

Square Roots: Contemporary Quadrilateral Literalism with Heart by Jennifer Liese

The infinite is a square without angles. - Chinese proverb*

Recalling the square, our modern art-historical memory delves back to Mondrian's pilgrimage from nature to the Neoplastic and Malevich's archetypal Suprematist icons. Drifting onward along time's line, we unearth Albers' mid-century series, "Homage to the Square," and a vast sweep of color fields. And in more recent recesses, the mind most likely alights on one or another Minimalist slab. The square - on the surface so very simple, with its four sides of equal length, four angles of equal degree - has served the twentieth century's artists graciously, comprising and conveying manifold meanings just by being its ever-accommodating self.

In its more recent incarnations, this repository, like any malleable entity, has perhaps suffered at the hands of its interpreters. Emerging in the infancy of abstraction as a lofty conduit to metaphysical consciousness, a cipher of the fourth dimension, the square becomes, by the 1960s, an emblem of the prefabricated industrial object, a cold symbol of Carl Andre's "significant blankness," a tabula rasa forbidden inscription. What woeful injustice for the shape the ancients imbued with the power to fend off plagues, the shape from which the logarithmic spiral of shells and celestial nebulae springs, the shape that, given three dimensions, promised protection from a deluge of evils, until Pandora lost her will.

It is a vital pleasure, then, to find the square, of late stripped bare, redeemed in "Square Roots," an exhibition of painting and sculpture by eight contemporary artists who reinfuse the quadrilateral (a few rectangles sneak in) with history, humanity, tactility, and spirituality. Ladd Spiegel, curator, is the second of Cecilia de Torres' artists to present a show contextualizing a loose family of Constructivist-inspired artists. The first was César Paternosto, the Argentinian-born artist and art historian who brought us "North and South Connected: An Abstraction of the Americas," illuminating the origins, formal and conceptual, of certain European, North American, and South American modernism in pre-Columbian textiles. Here, too, with "Square Roots," we find the Constructivist present linked to South American precedent, but Spiegel expands the gallery's purview, marrying in like-minded kin.

The most subterranean roots of the exhibition's squares seem to be those of Paternosto, who mines centuries-old Amerindian sources. Two large-scale canvases hail from a recent series entitled "Confluences," so named for its merging of the artist's signature formal motifs - the saturated color field and delicate linear markings, which, decades ago, appeared only on the edges of the canvas. Here, the variously toned lines come full front, punctuating precise pencil-stroke grids lain over one expanse of sunset-drenched red and another of earthy ochre. While Paternosto's geometry consciously nods to Incan stone walls and Andean weaving, the work's placeness is most immediately palpable in the sumptuous colors one can only dream of, or long for, from the distant North. In Confluence #6, the ochre ground supports contrasting threads - in powder blues, washed teals, sunny yellows - that suggest both abbreviations of Barnett Newman's zips and excerpts from a serialist music score, but nothing so much as tempting vertical slivers remembering ephemeral land, sky, and sea.

Likewise, Liz Deschenes baits us with vistas ultimately curtailed, though by the edges of a camera lens. Known for colorful and lush images of aquatic settings - bathhouse interiors, Japanese spas, and roiling ocean against atmosphere - the artist is represented here by two prints capturing a determinedly dry Death Valley. In one image, what at a glance appears as graphic abstraction - a white block under another in a range of browns - reveals itself on closer inspection as pristine salt flats beneath a distant mountain. From a series entitled "Below Sea Level," which continues Deschenes long-term exploration of elevation and how it affects our sense of place, these works take us to seemingly impossible depths - 280 feet nether ground zero. As in her seascapes, for which the photographer submerges her camera below the waterline, here the horizon ascends (or does the viewer descend?), suggesting penetration into the underside of consciousness. No empty vessels these.

Paul Bowen, a Welsh artist residing in Provincetown, Massachusetts since the 1970s, makes sculptures wrought primarily of flotsam found on Cape Cod beaches. Among the works in "Square Roots" is a large, wall-mounted construction of rough black wood remnants stacked into a dense planar square, then buoyed by a floating halo-like wooden circle. One needn't know exact facts to sense a depth of material history - the weathered surfaces speak for themselves - but it is confirming to

learn that the fragments were discovered following a 1990 hurricane, apparently the remains of a nearby artist's ill-fated seaside studio. Mute, one of a recent group of smaller works, is so-called for its relative quietude amongst others boasting more gestural appendages. Lacking animation of its own, Mute rewards the mobile viewer - its interplay of black painted circles on raw wood squares trickily shifting at every change of vantage point.

