

GAGOSIAN



Donald Judd: Paintings 1959-1961

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Donald Judd, Paintings 1959–1961, 2021, installation view. © Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

Say the name Donald Judd, and many people will picture an object that has taut lines, sleek metallic surfaces, and often is two-toned like a sedan from the 1950s. Squiggles don't come to mind. That's partly why it was such a surprise to find 15 paintings by the artist dating from 1959 into 1961 on view this autumn at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea that were so unlike the three-dimensional constructions the artist would soon fabricate. According to the press release for this show, Judd felt, "My work doesn't arise from sculpture; it comes out of the paintings of Pollock, Newman, Rothko." But when you looked at the abstractions that were on view at the outpost on West 24th Street, you might have been reminded, as I was, by late-period canvases Willem de Kooning executed two dozen or so years later. You know, the ones that are spare and understated and feature a few curves and meandering marks.

This body of work by Judd has mostly been kept under wraps for the past sixty years. It now fills a gap in our knowledge of his career. That the grounds are monochromatic is not surprising. That other colors lie beneath their surfaces is. That pentimento appear is just as unexpected. I've always thought of Judd as the type of artist who destroyed anything with a mistake and then started all over again from scratch. Even the character of the lines in these paintings is unusual. A band of white or tan will have another pigment coursing down its center. The texture of this group of paintings is also more varied than you might expect. Some are nubby like the initial panels into which the artist inserted things like a steel baking pan or a plexiglas oval. Others look as if their surfaces were stained.



Donald Judd, untitled, 1960 Oil on canvas, 31 x 25 in 78.7 x 63.5 cm. Donald Judd Art © Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Judd Foundation. Photo: Silvia Ros. Courtesy Judd Foundation and Gagosian

What was Judd trying to achieve with these works? This was, after all, a period of tumult and disruption in the art world. As it is, these abstractions are unlike what other contemporary painters were doing. They are not examples of early minimalism as practiced by, say, Walter Darby Bannard; or shaped canvases a la Frank Stella; or examples of color field associated with someone like Kenneth Noland. They are not post-painterly abstractions either. And they certainly have nothing to do with Pop art, which already had debuted. At this juncture, specific objects were still off stage waiting in the wings.

Ultimately, it's the singularity, not to mention the ambition, of this body of work that impresses. Judd has eliminated much, especially the angst, that was associated with the type of art that followed in the wake of Abstract Expressionism. Within the limits he allowed himself, he tried out a number of options, including ways to divide monochromatic fields, introduce quirky shapes, and favor a palette of red, blue, black, and white. In other words, from the get-go, Donald Judd was seeking something

radically different.



Donald Judd, untitled, 1961. Oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 45 1/4 in. 114.9 x 114.9 cm. Donald Judd Art © Judd Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Judd Foundation. Photo: Silvia Ros. Courtesy Judd Foundation and Gagosian

With these fifteen paintings, the future Minimalist was headed down an unfamiliar road towards his destination. He hadn't yet arrived there. Watching Judd figure out how to proceed was one of the fascinating aspects of this show. We know what came next, but he didn't. I don't think the black panel with the baking pan or the red one with the plexiglass oval ever felt this radical divorced from the context of the paintings that preceded them. (While these two works were not on view at Gagosian, they were featured in the recent Museum of Modern Art retrospective.)

One standout was an untitled square black painting completed in its center by another square filled with diagonal lines. From 1961, it represented a key to Judd's future. The artist had to take just one small step to transform a work like this into the type of specific objects he famously described during the 1960s. Judd only had to insert an empty baking pan into the portion of the painting that formerly was striped. Sometimes the simplest action leads to the thrill of discovery.