

ANNE TRUITT: PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER

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My idea was not to get rid of life but to keep it and 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, from an interview with James Meyer, *Artforum*, May, 2002

IN THE EARLY 1960S, ANNE TRUITT EMERGED IN THE NEW YORK ART WORLD

through a solo show at Andre Emmerich Gallery, but her minimalist sculpture was promptly dismissed in a review by Donald Judd. He said her work, appearing as “serious,” was actually not so and he called her arrangements “thoughtless.” Interestingly enough, a short time later Judd would begin presenting his own minimal sculptures that would derive their aura from a reductive aesthetic not unlike Truitt’s. Forty-one at the time of her first important exhibition, Truitt’s work and ideas about art remained incredibly coherent and probing until she passed away in 2004, after four decades of a consistent pursuit of physical truth within each specific form.

Better known as a sculptor, Truitt was also a painter who worked with equal rigor on canvas and paper. Looking at her work in Santa Fe, I was struck by the Keatsian idea that beauty is truth and truth beauty, because the issue of beauty is indeed deeply embedded within Truitt’s compositions—beauty’s relationship to the artist’s notion of truth is investigated in the relationship of color to line, one hue to another, or one shape to another shape in close proximity. There is nothing haphazard or arbitrary about Truitt’s decision making. And if there is a problematic aspect to some of the works on paper, it’s that Truitt was strongly inspired by Barnett Newman and, in some of the pieces, Newmanesque “zips” are very much in evidence even if Truitt’s vertical lines are more diffuse and luminous, and seem to bleed upward from below the surface of a particular field of color, as in the work *Untitled (10 January '71)*. That said, Newman’s ghost is nowhere

to be found, or anyone else’s for that matter, in the paintings on canvas that dominate this show.

A while back I came across this phrase: “the unforeseen intimacy at the heart of abstraction” and those words seemed prescient to me as I studied Truitt’s large paintings, particularly *Untitled (October '72)* and *Quest (5 July)*. The latter work was particularly galvanizing even though its predominantly pale-pink color isn’t known for being unusually magnetic. What captivated me was that within the painting’s square format, a large, irregularly shaped pink form—slightly angular though suggesting an oversize balloon—expanded almost to the edges of the canvas but was held in check against a white ground. Ready to float away but unable to, the field of pink was in actuality tethered to the bottom edge of the painting by a very small coral-colored slash of paint. At a distance, you could barely see that coral band—only perception on an intimate level renders the importance of that thick bravura line. The other aspect of being close to the painting was that when you backed away, the pink field itself seemed to move—to float outward, or was it sideways? This surprising sense of movement was of course an illusion, but you have to ask, what caused this apparent swerve?

It was as if some of these paintings possessed a subtle body below the surface of a field of color, and the small bands of contrasting hues at the bottom acted as a kind of fulcrum on which an airy cloud of pink, magenta, or pale blue was harnessed to the artist’s vision of color as a distinct physicality with the

dimensions of weight and depth. And at this conceptual node is where Truitt’s paintings relate to her sculpture. The same kind of curious movement is present in the work *Untitled (October '72)*. An irregular white rectangle, framed by a relatively thin border of flame red, generates the sensation that the white field is bulging ever so slightly outward from the picture plane. Does it have something to do with a slight angular tilt upward at the very top of the white shape, about a third of the way in from the right side? It is at this space in the painting where the uninflected white field gives its ever so modest dimensional thrust.

Writing in her first journal, titled *Daybook*, Truitt said, “A few of us leave behind objects judged, at least temporarily, worthy of preservation by the culture into which we are born...”

Ordered into the physical, in time we leave the physical, and leave behind us what we have made in the physical.” It is this sense of the unforeseen intimacy that can be found within the experience of abstraction that I find so applicable in looking at Truitt’s work—as if a quiet unadorned presence offered an intense belief in the intelligence of her own vision, an intelligence that rose to the surface of each piece and showed itself capable of expansion, of selective indirection, of being able to trust in the physical to carry the intimate weight of an existential loneliness, giving it a sequential and surprising radiance.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

Anne Truitt, *Untitled (October '72)*, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 96", 1972

