



Currently Hanging

MARIO NAVES

Calm, Stately Cruciform Shapes Excite Respect, Not Enthusiasm

The painter Harvey Quaytman, who died last year at the age of 64 after a long illness, was an unspectacular fixture of the New York art world for close to 40 years. If "unspectacular" seems an odd or callous adjective, especially in light of the artist's recent passing, please understand that I mean it as a compliment.

Rooted in the Modernist ethos, particularly Constructivism and Neo-Plasticism, Quaytman paid little attention to artistic fashion. Though he took inspiration from Abstract Expressionism and shared affinities with Minimalism, Quaytman set himself apart from the stylistic convolutions that pass for recent art history, preferring the strictures of tradition to the distractions of culture: Making art, not noise, was his life's mission. (He's reminiscent, in this regard, of figures like Richard Diebenkorn and William Bailey.) The signature pictures, cruciform-shaped canvases done in acrylic and augmented with rust, are the culmination of an art put into motion by pioneering Russian abstractionists like Aleksandr Rodchenko and Kasimir Malevich.

Quaytman clarified that tradition, but he did not revitalize it, which accounts for the muted, somehow dutiful recognition his work has received. The paintings seem almost purposefully designed to thwart enthusiasm; they can be stately to a fault. That's not to say that the memorial tribute organized by the McKee Gallery isn't moving—it is. For anyone who prizes the art of painting, *Harvey Quaytman: A Survey of Paintings and Drawings 1969-1998* is a must.

The show illustrates Quaytman's artistic pursuit and the concomitant tussles it entailed. We begin with *Riley Mumbling to Himself at Night* (1961-63), a boxed-in ramble of de Kooning-esque shapes, and follow through the experiments—not always successful—with format and structure. A rest-

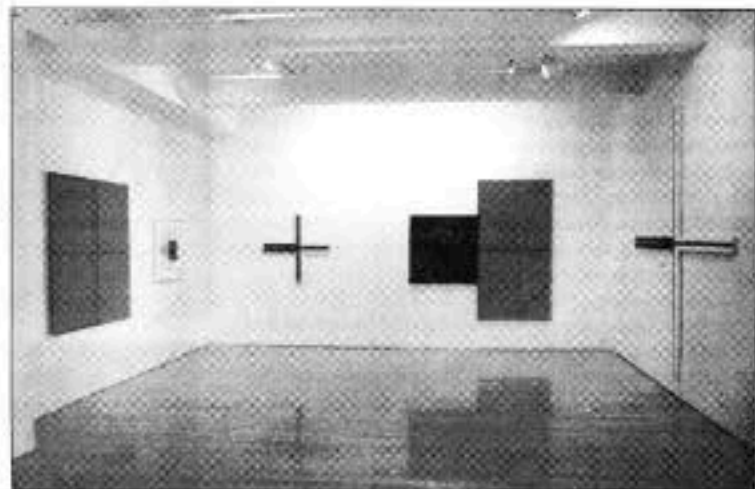
less pictorial intellect, Quaytman steadfastly probed the rather fixed limitations of his art. Its mainstays are an abiding sense of craft, an understated material sensuality, irregularly shaped canvases and an almost grudging acknowledgment of illusion. By the time he settled on the cruciform format, the armature upon which his concerns would be refined, we feel that Quaytman deserved a rest.

You're likely to leave the gallery wanting to see more of Quaytman's art, which speaks to the pull and principle of his accomplishment. And yet we could twiddle our thumbs forever

Making art, not noise, was his life's mission.

and a day waiting for one of our museums to mount even a modest retrospective. Now's your chance to honor the handiwork of an admirably unspectacular man.

Harvey Quaytman: A Survey of Paintings and Drawings 1969-1998 is at the McKee Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, until Nov. 1.



Harvey Quaytman's work from the 1990's, on display at the McKee Gallery.