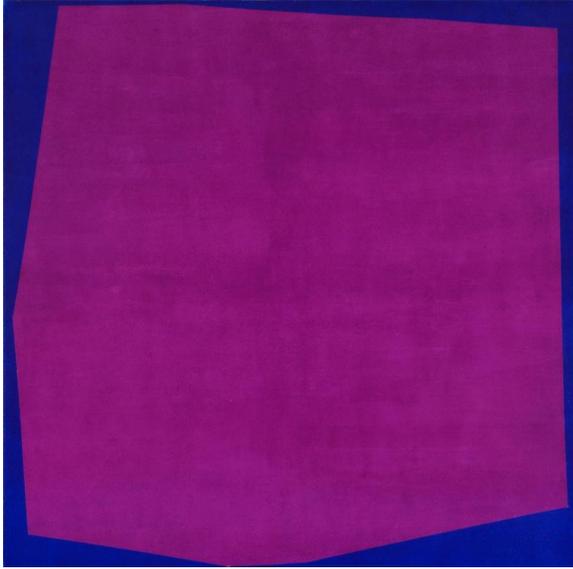


Passionate Minimalist: Artist Anne Truitt

Michael Abatemarco | Posted: Friday, July 4, 2014 5:00 am



Anne Truitt

Anne Truitt, Promise, 1989, acrylic on canvas

Anne Truitt (1921-2004) made waves in the art world with her first solo exhibition at André Emmerich Gallery in New York in 1963. Her work was composed of arrangements of bulky columns, boxes, and slab forms in somber colors. Artist and critic Donald Judd, writing for *Arts Magazine* in April of that year, described her arrangements as “thoughtless” and her work as appearing “serious without being so,” a far more dismissive comment than the praise Clement Greenberg, writing some years later about the same exhibition, heaped on Truitt. Greenberg, an influential art critic, a promoter of Abstract Expressionism, and a friend of Truitt’s, credited her with anticipating, with her boxy monoliths, the Minimalist movement that would reach its zenith before the 1960s came to a close. In his 1967 essay “Recentness of Sculpture,” Greenberg wrote about her early works, saying, “Despite their being covered with rectilinear zones of color, I was stopped by their deadpan ‘primariness,’ and I had to look again and again, and I had to return again, to discover the power of these ‘boxes.’” Judd remained unconvinced, writing in April 1969 that Greenberg’s attempt to credit Truitt with Minimalism’s invention was garbled and further suggesting that it wasn’t even worth inventing.

Truitt had not embraced the Minimalist aesthetic to the extent that her contemporaries did, choosing to paint her works by hand and, later in her career, turning to more polychromatic sculpture. Minimalist works, for the most part, are created in series, industrially produced, and geometric. They are simplified in form, and color, when used, is done so sparingly. The works are also nonreferential, hinting at nothing beyond their own appearance. In his authoritative compendium *Minimalism*, James Meyer writes that Truitt had an intuitive approach to making art and that her works often dealt with personal memory, aspects that seem to be at odds with the basic markers of Minimalism and may have more in common with the emotional intensity of Abstract Expressionism.

Truitt amassed a considerable number of paintings and works on paper over her career. These are the subject of an exhibition on view at Charlotte Jackson Fine Art. Truitt’s two-dimensional works bear some of the same elements explored in her vertical monoliths: irregular, hand-painted geometric forms. Color

and form appear to be primary concerns, but this is a superficial reading because she used color to evoke mood and to impassion her works. Her paintings were not about color itself but about what it could epitomize. Her acrylic paintings have bright yellows, fiery reds, and oranges as well as cooler blues and whites.

Few pieces in the show are entirely monochromatic. There are two-tone pieces and some paintings with three colors or more. The compositions are imperfectly shaped rectangles that roughly follow the contours of the canvas or paper, seeming, somehow, trapped within the rigid confines of the frame. Subtly, even minimally, Truitt explores variation within a finite set of parameters. Rectangular shapes and more oblong, rounded forms appear again and again in her works, but never exactly in the same way. Repetition of forms seems not to have been a major consideration for Truitt, who, like Agnes Martin, rejected the technical precision associated with Minimalism.

Truitt's titles reference subject matter not apparent in the work, such as her 1989 painting *Promise*. Her titles are oblique, with no corresponding figuration or representationalism within the compositions. Among the highlights of the exhibition is a selection from her *Arundel* series, begun in the 1970s. The title refers to Anne Arundel County in Truitt's home state of Maryland. The works are monochromatic, white-on-white paintings bearing faint graphite lines done in various sizes and formats — from perfect squares to long, thin rectangles. The title is the sole indicator of an autobiographical meaning for the artist, a contrast to the straightforward “what you see is what you get” concerns of Minimalism. While her art is direct on the surface, it is subjective as well. “The real reward of art is quintessentially immediate and private,” she wrote in her autobiography, *Prospect: The Journey of an Artist*. As simply as possible, it seems that Truitt engaged a host of impressions gleaned from the world she knew and sought to capture their essence in her art. “It is art that renders individuality visible,” she wrote, “first as a personal ever-beckoning mystery, then as an available resource to all who hunger for companionship as they strive toward their own development.”

Truitt's paintings and works on paper are less distinctive than her sculpture. Comparisons to Ellsworth Kelly's color field and hard-edge paintings are easy to make, but Truitt's approach to mark making was less structured and more raw, and she did not have Kelly's interest in patterns and grids. She did not identify herself with the Washington Color School, although she spent much of her life in the D.C. area and is often associated with that movement. She could change the dynamic of a painting with the addition of a thin sliver of color along one edge that anchors a shape in the composition, giving even the most unwieldy of her not-quite-geometric shapes some balance and weight. A slightly curved dark line at the bottom edge of a painting called *Quick*, for instance, mimics a horizon line, becoming the painting's focal point.

In her sculptural works of the 1960s Truitt relied on darker hues such as deep reds, browns, and grays — funereal colors that were suited to significant works like *Southern Elegy*, a minimally figurative slab resembling a tombstone. Her palette became brighter and more polychromatic in the 1980s and so did her paintings. In a 2002 *ArtForum* interview with Meyer, Truitt stated that her intent as an artist was to instill life into her works. “My idea was not to get rid of life but to keep it and to see what it is. But the only way I seem to be able to see what anything is, is to make it in another form, in the form in which it appears in my head. Then when I get it made I can look at it.” ◀

▼ *Anne Truitt: Paintings and Works on Paper*

▼ Exhibit through July 27

▼ Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, 554 S. Guadalupe St., 505-989-8688