: „The canvases are shaped because I wanted to eliminate the picture plane. I was thinking of the tyranny of the format, the rectangle that is always there to be worked with, for, or against.“ Thus, the painted shape does not bow to the limiting space of the canvas as the painting surface, which in turn does not present itself in a conventional format.

Unlike the sculpture *The Provisionals* (1969), in which the form of the aluminum strip bends to the pressure, here the circle and square remain resilient and do not give way. The formal and emotional levels overlap, and the result is an interplay of divergent forces. Kuehn's dialectic of antithesis and synthesis, free will and predetermination as the central paradigm of his art becomes clear.

*Eternal Figures* (1974) consists of three graphite drawings on paper in which Kuehn superimposes geometric forms with gestural strokes. Circles, squares, and triangles appear like shadows on the sheet, contrasting with the uncontrolled drawing. The exploration of the contrasts between graphic, painterly, and sculptural elements and the tension between geometry and free gesture are always juxtaposed in Kuehn's work. These lead to an ambiguity that the artist transfers to psychological levels: „I made hundreds of works that tried to address the question, in the broadest sense, of what could a drawing be. At the beginning I thought that

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my approach was formal, investigative, and rational. Looking back, I can see how fraught and psychological it was at the same time. I think all my issues about freedom, constraint, paranoia, social controls, societal controls were lying just beneath the surface in those works.“

The *Drill Drawings* are a series of works in which Kuehn consciously relinquishes control and raises questions of autonomy. He uses brushes as attachments for a drill and allows the machine's power to determine the path of the black paint across the paper. The boundary between artist and machine becomes blurred and it is unclear whether Kuehn's body becomes the stabilizing tool of the drill or whether he directs the machine itself. In contrast to Kuehn's *Gesture Project*, in which the limits of his own body raise questions about freedom, the *Drill Drawings* reveal a gestural movement that is seemingly detached from subjective will. The *Drill Drawings* not only challenge the artist to give up control, but also reflect constraints, norms and external forces that arise in social dynamics. The process in which Kuehn frees himself from the independent, controlled form and creates space for the autonomy of material and tools reflects the escape from social structures in favor of individual freedom.

The first solo exhibition by Gary Kuehn at max goelitz is supported by Häusler Contemporary Zurich and accompanied by an exhibition text by Alex Bacon (art historian at Princeton University and co-editor of Circle Books).

**Gary Kuehn** whose extensive oeuvre includes sculptures, paintings, collages and drawings, is one of the most famous representatives of Process Art, which radically changed the concept of art in the 1960s. In his sculptures, Kuehn questions the authority of the material and thus explores the field of tension between limitation and freedom. With an enormous sense of materiality and a craftsmanlike knowledge of its properties, it has been simple forms such as circles, squares, and triangles since the beginning of his career that, in conjunction with his interest in craft and industrial materials such as wood, metal, plaster, polyester, Plexiglas, aluminum, and steel, have formed the basis of his artistic investigations. The geometric forms are often exposed to the deforming forces of mass or kinetic energy, spatially displaced, knotted or pushed, whereby Kuehn always generates an emotional value in his formally abstract works.

Most prominently the artists' work was part of the documenta 6 in Kassel (1977) and of the exhibition *when attitudes become form* at Kunsthalle Bern (1969). Kuehn's works were last shown on the occasion of the two retrospectives at the Galeria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea GAMeC Bergamo (2018) and the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein (2014).

For further information please contact:

Alexandra Chizhevskaya | alexandra@maxgoelitz.com | +49 (0) 89 89063944

max goelitz  
maximilianstrasse 35  
80539 munich  
germany

maxgoelitz.com

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