

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

## Reviews

### Donald Judd, painter without a brush

**PAC POBRIC** on “Donald Judd: Stacks” at the Mnuchin Gallery (until 7 December)



Donald Judd, *Untitled (Bernstein 90-11)*, 1990. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

Donald Judd was a relatively unknown artist when Bruce Glaser interviewed him, Frank Stella and Dan Flavin on WBAI-FM, a New York public radio station, in February 1964. Though he had had a solo show at the Green Gallery the previous December, the only other had been at the Panoramas Gallery in 1957. At the time, he was better known as a critic than as an artist, and he felt somewhat insecure about his works: some time after the Panoramas show, he referred to it as a “stupid” exhibition. Stella, on the other hand, had more reason to be self-assured. He was eight years younger than Judd and had already exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, only one year after graduating from Princeton University. The same year, he held a solo show at the prestigious Leo Castelli Gallery. Another followed in 1962.

Judd was impressed. Writing about Stella’s work two years before the Glaser interview, he praised its clarity: “the coherence is philosophical as well as technical”. The work was “not only new but better”; it made “Abstract Expressionism now seem like an inadequate style”. But he still had certain reservations. Both artists were eager to carve out American art as a new phenomenon, but Stella was more receptive to the idea that it had links to European abstraction. When Glaser asked if his work was related to that of Mondrian, Stella said that there were “obvious connections”, although the motivations were different. Judd was less generous: “There’s an enormous break between that work and other present work in the US, despite similarity in patterns or anything.”

His conviction about the superiority of American art would persist, to the point that he would only say that his judgements on Abstract Expressionism had been "inadequate" - only inadequate to the 1960s, once it had hardened into a contrived style. Whatever radical touch Abstract Expressionism had had in its heyday had devolved into pretty pictures of abstract designs. Yet Judd had many good things to say about American painting at its best. He hailed the scale of Barnett 20th-century art" and called Jackson Pollock "a greater artist than anyone working at the time or since". (He immediately added: "That gives him an edge on Barnett Newman, which I hate to admit.")

The question for Judd was how to continue making art after this grand experiment had exhausted itself. His solution was to move into three dimensions—but not to make sculpture. "Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture," he famously wrote in 1965. And although "the new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting...it is nearer to painting." And that was precisely the problem for Judd: how to transform painting into something new without abandoning its problems.

These concerns are everywhere evident in Judd's exhibition of "stack" works at the Mnuchin Gallery, all 10 of which were made between 1968 and 1990. In the first place, these works are all wall-mounted, like paintings. Scale, too, is a major consideration. At their largest, the sections of the stacks measure 9 x 40 x 31 inches, eagerly eating up any surrounding space. (Judd imagined these pieces would suit institutions while the smaller ones would be better for domestic settings.) It is also obvious that, with a set overall structure in place (one stack after another), Judd could focus more fully on material and colour, which are at their best when they are highly specific. The violet anodised aluminium stack easily takes best in show because it looks like absolutely nothing else.

But the greater relationship these works have to painting is in their overall shape. Once unpacked from their shipping crates, assembled and installed, the stacks are not made of discrete parts, at least not in the traditional sense. As Judd insisted to Glaser about another of his pieces, it is "above all that shape", which is also true of the stacks. They are whole per se, fully integral and composed. And who else but Pollock haunts this aspect of Judd's work? Looking at the painter's art, Judd insisted that it was complete only as is: "the quality of the parts is the quality of the whole". Pollock's pictures could not be broken down into various parts. They were only exactly what they were: finished, whole paintings. This also applies to Judd's work so well only because he understood Abstract Expressionism so deeply. And that remains the best-kept secret about the artist: that he was a painter who did not use a brush. As he declared in 1977: "My thought comes from painting even if I don't paint."

*Published Wed, 06 Nov 2013 16:00:00 GMT*