

# HYPERALLERGIC

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### THE REDISCOVERY OF ROBERT DURAN

By John Yau



Robert Duran, "Little Red Rooster" (1969), Liquitex on canvas, 89 1/4 x 117 inches

Robert Duran (1938–2005) was born in Salinas California. His mother was Shawnee and his father was Filipino. Although he could not as pass as white, he neither emphasized his biracial identity nor publicly suggested that it inspired his work. Being that the art world's tastemakers in the 1960s — the time Duran was getting his start — claimed to be colorblind, as quality was all that mattered, it is easy to see why he did not call attention to his Native American and Asian heritage. Being biracial might have further impacted him, as it was difficult to fully identify with either group.

Like many ambitious young artists of the 1960s, Duran moved to New York, encouraged by his friend, David Novros. He was part of small group including Novros, Dorothea Rockburne, Ralph Humphrey, Brice Marden, and Chuck Close that began showing at Bykert Gallery; there, he would have six solo shows between 1967 and 1974, the year before it closed. Duran's last one-person show in New York was at Susan Caldwell Inc. in 1977, so he had a ten-year run.

During this period his work was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's prestigious Annual Exhibition (1969) and in its first Biennial (1973), and he received a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation (1969). After 1977, though,

he seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth, as least as far as the art world was concerned. The truth is that he moved to New Jersey, drove a school bus, raised a family, and continued to paint — his work seen only by family and a few close artist friends.

Robert Duran: 1968–1970 at Karma marks the first time his work has been displayed in a gallery in more than 40 years. Although the show does not include pieces from his first exhibition at Bykert, it does begin the process of introducing viewers to Duran’s largely unseen artwork, starting with the work that he did after 1967.

The show consists of eight abstract paintings of radically different sizes and ten watercolors. The paintings can be roughly divided into two groups. Those in one group are composed of layered and atmospheric fields in which irregular geometric shapes or negative spaces float. The others are more graphic, with saturated grounds populated by myriad shapes — each a distinct hue — that are evenly dispersed across the surface. In the former group, the viewers see into the thinly painted, closely valued clouds of color, while the calmly isolated shapes call attention to the painting’s surface. Together, the watercolors chronicle different compositional possibilities that he was considering. At a time when branding one’s work became an option, Duran was clearly pushing back.

Painted on the floor with thin washes of color, which have been poured and brushed onto the unprimed, stretched canvas, Duran’s paintings do not look like anyone else’s work. In what I call the graphic paintings, he used one or two closely related colors, as in deep blue and dark green, to stain the ground, in which irregular pronged and snake-like shapes were carefully dispersed across the surface. Later in the process, he filled in each of the shapes with different hues.

Composed of two equally sized canvases abutted together, measuring in total 90 x 252 inches, the largest painting, “Untitled” (1968), is panoramic in scale. Duran is neither a Minimalist nor a Color Field painter. His works belong to their time but they don’t quite fit in — which I would suggest spoke to, as well as came from, a deep place in his psyche. In the 1960s, you could change your name and cover up where you came from (Andy Warhol) or you could remember where you came from without making transparently autobiographical work (Robert Rauschenberg). These are just two ways to deal with displacement.

The dispersal of abstract silhouettes within a luminous field, in which the different-colored shapes echo but do not repeat each other, is Duran’s way of taking on both all-over painting and the grid, pushing them together and down his own path. In “Little Red Rooster” (1968), the only titled painting in the show, Duran defines a bluish-violet crown-like shape with four different sized prongs in the center of the painting’s red ground. The prong shapes above and below the central one point horizontally. The central crown-like shape is the largest one in the painting with vertical prongs. In that sense it recalls Willie Dixon’s lyric, which was covered by The Rolling Stones in a 1964 single: “He keeps everything in the

barnyard/upset in every way.” It is also worth noting that The Stones changed Dixon’s “I got a little red rooster” to “I am a little red rooster.” Something from popular culture and a trace of his life in Salinas Valley, which was celebrated by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and where farming predominates, has gotten into this painting.

In the atmospheric paintings, Duran takes on the figure-ground relationship and complicates it through the layering and interpenetration of fields and shapes. In these paintings, the shapes tend to be larger and do not echo each other. At one point, I briefly imagined that I was an astronaut looking through different colored clouds at an unknown world below.

In the two-part “Untitled,” the repetition suggests that the shapes are not randomly chosen, and evokes the possibility that they might be a code or a language that resists translation and understanding. In this work and other paintings, the vocabulary consists of pronged shapes, U-shapes, snake-like bands winding their way across the surface, and jigsaw puzzle-like shapes that don’t seem to fit any other form.

One’s attention drifts between shapes that echo and those that differ from one another, gently guided and redirected by the snake-like bands. The echoing of certain shapes is further enriched by the use of different hues to denote each form. Duran masterfully keeps a lot of balls in the air in this and the other paintings, never becoming formulaic or reductive. His palette is positively wild when compared with that of other artists working at this time. One can see “Untitled” as anticipating certain works of Philip Taaffe, such as “Sanctum” (2015), which measures 77 by 132 inches. In “Sanctum,” Taaffe scatters and layers pictographs and symbols derived from various cultures across an atmospheric field. The dialogue between Duran’s painting and Taaffe’s is rich and complex. Duran’s two-part “Untitled” belongs in a New York museum as much as any works by Taaffe.

If the watercolors and the two groups of paintings are a clue, Duran never seems to have settled into a mode of production and he was not afraid of using a wide array of colors. In the watercolors, we get a glimpse of his restless, astute nature, his willingness to explore different formal possibilities. Two watercolors use triangular shapes around the edge of what becomes multiple rectangles arranged in rows. You get the feeling he is thinking about composition in his own unique way. In another watercolor, orange and red brushstrokes are short and clustered together to form an irregular shape. In other watercolors, where the colors bleed into each other, Duran seems to have worked in from the edge, making the unpainted ground a field of perforated, negative spaces.

Covering three years near the beginning of his career, the exhibition underscores Duran’s restlessness, pictorial ambition, and masterful use of color culminating in his bold early achievements. Isn’t it time that we look at the beginning of what might turn out to have been a sustained and remarkable art career?