

# ART & OBJECT

## FEBRUARY 26, 2019

### THE FORGOTTEN MINIMALIST

By John McIntyre



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

Since his death in 2005, attention to the minimalist painter Robert Duran has been, well, minimal. Duran was well-known in his lifetime, having participated in a pair of Whitney Biennials (1969 and 1973). He mounted a number of solo exhibitions at New York's Bykert Gallery, and his work was reviewed in *Artforum*, *ArtNews* and the *New York Times* as part of the vanguard of minimalist artists in the late '60s and early '70s. A decade later his prominence had faded, and after his death, only a brief paid notice appeared in the *New York Times*, noting he was an "esteemed painter and widely collected. Guggenheim Fellow and NEA grant recipient."

Now New York's Karma Gallery is making the case that Duran deserves a long second look by presenting a dozen of his earliest paintings, dating from 1968-1970. He had already exhibited work by then, but was primarily a sculptor for exhibition's sake, early on, and it was these intensely colored, monumental paintings that heralded his shift to two-dimensional work. The paintings hang in a pair of connected gallery spaces with long walls and high ceilings. The four dramatic paintings in the first room are shown to their best advantage, one per wall. They range from oversized to monumental. They're imposing for their size, color, and the almost kinetic play of the shapes spread across the canvases, the smallest of which measures over seven feet long, and the largest at an astonishing 19 feet. There is, in short, no doubting the young Duran's ambition. Three of the four display his earliest impulses as a painter: the distinct, concrete, almost sculptural forms that left critics in his heyday ambivalent. The fourth is more fluid, the work of a painter ceding a bit of control, forgoing the negative space between forms that's so prominent in works like *Little Red Rooster* and edging toward the more fluid style and restrained color palette he came to favor.

A number of more modest pieces hang in the second room, eight watercolors among them. These tend toward discrete color fields on paper. The results can feel almost like experiments in color at times, when regarding the tonal gradations within each field. They're 19"x24", and with time exert a gravity of their own, as do the handful of other, almost Abstract Expressionist watercolors, which are more richly colored but less immediately identifiable as Duran's.

Duran kept a studio on Broome Street in lower Manhattan, during the years he produced these paintings. He might, especially on a fine day, have set out walking from his studio and made it to the space that now houses Karma Gallery in a few minutes' time. In this sense, the exhibition represents a sort of artistic homecoming, returning these works to their place of birth. But the city changed, the art world changed, and so did he. There are photos of Duran, at work in his studio. It's 1968 and he's young and vital, his attention remains intent on his work. He bends at the waist, reaching to touch up a spot three feet in from a canvas's corner, his feet spread wide, hair falling by the sides of his face. There's no sense of what's to come, what disaffection might halt what was a promising career. He moved to New Jersey in the early '80s, worked for years as a bus driver, and built a more conventional life. All the while he continued to paint, at home in his garage, but he didn't show work again.

Many details of Duran's post-art world life remain sketchy for now. There's no definitive account yet of why he turned his back on the career he'd established across more than a decade. More pressing for those of us intrigued by this showing of his early work, cataloguing the remainder of his output is a work in progress, one with an added degree of difficulty thanks to the fact he seldom signed or dated his work. Still, Karma and his estate are at work together, with intentions of mounting additional shows in the future, to highlight work from the remainder of his career. Robert Duran: 1968-1970 runs until March 31 of this year.