

ARTFORUM

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SAN FRANCISCO

Noam Rappaport

RATIO 3

Noam Rappaport's recent show at Ratio 3 represented a fresh, fruitful direction in the Los Angeles-based artist's ongoing investigations of abstraction. On display were four "dogleg"-shaped canvases (versions of which were exhibited at James Fuentes Gallery in New York in 2014) and a new series of five sculptural reliefs, as well as several hybrid paintings, composed of multiple canvases joined together and overlaid with various collage elements, such as rope and scraps of wood (all works, 2015). Rappaport's prolific, playful-yet-conscientious explorations of shape, color, and surface revealed that those elements destabilize as much as they dictate the perception of form, and his work stands in productive dialogue with the history of abstract painting: Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Robert Rauschenberg come to mind, but so do lesser-known figures such as the late-1960s-to-early-'70s French group Supports/Surfaces (with whom Rappaport was included in a 2014 exhibition at Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles) or Harvey Quaytman, whose idiosyncratic, almost alchemical approach to materials resonates with Rappaport's more personal, intuitive process.

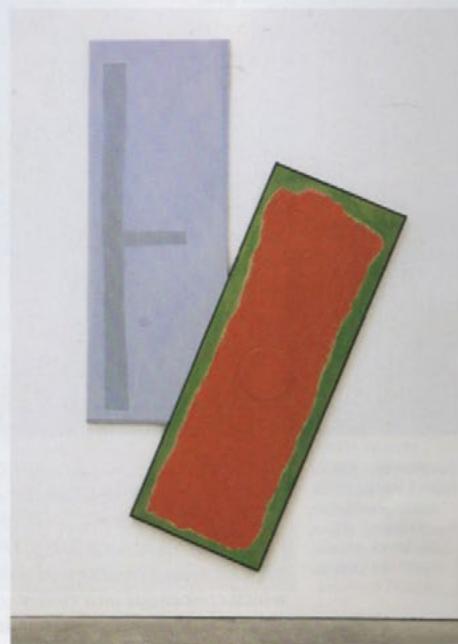
The shaped canvases are iterations of an ambiguous form based on two slightly skewed, overlapping rectangles. In some paintings, such as *Twos*, the rectangles appear separate, one clearly superimposed on top of the other or falling away from it; while in others, such as *High Night*, they merge, like conjoined twins, to form a single zigzag. This tension between the actual shape of the canvas and the illusion painted on its surface was pivotal to critical debates over modernist painting. Indeed, in his 1966 article "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," Michael Fried devoted ten dense pages in this magazine to the topic, arguing that Stella's shaped canvases (specifically the "Irregular Polygon" series) staged a battle between "literal shape" and "depicted shape" in which the latter triumphed, thus rescuing painting from its devolution into a three-dimensional "literalist" sensibility, which, according to Fried, threatened to consign art to mere "objecthood." Released from the high drama of modernist teleology, however,

Rappaport exploits shape to a much different set of ends—not to reaffirm painting's sanctity as a medium but to heighten its precarious and indeterminate nature.

In his shaped canvases, Rappaport renders uncertain the relationship between painting's support and its surface, using color, texture, and diverse surface treatments (bare washes, pencil marks, scumbling) to complicate the reading of shape. Against the austere formalism of modernist painting, he flirts with a "bad," kitschy quality: garish paint; impasto that resembles cement (in *Dogleg*) or cake frosting (in *Untitled*). He interrupts the flatness of the canvas by subtly building up sections to create layers of relief or recessed areas, like windows. His paintings resist immediate legibility: One found oneself looking back and forth, as if playing a game of concentration, to check and double-check perception against reality.

Such ambivalence carried over into the series of smaller, monochromatic sculptural reliefs (all *Untitled*), each consisting of two inverted wedges joined in the center at their shallowest point to produce a symmetrical, indented vertical form, the composition of which was enhanced by the play of light and shadow on its geometric planes. There was something uncanny about both the form itself (which was at once unidentifiable and vaguely familiar, like an anonymous architectural fixture, maybe an electrical outlet or conduit) and the proliferation of these nearly identical forms. Attached to the wall at eye level, they varied in proportion, size, and, most markedly, color, ranging from the most saturated ultramarine (almost but not quite International Klein Blue) to muted, generic hues, such as a beige green evocative of a corporate hallway or doctor's office. The meticulously installed show read as an extension of the artist's compositional decisions, so that the white-walled gallery itself became a kind of ground to the various shapes, colors, and surfaces of the objects displayed, and thus offered an opportunity to explore embodied perception.

—Gwen Allen



Noam Rappaport, *Twos*, 2015, oil, acrylic, paper on canvas, 90 x 55 x 2".