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Stuart Arends at Gallery Schlesinger

by David Cohen

“Stuart Arends: Friends” at Gallery Schlesinger Limited
“Nobu Fukui” at Stephen Haller Gallery
“Alexander Liberman: No Regrets” at Ameringer Yohe
“Fred Sandback” through end May at Lawrence Markey Gallery and Zwirner and Wirth

Minimalism was so strenuously and self-consciously iconoclastic, with its prim reductions, its insistently banal primary structures, and its chromophobia, that there is an almost equally iconoclastic pleasure to be had in work that takes up some aspect of this movement but recklessly adds whimsy or gaiety.

Several shows up right now that fit this bill. None of the artists set out to debunk minimalism: one historically precedes it, others dutifully pay homage to the movement. But it doesn't require a radical misreading of these artists to see an implicit critique of puritanism in their catholic displays of gesture or color.



Stuart Arends Rachel 2003-04 ink, oil and wax on wood, 4-1/2 x 4-1/2 x 2-3/4 inches Courtesy Gallery Schlesinger

The small painted boxes of Stuart Arends know how to behave in polite company: They have been collected assiduously by the Panza di Buomo Collection in Italy, which specializes in minimal and monochromatic art. But they are touched by a delicacy and personal, even poetic quality that belies any sense of severity.

The artist has insisted on their status as paintings rather than sculptures, suggesting in a statement that accompanies the show that he arrived at the box as his preferred support out of a desire to deal with a painting as an object “rather than just a format for illusions”. The box isn't suggestive of a receptacle; rather it is just a canvas whose wrap around edges happen to have equal weight to its frontage.

The painting is made up of neatly delineated, irregularly overlapping rectangles. There is a specificity to his touch, which is restrained but personal, sealed-in (with much use of wax) and at the same time differentiated, with a different kind of brushstroke for each rectangle. As if to emphasize the personality of these charmingly particular objects, Mr. Arends has called his show "Friends," giving each piece a person's name. His show is a party where you want to linger and meet everyone.

In 1965 Nobu Fukui elicited a cryptic description from Donald Judd, the high priest of minimalism, in a brief notice in Arts Magazine: "The paintings are well done; there isn't anything wrong with them-they aren't elegant, bland or affected-but they are like other paintings." While Mr. Fukui's work has changed radically in the intervening decades-his aesthetic is now exuberant and layered to the point of being baroque-Judd's enigmatic categorizations hold true with remarkable alacrity.

Mr. Fukui is an artist who, literally, juggles many balls: a typical work lays upon a ground of richly detailed, dense gestural and/or collaged texture a rigid grid structure populated at the intersections of its ruled lines with irregular clusters of colored uniformly sized dots and, less frequently, actual balls (they could be beads or marbles) dipped in paints of the same primary and nursery colors.

The viewer soon gets used to these grids and balls so that they shimmer on the retina like a layer of pointillism. There is, however, an insistent democracy between the layers, and within each layer, despite the irregularity, an all-overness that achieves order without symmetry or ubiquity. The collage materials, where he uses them, hover ingeniously between interestingness and gratuity. In fact, his whole project seems to be a bravura balancing act of meaning and decoration, as if these aesthetic categories themselves are willed equivalents of order and chaos.

Dots and balls of a sparer nature but no less whimsy and charm filled the works of Alexander Liberman between 1950-1960, an elegant selection of which, installed in direct emulation of a show staged by the artist at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1960, closes at Ameringer Yohe this weekend. Reviewing the Parsons show in Arts magazine, Judd noted that "the economy is admirable."

These works are, indeed, about economy for the sake of vigor and dynamism rather than reduction for its own, cerebral or theoretical sake. They look to Russian Constructivism, (the "Yellow Continuum" series directly recalling Rodchenko and El Lissitzky) but despite their precisionism and hard-edged clarity they equally bring to mind the pulsating, wobbly disks of Miró or the child-like joie de vivre of Calder, especially Liberman's last disk painting in this show, an untitled work from 1960 that pits a hand-drawn larger yellow and smaller red ball against a dazzle of ultramarine.

Liberman was the legendary art editor at Condé Nast who managed to maintain a serious practice as a fine artist despite the pressures of his job and the snobbish distance, before the era of Andy Warhol, between the worlds of art and fashion. He was a great collector and patron of artists, but there is plenty of positive evidence in these joyful, bracing works to overcome any suspicion of the depth of admiration felt for this artist by such peers as de Kooning, Newman, and later, of course, Judd.

On the face of it, the late Fred Sandback-the subject of a two-part exhibition at Lawrence Markey and the uptown premises of David Zwirner-was as minimal as they come.

His trademark material was store-purchased brightly colored acrylic yarn, stretched taut between floor and ceiling, or forming right angles to a wall. These lines of string inevitably force awareness of their environment in a way that displaces attention from the object itself to its impact, a classic hallmark of minimalism.

And yet, severe, pristine, reductive as Sandback first appears, the effect of his string pieces is strangely sculptural. You become aware not so much of the room itself, although that is a factor, as of planes defined in space. And the sense of implied continuation, the thought that the lines must continue through to other rooms and spaces, adds a poetic element alien to hard core minimal art. Despite his drastic means, Sandback was ultimately more of a connector to artistic traditions than a disruptor of them. His professed preference for the expressive figuration of Giacometti over the presumed affinity between his own work and the Russian constructivists is richly suggestive and rings true.

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