

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

Tales of Brave Ulysses

By Andrew Paul Woolbright | December 2023–January 2024



Installation view, *Tales of Brave Ulysses*: Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, Alan Shields, and Richard Van Buren, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

Tales of Brave Ulysses, which spans across the galleries of Van Doren Waxter and Garth Greenan, highlights a significant moment of counter-modernism within the 70s and 80s. The work of the artists Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, Alan Shields, and Richard Van Buren are a weft and warp, interlaced in dialogue with each other to reveal an exchange of ideas and innovations. Their shared interests in forms of craft and color demonstrate the important influence and exchange between friends in artist communities, while also revealing a moment of reconciliation between the art world of New York and the counterculture and protest movements of the Vietnam War; where a sense of material recycling and radiant color held a space within Post-Minimalism.



Installation view, *Tales Of Brave Ulysses*, Van Doren Waxter, New York, 2023. Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter & Garth Greenan Gallery, NY.

In terms of form, the net and the grid form significant points of interrogation throughout both exhibitions; representing the plurality of moves forced out of painting's first death. The loose net expresses itself through Alan Shields' acrylic thread works, Loving's paper collages, and Pindell's *Untitled* 1968-70. Pindell's *Untitled* is a kind of soft ladder, a twisted mesh of loose, chain-link connections that harmonizes with Shields's (*no identifying marks*) that he completed in 1983. Both seemed to be questioning what could be expressed through the absence of form in painting—what could be removed and what is necessary to maintain the edge of material as a function of painting rather than a function of soft sculpture; moves that Pindell was making with Lerner-Heller Gallery in the 80s and Shields was exploring in his exhibition *Cut-Outs* with Paula Cooper in 1984.



Installation view, *Tales Of Brave Ulysses*, Van Doren Waxter, New York, 2023. Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter & Garth Greenan Gallery, NY.

Along with Loving's untitled canvas strip works, the gravity and language of slack and drape is an aesthetic force that runs through both exhibition locations. Loving had been heavily influenced by the Whitney Museum's "Abstract Design in American Quilts" in 1971, and took part in moving painting away from the rigid container of the stretcher bar. It was a time of painting's exhaustion, and while other painters explored shaped canvas and conceptual in situ forms, Pindell, Loving, and Shields found energy in softness, quilting, and stitching loose canvas. For them, the implied movement and activity of loose materials—the sway and drape of soft materials, of canvas surfaces performing as paper or cloth, carefully tacked up and allowed to shift, resisted the commodity fetish and returned painting to a conversation of material subjectivities and narrative. The work of Richard van Buren often acts as an important contrast to the soft gestures of the other three. His works extend the other artists' mutual interest in the freshly available synthetic pigments of the 70s, while granting the hard edges, discreet forms, and the wondrous illusions within the shadows and negative spaces that the forms of his sculptures produce.



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Part of the relevance of this exhibition is in this spiritual engagement, a rarity in the timeline of New York that ran counter to the ascendant Frankfurt school of the time. At Garth Greenan, Alan Shields's *Maze*, made between 1981 and 82, builds a meditative journey out of a series of paintings by the artist. Snaking around the center of the gallery, it is a spirit walk of transcendental thought forms, begun a year after he took a spiritual retreat to Ahmedabad in India. *Hunt for the Other Side* created much later in 1997 marks the most decisive step into mystical language represented in the show—an esoteric grid of marks of withheld significance underneath two writhing serpents. Shields's *Tanta Luna* (1969) trespasses back and forth between a flag, a quilt, and a star chart and employs color in symbolic and metaphysical performances similar to the ways they are utilized in alchemical texts.



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Each artist participates in a materially vibrant stance of dismantling—rehearsing their suspicions of dominant viewpoints of art through their own practices; born both out of their political reactions to the Vietnam War and where white patriarchal bias had steered aesthetics. Both Pindell and Loving saw modernism through rogue and discarded aesthetics, seeing new modernisms in material expressions of scraps and detritus: the torn drape of pigmented canvas and the color burns of spray paint in the case of Loving, and the repurposed hole punch outs of office work in the case of Pindell. Shields's mystic journey allowed him to traverse similar aesthetics, while Van Buren's attraction to polymers and capsuled forms proved an entry point into commodity reassessment. It was reclaiming and reusing materials as a base materialist strategy—a recountering of what is valued and what isn't, and what can be achieved from recirculating materials through the studio and into the gallery. Suspicion of the market and of the political moment produces radical reevaluations of the forms that art takes, and the *Tales of Brave Ulysses* yields the important new mythologies that were produced at the moment of painting and Minimalism's exhaustion.

