

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

December 31, 2011/January 1, 2012
C14

Homage to an Art-World Odd Couple

On the surface they had little in common. Dan Flavin made minimalist fluorescent-light constructions, while James Brooks was part of the Abstract Expressionist circle of Jackson Pollock. But a new exhibition portrays the two as longtime friends who may have shared an artistic sensibility as well.



Dan Flavin's 'Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today' as installed in 2008 at New York's Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Modern Art/Estate of Dan Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS)

The show at a New York gallery pairs some 16 paintings and works on paper by Brooks with two examples of Flavin's fluorescent projects. It suggests that Brooks may have influenced the younger, more famous Flavin. Both light sculptures on view were named for Brooks and his wife, Charlotte.

Flavin dabbled in Abstract Expressionism himself before turning to Minimalism and, ultimately, his signature fluorescent motif in the 1960s. He continues to get frequent museum and gallery exhibitions today. Lately, the market for his fluorescent work has picked up as well. Sotheby's set an auction record in New York for the artist in November when his "Four Red Horizontals (To Sonja)," from 1963, sold for \$1.7 million.

Brooks, on the other hand, failed to achieve the mainstream popularity of some of his contemporaries.

Flavin (1933–1996) and Brooks (1906–1992) probably met on Long Island's East End, a popular artists' retreat where both New Yorkers had homes. Brooks was of an earlier generation. He served as a government muralist prior to World War II and after the war fell in with the likes of

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

Pollock and Philip Guston. Like many of the artists in his circle, Brooks abandoned his earlier, representational style for abstract content and broad brushstrokes that would come to define the postwar era.

While others like Pollock loved to improvise, Brooks "worked in a very deliberate, very premeditated fashion," says Dorsey Waxter, executive director of Greenberg Van Doren, which represents the artist's estate and is holding the exhibition on both artists, called "Unlikely Friends: James Brooks & Dan Flavin." Flavin, too, was a careful planner: In February, New York's Morgan Library & Museum will mount a retrospective of Flavin's little-known drawings, many of them preparatory sketches for his fluorescent sculptures and installations.



James Brooks's 'Leedy,' a painting from 1970
Courtesy of the Estate and Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York

While Flavin's minimalist output rejected many of the Abstract Expressionist principles Brooks held dear, something about the oft-overlooked painter struck a chord. "Both of them were very interested in the notion of what a line could be," Ms. Waxter adds—be it sketched freehand on paper or ready-made via fluorescent lights.

Once acquainted, Flavin became one of Brooks's most devoted advocates. The two saw and wrote each other throughout the 1970s and '80s. In 1984, shortly after the artist opened the Dan Flavin Art Institute in the East End town of Bridgehampton, Flavin staged a solo exhibition of Brooks's work. Promoting the show, Flavin wrote to a local newspaper that Brooks was "one of the finest artists ever to grace this land."

Seven of the drawings included in that exhibition will be on view at Greenberg Van Doren. The ink, acrylic and gouache works on paper show the unusual lines by which Flavin was seemingly so seduced. They appear more controlled than those of Brooks's Abstract Expressionist colleagues, shaped like Rorschach blots and mutant chromosomes, deftly illustrating the sort of streaks and blotches that other artists hoped to achieve by chance. **RACHEL WOLFF**