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## A Maze and Grace: Alan Shields takes Color Field for a Walk

by David Carrier

Alan Shields: Maze at Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

November 7 to December 21, 2012

730 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street

New York City, 212.445.0444



Alan Shields, *Maze*, 1981-82. Acrylic and thread on canvas, cotton belting, Velcro, aluminum pipe, 87 x 219 x 219 inches. Courtesy of Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

Critics sometimes like to imagine they are entering the picture space of paintings under view. In a justly famous extended passage in *The Salon of 1767*, for instance, Denis Diderot describes wandering within some landscape scenes by Claude-Joseph Vernet. And in his critique of Clement

Greenberg's formalism, Leo Steinberg asserted: "In an age of space travel a pictorial semblance of open void is just as inviting to imaginary penetration as the pictorial semblance of a receding landscape was formerly to a man on foot." Normally, of course when viewing a work of art, you stand some distance in front of that object. But if paintings are used to construct a maze, then you can walk surrounded on all sides by art. Galerie Lelong Chelsea's exhibition Hélio Oiticica: *Penetrables* earlier this year allowed viewers to go through a maze at the far end of the gallery which was composed from panels of solid colors—green, blue, yellow, and orange. At the end, you were rewarded with a cup of orange juice. Oiticica intended that *Penetrables* be a movable penetrable fresco. Shields' *Maze* creates a very different effect.

The Greenberg Van Doren Gallery has a relatively large unobstructed display room. And so, filling a large part of it with *Maze* (1981-82), filled with decorative circles, triangles and rectangles composed of areas of pure color, and some intricate geometric patterns changed completely the way that you experienced that space. Twisting and turning, walking on narrow pathways between paintings hung on frail-looking wood frames using webs of cotton belting, you finally emerged on the far side from the entrance. The pathway is narrow enough that you need to turn sideways. When you enter, you don't know exactly where the path will lead. Were someone to enter from the other side, you then would have to back out. At some points, you can see outside, but often when you are within *Maze* you find yourself immersed in a forest of paintings.

Taught to sew by his mother and sisters, Shields (1944- 2005), became famous in the early 1970s for employing the motifs of 1960s color field paintings in colorful decorative hangings. He compared *Maze* to a stage set: "you've got walls, corridors, intersections, changes of direction, all directed by a type of architecture within architecture." The opening for this show featured a performance choreographed by Stephen Petronio "Into The Maze," set to a piece of music composed by Tom Laurie, which was inspired by a short melody written by Shields. But even without attending, a gallery visitor could understand the power of *Maze* (1981-82) to inspire these performers. Entering a maze is an essentially regressive experience. Abandoning your normally purposeful walk, you surrender yourself to following the spatial order created by the artist. Color field paintings become walls of a maze – what an unlikely, but aesthetically satisfying fate for an art form that aspired to dematerialize the work of art.