

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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On its own terms: “Specific Forms” at Loretta Howard



“Specific Forms” at Loretta Howard, installation view

Contributed by Kim Uchiyama / “Specific Forms” at Loretta Howard Gallery illuminates a particular moment in 20th century art history where works created by a variety of artists occupied the space between the then diverging ideologies of a young Donald Judd and those of the older critic Clement Greenberg. Saul Ostrow has curated a finely-tuned exhibit that demonstrates the highly individual modes of thought that were at play during this transitional time, ideas distinct from the critical positions of Minimalism, Pop and Color-field.

The movement known as Abstract Expressionism – a “movement” itself comprised of highly individualistic artists – can be seen in retrospect as the physical and psychological response to the global tensions of World War II. Mary Gabriel, in *Ninth Street Women*, her invaluable contribution to understanding the full scope of this era, emphasizes the war – and the lead up to war – as the underpinning for the formation of a new American art which would reflect the exigencies of the moment. The works in “Specific Forms” came about because these times had changed. Post-war America lacked the angst of the 1940s

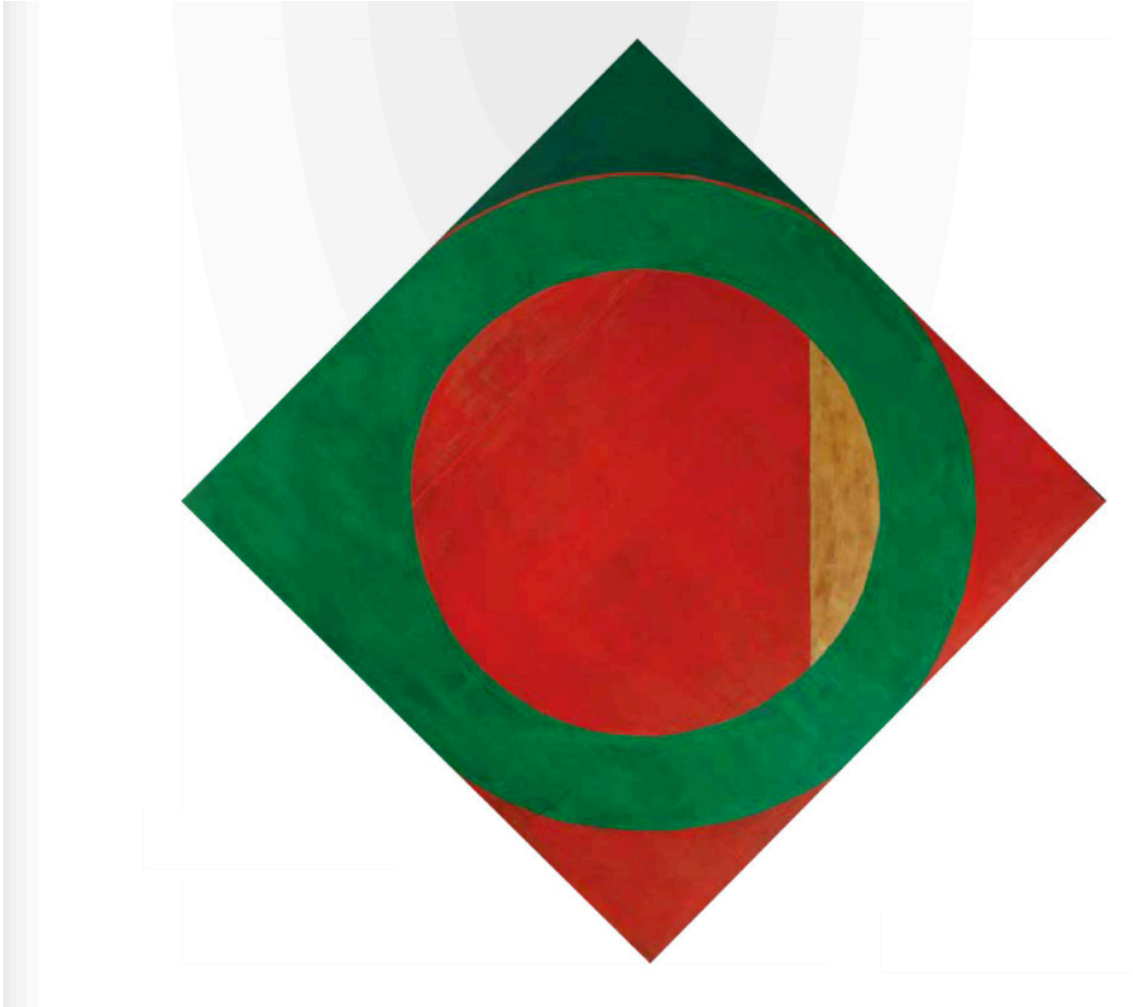
and 1950s, and was increasingly replaced in the 1960s and 1970s by an art that sought to look to itself reflexively, on its own terms – the thing being the thing itself.

In an era characterized by an implicit questioning of authority and established norms, these fourteen artists sought to break the mold of existing “-isms” and are seemingly preoccupied in creating a new consciousness via their art. The resulting works are highly specific unto themselves and characterized by strikingly individualistic terms for their existence.