Another whose squares evoke material history is M.P. Landis. Landis' group of 12 x 12-inch panels are selected from an earlier installation, entitled *Studio: Sq./Ft.*, in which the artist assembled 222 square-foot panels into edge-to-edge, floor-to-ceiling grids. Prompted by the loss of his Red Hook studio and attuned via real estate realities to the preciousness of the square foot, he sought a productive way to rid himself of excess baggage. Here began the dissemination of the matter of an artist's life - broken tools, tomato sauce cans, calendar pages, car parts, used tea bags, insulin syringes, notes to himself, all affixed to plywood planes reborn as nostalgic visual diaries. At the opposite pole of Landis' hyper-cluttered inclusion are Marta Chilindron's spare interior architectural templates, mobile pop-up rooms, with empty space where the furniture was meant to be. Alternately austere and whimsical, these works defy stasis; with a hand's help, they are kinetic in space and over time, existing in all dimensions at once.

The two artists here who most wittingly engage a critique of Minimalism, though to divergent ends, are David Cabrera and Eduardo Costa. Cabrera's "Cut Wood" series consists of sets of enamel-painted wood rectangles that, initially, appear as flawless as manufactured bathroom tiles. Up close, however, the illusion of perfection wanes, as one detects sketchy craftsmanship - irregular edges, messy paint application. In the late 1980s, when this series was first shown in New York, critics received it as a straightforward deconstruction of Minimalism. A dozen years later, the artist, who is Mexican-American, identifies childhood memories of his family's anxious, at times bungled, attempts to assimilate into mainstream California culture, as a further derivation. Allowing himself to do a "bad job," Cabrera subverts the burden of ethnic difference. Costa, a seasoned practitioner of Conceptual art since the 1960s, creates, in his recent "three-dimensional paintings," sculptures in every sense but one - they are made entirely of paint. His cube of solid black acrylic riffs directly on Tony Smith's solid steel Black Box, and betrays Greenbergian flatness with keen bravado.

Finally, Spiegel's 9 x 9, a wood square with details evoking a game board, brings the Agnes Martinesque grid - customarily reserved for distanced contemplation of the sublime - right down to earth. Studded with hand-whittled pegs, the work invites us, if only by suggestion, to touch the sacred symbol and partake in our own meditation. An abiding interest in Zen Buddhism is perhaps behind the artist's neglecting to provide the rules of this game, directing any search for guidance inward rather than upward. Such benevolent indeterminacy recalls John Cage, who once stumbled sweetly toward defining a dream: "What I would like to arrive at, though I may never, what I think would be ideal, would be a situation in which no one told anyone what to do and it all turned out perfectly well anyway."

Almost any artist will tell you the square can be a terribly frustrating collaborator. Its stubborn symmetry and perpetual repetition outwit all but the most strident attempts at dynamism. Add to this an apparent bias against minimalist practice (the square may be rather, well, "square," in these decadent, don't-forget-the-Q-tips-mousetraps-kitchen sinks-in your-installation times), and one must wonder, 'Why, now, this revivification of the simple square?' An admittedly extravagant speculation: In 1922, just before joining the Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy declared, "The reality of our century is technology: the invention, construction and maintenance of machines. To be a user of machines is to be of the spirit of this century. . . . Everyone can be the machine's master or its slave." Today, one could of course substitute "computer" for "machine" and ring just as true. Our daily relationship with the computer certainly gives us claim to the spirit of our own new century, but at what clandestine costs?

Alone, blindered, and fixated on a (roughly square) screen, we await the theoretical reward of what one New York Times writer recently coined the "cyber-Pangaea," the promised virtual rejoining of the planet's seven continents (and their people) into a unified whole. In the meantime, we're treated to a constant bombardment of words and images aimed almost exclusively at arousing our appetite for consumption. We soothe our guilty yearnings for commodities with aspirations toward simplicity, and L'Oreal and Pottery Barn are happy to oblige, with hair spray logos and dinner sets cribbed straight from high modernism. Yes, my toothbrush looks like a Brancusi, but the squares in "Square Roots," handmade and hearty, are infinitely more singular than that. They are little interventions meant not to master or enslave, but to coexist, and just maybe, to fend off a plague the ancients could never have imagined.

* For an inspiring general history of the square, I am indebted to a lovely little book entitled *The History of the Square*, by the Italian artist Bruno Munari.

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