

BROOKLYN RAIL

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ROBERT DURAN: 1968 – 1970

By David Rhodes



Robert Duran, *Little Red Rooster*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 89 1/4 x 117 inches.

Incredibly—given the quality of the paintings—this is Robert Duran’s first showing in New York City since 1977. The exhibition, comprising seven acrylic on canvas and eleven watercolor on paper paintings from 1968 to 1970, locates Duran’s work at a particularly divisive moment for contemporary art in general and painting in particular. The vociferous and absurd rejection of painting as a medium per se, both intellectually and as a practice, was increasingly prevalent. Duran, against trend, moved from sculpture into painting. Having made minimalist slab and column like objects which he had begun to spray paint; he took the implications of the colored surface and edge of his sculptures into painting—a move of striking independent boldness, given the negative view of painting at this time. In a March 1971 *Artforum* review by Robert Pincus-Witten the critic describes Duran’s then new paintings,

“The beauty of Duran’s present exhibition makes it clear that we must now clarify his position in terms of his own painting. The first mature works of which one became aware dealt with a means of structuring a surface attracted to erratic shapes, but which at the same time sought artistic confirmation in the retention of certain serial or Minimalist ploys.”

Like his colleagues Brice Marden, David Novros and Paul Mogensen, he pursued painting without abandoning its intrinsic qualities of surface, color, and space for the actuality of the Minimalist object. Duran had six exhibitions with Klaus Kertess’s Bykert Gallery, the closing of which contributed to his reduced visibility as an artist. He also participated in the first Whitney Biennial in 1973. Kertess had supported an extraordinary roster of artists

toward the beginning of their careers including Alan Uglow, Gary Stephan, Dorothea Rockburn, Marden, Novros and Mogensen. By the early 1980s Duran had left New York City, taken a day job and begun to raise a family in New Jersey, whilst continuing to produce paintings until his death at 67 in 2005.

The four large-scale paintings in the gallery's main space are impressive, both for the apparent lightness of touch and the sureness in invention. Each take as a given an approximately even distribution of individual, multiple, and irregular shapes that though amounting to an all-over suggestion of pattern or grid remain both intuitive and spontaneous. This recalled for me Marcel Franciscono's description of Paul Klee's contribution at the Bauhaus, "The process Klee taught, while rationalistic, was ultimately non-rational." Take for example, *Little Red Rooster*, c. (1969) an 89 × 116 inch painting. An unpainted border of raw canvas characteristic of the paintings as a whole emphasizes the stencil like negative shapes in a red ground that are stained in thin gradations of blue, green, pink, orange, and violet, very like watercolor. Studio photos of Duran show the canvas was worked flat on the floor. The arrangement of shape is topographic, like Native American sand painting (part of Duran's own close family heritage) and frontal like Matisse's paper cut out *The Swimming Pool* (1953). In the back gallery there are works on paper, some very like the large-scale paintings with the irregular shapes this time blank and unpainted, others are more schematic, loosely geometric, and formally less fluid in structure. Another watercolor on paper variation comprises fragmented compositions of short isolated vertical and horizontal strokes of color that put me in mind of both Cezanne's landscapes and Günter Förg's "Spot" abstractions from the 2000s. These works on paper are extraordinary in their sparse evocation of space through what appears to be a swift and constantly varied placement of color. The orange, yellow, pink, and red strokes of *Untitled*, c. (1969) don't complete an overall distribution in the top left quadrant of the sheet; the balance of forms and sense of completeness is beautiful, inexplicable and, as in the empty areas of a Cezanne watercolor, active—a modestly stated visual process of becoming. After this presentation of paintings, it is exciting to look forward with expectation to further presentations, giving much credit to Karma for their care and scholarship in mounting such exhibitions.