Signs and systems were also in the air. In 1970 at the Guggenheim Museum, Annette Michelson introduced the ideas of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to the American art world. Levi-Strauss’ theory of human development was organized by linguistic, semiotic modes of thought which some felt could be applied to the visual arts. After all, painting and sculpture were themselves forms of language. But in its fundamentally rationalist approach, Structuralism had limiting consequences for any real understanding of art. A systemic organization of thought could not be the full measure of any art form, because art is more than a description of systematic functions, or an accumulation of language – it seeks to recreate an experience of consciousness greater than the sum of its parts.

In the absence of any prevailing concept of avant-garde, artists became newly engaged with posing fundamental questions. After Abstract Expressionism artists wondered how painting could find new meaning. Is there a place in art for culture and sensuality? What connection does the artist have to art history, or, for that matter, to any history?

With this in mind, Ostrow has curated an intelligent and reflective exhibit in which art forms are perceived as simultaneously open (looking outside of itself) and closed (looking only to itself). With further viewing, it becomes clear that the works here chosen are meant to create specific visual and contextual relationships with each other – as well as stand their own ground as individual works of art.



Larry Poons, *Rock and Roll*, 1958, oil on canvas, 68 x 68 inches (measured on the diagonal), 48 x 48.25 inches

Two works on paper by Judy Chicago, *Optical Shapes #6* and *Optical Shapes #10* (1969) are cannily selected to illustrate the difference between them. *Optical Shapes #6* looks to reflect the kind of stasis that occurs with four mirrored forms, while *Optical Shapes #10*, using the same components, centers on the permuted rotational movement of its four color-comprised circles.



Edward Avedisian, *Untitled*, 1965, acrylic on board, 30 x 30 inches

Taken together, these two works compel the viewer to compare the progression of movement from one of Chicago's paintings to the next. In Edward Avedisian's *Untitled* (1965), particular formations are also taking place. Gently morphing cell-like orbs suggest growth and reproduction, as if we are witnessing a biomorphic transition. This in turn invites comparison to the adjacent works by Chicago. Careful pairing of works throughout the exhibit seems intended to encourage the viewer to reflect on analogies and differences between the works presented.



Marcia Hafif, *157*, 1967, courtesy © Marcia Hafif

Duality constitutes Marcia Hafif's *157* (1967) where color defines two singular and enigmatic forms to optically mesh finger-like on the picture plane before the viewer. Two color shapes create a quite different spatial relationship in Ray Parker's *Untitled* (#635) (1963), where lozenges of sky blue and yellow ochre exist as equal but conjoined entities, highlighting their commonality but also their distinctness.

Ostrow says that each of the fourteen works were specifically selected as individual artworks, not necessarily meant to represent the artist's overall oeuvre. Accordingly, some of his selections do not illustrate an artist's best-known periods. One of the show's biggest surprises was Larry Poons' *Rock and Roll* (1958), presented on a near square diamond format. Its affinities to Al Held's adjacent *60 S-2 AP* (1965) is striking, and both reference a large central "O" of blue or green shapes. The use of alphabetical forms

creates a familiar context, but one that is entirely reinvented in its organization – and used quite differently in both instances.

The one sculpture included in the exhibit, George Sugarman's *Trio* (1969-70), comprises bright yellow components organized in a gene-like chain, which progressively increase in scale as the viewer moves from one end to the other. Thomas Downing's painting *Position 2-13-75* (1975) speaks to the concept of numerical "positions" in which the order of circular forms also implies a familiarity of organization. But what is it exactly? Military formation of an army phalanx? A sequence of columns populating the long and short sides of a Greek temple? Subtle, alternating shifts in Downing's use of reds again suggest movement as opposed to stasis.

Color for Ostrow was a key factor in his selections for "Specific Forms." Here color does not merely function descriptively or decoratively, but is used to meaningful and specific effect. As much as the show is a fascinating and informative slice of art history, the real importance of experiencing these works is that we can reexamine where we are now. Are today's artists using color to determine form and structure to meaningful effect? What is there yet to learn from where abstraction has been – and how might that determine where it could go? Abstraction is still a viable vehicle of expression for contemporary thought. Specific works of art — and the formulations of specific artists, rather than any "isms" — seem the way forward in contemporary abstraction. As such, they demand a closer look.

"Specific Forms," curated by Saul Ostrow. Loretta Howard, 521 West 26th Street, 1st floor, New York, NY. Through March 7, 2020. With works by Edward Avedisian, Richard Anuszkiewicz, Darby Bannard, Billy Al Bengston, Judy Chicago, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Marcia Hafif, Al Held, Ray Parker, Larry Poons, Leon Polk Smith, and George Sugarman.

About the author: Kim Uchiyama is a painter who has had solo exhibitions at John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY, Spazio Contemporaneo Agora', Palermo, Italy, Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, Bridgehampton and Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York. She is a recipient of many fellowships including New York Foundation For The Arts, MacDowell Colony, and BAU Institute in Puglia, Italy.