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Anne Truitt: Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University

Philip Auslander

The American artist Anne Truitt, who was included in "Black, White and Gray" (1964), "Primary Structures" (1966), and other exhibitions that helped define Minimalism, is best known for her pillar-like wooden structures, which she continues making to this day. This exhibition, cocurated by Margaret Shufeldt, the Michael C. Carlos Museum's associate curator of works on paper, and Emory art-history professor and frequent Artforum contributor James Meyer, draws attention to Truitt's early works on paper--a portion of her oeuvre that has seldom been seen in public--and argues for its centrality to her development. Resident first in Washington, DC, then in San Francisco, then again in Washington, Truitt has always functioned outside the New York art scene (though she was championed early on by Clement Greenberg). Along with recent exhibitions devoted to figures like Jay DeFeo and Lee Lozano, this show evinces a desire to look more closely at the generation of American women artists working in the period between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art as well as the movements that followed.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The earliest works here, made in San Francisco in the late '50s, demonstrate some affinities with Abstract Expressionism--one working drawing from 1958 is reminiscent of Franz Kline--but it's clear that Truitt was not fundamentally focused on the expressive gesture. Blocky shapes and thick lines give way to feathery, mottled brushwork that resembles Japanese ink painting more than Abstract Expressionism; as these forms become less dense and more fragmented, they yield to negative space. In a drawing from 1961, a dry-brushed wavy line resembling a mountain range progresses from the left near the top of the page but never completes the journey to the right-hand side; the empty page encroaches from three directions onto the fragile form.

Two pencil drawings from 1962 could be seen as transitional works. In one, a single, barely discernible blurred and smudged pencil line traces the outline of what could be a roof or hill rising from a landscape. In another, lines also reminiscent of roofs or peaks have begun to function as the edges of irregular geometric areas of color. Indeed, the entrance of color into the work changes almost everything: As Truitt builds abstract compositions from rectilinear areas of saturated solid, negative space disappears. Perhaps the link between this work and the ink drawings of the late '50s is in the dark palette (black, brown, dark green, maroon) and the asymmetry of the compositions. From the beginning, it seems, Truitt played the expectation of symmetry against its actuality.

The exhibition also follows Truitt's transition from drawing to sculpture. Many of her earliest three-dimensional works are flat wood surfaces placed perpendicular to the floor--drawings without walls? *White: Five*, 1962, resembles a piece of paneling; the bracing at the rear makes it clear that, like a piece of paper, it has a front and a back. Like the acrylic drawings, the surfaces of *Southern Elegy*, 1962, and *Bloomsday*, 1962, are painted in dark colors or unevenly gridded. Whereas the first is two-sided like a tombstone, the second is closer to a stately piece of fine furniture that invites you to walk around and inspect it from all sides.

Truitt has traveled a great distance from the drawings of the late '50s to the burnished, luminous sculptures she continues to make. The exhibition offers a persuasive narrative of the first part of that trajectory and reminds us that the expressiveness of Truitt's work, then as now, lies in nuances of line and color, suggestive asymmetry, and lustrous surface.

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