

bodies of resilience | gary kuehn
30 november 2023 — 17 february 2024

Exhibition text by Alex Bacon

Gary Kuehn developed his artistic practice over the course of the 1960s, alongside the contemporaneous emergence of minimalism, coming of age in the context of Pop and Happenings, prominent practitioners of which, such as Roy Lichtenstein and Allan Kaprow, taught him at Rutgers University in New Jersey. As such, Kuehn recognized the power of iconic images and objects. The kinds of images and objects he preferred, however, were less those of mass consumerism, than materials close at hand, those readily found either in the home or on the construction site. These ranged from pillows, to bundles of sticks, to vices and bolts, strips of metal, and blocks of foam. He manipulated these materials by applying similarly commonplace forces to them: bending, folding, slumping, bolting, etc. He froze many of these activated objects by casting them in fiberglass, itself a familiar construction material.

This approach and privileging of the everyday aligns Kuehn with Judson dance, as practiced by choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs, which replaced the highly trained bodies of ballet with the regular steps of everyday life. Just as minimalist objects did away with the illusionism and external referents common to historical sculpture, Judson dance, and process-based art like Kuehn's, addressed the quotidian activities that were already being featured in Happenings, but rendered them even more straightforward, removing the narrative, sometimes even mythic, structure retained in many Happenings.

Implied motion is often an element of Kuehn's works. For example, the slouch of the uncrated rectangle juxtaposed with the static held quality of its sister crated piece, in *Untitled* (1969). While in *The Provisionals* (1969) a sense of centrifugal force rips through the circular arrangement of pincer aluminum as we feel the force of the metal strips being held in place, implicitly wanting to snap back to straightness. This is a productive comparison, as it suggests two primary forms of Kuehn's works: 1) those that subject a material to a deforming process (i.e., *Untitled*) and 2) those that hold a material in place against its will (i.e., *The Provisionals*).

In addressing the world around us, and the forces active within it, Kuehn's work takes a blasé, even humorous, approach to the inevitability of forces overcoming even the best laid plans. The 1960s witnessed an unprecedented attempt to corral and control the natural world. Hand-in-hand with this came a new awareness of human limitations and the dangers of this will to overpower and mold nature. Kuehn had intimate knowledge of such hubris through his day job as a laborer, performing construction jobs like laying down tar across the vast, flat roofs of industrial buildings. Kuehn's particular brand of pragmatism thus introduces a degree of humor into the work by not taking things too seriously. Rather than the dark, even violent, undercurrent of Robert Smithson's concept of entropy, Kuehn's humor resides in the rather more prosaic situations his works cultivate. In his sculpture of the mid-to-late-1960s this often occurred in how a common, familiar object, like a pillow, or plank of foam was bent, folded, held down, or otherwise compromised. The very ridiculousness of the situation – foam not being a particularly difficult or unruly material requiring much effort to constrain – renders what might otherwise be formal experiments with process quite funny. In a work like *Small Pillow Piece* (1964), for example, a familiar domestic object, a pillow, is subjected to vice-like pressure entirely unnecessary to restrain such a soft, lightweight thing. By the 1980s such a gesture had become reflexive, with Kuehn encasing painted canvases in a wire cage in *Winter Fruit – Paintings of the 80's* (1989). In a form of Kuehn's own tongue-in-cheek take on the appropriationist "neo-geo" abstraction fashionable

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at the time a finished painting was itself something to subject to being put through the pressures of a one of Kuehn's processes.

Kuehn has always made use of fundamental bodily gestures and, in more specific cases, those of the hand. Just as he folds, bolts, or drapes various materials, in flat (but still physical) works, elemental rotations of the wrist are considered sufficient to create the paintings and drawings that comprise his so-called *Gesture Project*. Similarly "simple" deployments of mechanical implements, like drills, and the wayward marks they make when applied to graphite and paper, are considered enough to make a drawing from. In the spirit of the time, these remove the full control of the artist to determine the final form of the image, with it instead being the joint creation of the artist and the mechanical appendage. These represent the first drawings that weren't simply illustrations of ideas for sculptures.

The *Gesture Project* is comprised of drawings that take the dimensions of the artist's body as their starting point, with their formats miming the size of the artist's arm span. The format becomes a container through which the artist's hand flows, skirting its edges. In discussing the works of the *Gesture Project*, Kuehn has described their surfaces, using his distinctive dark humor, as a kind of "prison" for the marks that appear on them. Within this "surface prison" Kuehn creates the matrix for a painting or drawing.

Kuehn's painting practice didn't emerge until the end of the 1960s, when he started making eccentrically shaped minimalist black and white canvases. In these *Black Paintings*, he demarcates his form using a metal brace within which he allows the paint to flow, filling in the space without any direction from him, or any use of traditional painterly tools like a brush. Instead, he applies his characteristic process-based approach to painting. Thus, the often eccentric outer shapes of these paintings, such as *Black Painting* (1969), and the corresponding sense of cropping, is due to Kuehn having cut out the uneven shape his process produced. Thus, these jagged edged paintings are like extractions or samples of some natural force, not unlike his sculptures, with their dualities between process and form, and the antinomy of a shape and its undoing.

Alex Bacon is an art historian based between London and New York. He is copublisher of Circle Books and, until recently, Curatorial Associate at the Princeton University Art Museum. He is currently completing his PhD in Art & Archaeology at Princeton University with a dissertation on Frank Stella and the emergence of Minimalism in the 1960s.

The first solo exhibition by Gary Kuehn at max goelitz is supported by Häusler Contemporary Zurich.

For further information please contact:
gallery@maxgoelitz.com | +49 (0) 89 89063944

max goelitz
maximilianstrasse 35
entrance herzog-rudolf-strasse
80539 munich

maxgoelitz.com

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