

June 6, 2011

Alan Shields: Something Goin' On & On



Alan Shields: Something Goin' On & On, installation view

Alan Shields's operative medium is pure color. His passive, infused, or diluted application of paint through tints, prints, stains, and stencils leaves his work vulnerable to the conditions under which it is viewed, bringing to mind the seacoast or a broad expanse of field where the light and weather are in perpetual flux. While, in much of his work, the artist seems to start with the intention of making bold, bright, chess game-like layered geometric statements, many pieces are more skeptically resolved, opening questions rather than providing definitive answers. Reading the work feels like scrutinizing the horizon, checking the sky and wind for signs of what's to come.

Shields (1944 – 2005) worked in the wake of New York '60s Minimalism, honing and adapting his materials and techniques in painting, environmental installations, and printmaking with patient persistence while maintaining a conscious availability to unexpected results. For all the crafty, color-filled, theatrical materiality evident in *Something Goin' On & On* at Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, this show of Shields's work feels more like an elegiac acknowledgement of the artist's passing. Curator Jill Brienza, a longtime friend of the artist, presents a selection of work from the '70s and '80s that provides a restrained but palpable distillation of the entirety of Shields's life work, which spanned four decades. As with the changeable workings of memory, the pieces in the show seem to become most visually alive when observed in the gallery's bright natural sky light; the works' presence fades slightly with cloud cover, at dusk, or under artificial light beyond the main room.

In each of the gallery's three rooms, Brienza has placed an example of Shields's three-dimensional paintings: in the foyer is "Inside Outside Passion Flower Bell" (1975 – 79), comprised of two small, jewel-toned pyramids; "Dance Bag" (1985), a cone of ribbon-like canvas strips suspended over a circular mirror, is in the main gallery; and "Reip Red River

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

"Rip or Honest to God Indian Soo" (1971–73), a canvas cylinder decorated with string and large wooden beads, hangs from the ceiling of the private viewing room. Unstretched canvas was a favorite material of Shields for formal and philosophical reasons. Proceeding from an early encounter with Buckminster Fuller's ideas suggesting the enlightening qualities of alternatives to the predominate rectilinear spaces we inhabit, Shields's three-dimensional work—shaping and draping canvas, woven strips, and string—toys with different ways for his audience to see and move through man-made environments.

Shields moved to Shelter Island, NY in the early 1970s, but he remained proud of his family's deep Midwestern farming roots. Practicality was the mother of much of his aesthetic invention—such as the portability of unstretched canvas or the use of stenciling to recycle compositional forms in his painting and paper, and printmaking. His machine-sewn colored threads operate as drawing details in "Diet Limca" (1980–81), but they also secure the grids of woven fabric tape. The duality of farm life—the extreme uncertainty of nature and crop outcomes versus the unrelenting multitude of small, endlessly repeated daily tasks—could be seen as the underpinning for the compositional device common to many of his large works, juxtaposing cosmic scale with a uniform dispersal of very small remnants of paint, repetitively printed forms or, in the case of "Finger Lickin'" (1974–76), a large web of thread, rope, string, and beads.

The implication of a posthumous exhibition is that the job of assessing the artist's legacy is now underway. Having first met Shields as a child of six, Brienza has wedded her close personal relationship with the artist to her professional goals as a curator. Well before the artist's death, she promoted an awareness of Shields's work, taking care to find the firmest possible ground to make the case for his importance. Located in a New York City gallery, the current show becomes a public forum for considering Shields's work in the place where he first struggled to make a name for himself in the late 1960s. And when he finally found a home at Paula Cooper, he was an anomaly even in a gallery that showed anomalies—Richard Van Buren, Elizabeth Murray, Jonathan Borofsky, et alia. He was an artist who appeared in the mainstream but who never became mainstream in his methods.

This serious business is anchored by a full catalogue with a commissioned essay from independent curator Bob Nickas, who cites a cast of brand name artists for historic punctuation. In a way, this ponderousness works against the artist's evanescent, playful impulses so clearly evident in the show. Seeing Shields's work here is like an invitation to pull on your favorite, comfortably worn-in jeans and 100 percent cotton T-shirt and head for the beach. The self-conscious efforts necessary to the running of the art market heighten the feelings of loss for Alan Shields. He had a generous, open-minded attitude about making and sharing his work. He is no longer with us, but succeeding waves of artists, for whom disciplinary distinctions are a thing of the past, certainly hear his voice.

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