

Sam Still | Press

Born 1953, American
Lives in New York

Threads, International Juried Competition, Los Angeles, CA, Fabrik Magazine, January 2011

Sam Still's minimalism takes especially aggressive, and yet especially poetic, form. Confining himself to ink on paper, applied with a rapidograph pen, Still generates notably large drawings of emphatically flat silhouettes, shapes that are sometimes as forward and uninflected as a perfect circle, and other times strange – and strangely familiar – in their eccentricities. Their contours may describe shapes never quite seen before, or conversely seen somewhere far away from the rarefied visual experience Still's large, stark images provide. One suddenly recognizes a particular form – a black square with a bent white shape interrupting its center, for instance, or a black rectangle interrupted in the middle by a curved, pinched white area – as the silhouette of a common household item or supermarket package or something as dumb as that. Still responds to the poetry of the everyday not by reveling in its pathos or celebrating its silliness but by simplifying and amplifying its basic object-hood – not even its bulk, but its footprint.

Peter Frank

Avant garbage, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune, May 12, 2002

The Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York is arguably the most important national contemporary art show. Careers are made at the Biennial, art trends are defined and outlandish gallery prices are validated.

There are no Louisiana artists in the 2002 Biennial (on view through May 26), despite the efforts of Contemporary Arts Center Curator David S. Rubin, who brought Whitney Curator Lawrence Rinder to New Orleans last winter to peruse Bayou State art. Rinder returned twice on his own, searching the studios of Louisiana artists.

Why did no Louisiana artists make the cut? That's hard to say. It's certainly not because their work is inferior. In fact, in my opinion, it would be hard to imagine art work much inferior to the selection at the 2002 Biennial.

I disliked most of the work in the Biennial so much on my recent visit, that I started to doubt my own judgment. So, it was a good thing that I visited the exhibit with an old friend, Sam Still.

For two decades Still, 49, was a fixture on the New Orleans art scene, as an avant-garde artist and as director of the Aaron-Hastings and Still-Zinsel contemporary art galleries. Fifteen months ago, he sold his Zebra Framing business, and with wife Suzanne Zinsel, of Suzanne Zinsel Fine Art on Julia Street, moved to Manhattan to try to "make it" as a New York artist.

Still never had been a prejudiced provincial -- as I admit I am, always eager to point out that most of the art emerging in the big U.S. art markets on the East and West coasts is soul-less, pretentious, and not a bit better than the home-grown equivalent -- and since he'd gambled his future on the New York art scene, I felt I could count on his opinions lending some balance to mine. We strolled the three floors of the Whitney together, looking at the paintings and sculpture, listening to the audio presentations, peeking into the darkened rooms where the video art was shown and comparing opinions all the while.

We agreed that not everything was awful. For instance, I liked Judith Schaechter's backlit stained glass pieces -- grotesquely crowded cartoon images in overlapping translucent colors. Still thought they were all right, but he doesn't trust art that relies on electricity.

"I don't know," he said, "the electricity just makes the art seem inhuman. It's like, am I looking at the presentation or the art? I like things that are more attached to the earth."

Ken Feingold's piece titled "If/Then" is a pair of animated mannequin heads in a cardboard box filled with foam peanuts, which carry on a forlorn conversation: "How did we get here?" "Where are we going?" Sure, it's kind of a dumb "Twilight Zone" idea, but at least you can react to it somehow. Most of the Biennial was so inscrutable; I had no reaction at all. The electricity bothered Still. You know those LED light boards in restaurant windows that have moving messages in red dots: "TODAY'S LUNCH SPECIAL"? Jim Campbell used those boards to create strange video images of cars and people passing by. Very odd and alluring -- I liked them. Of course they were electrified.

Still's favorite piece was Margaret Kilgallen's "Main Drag," a huge installation of painted plywood panels that blended 19th-century Americana with 20th-century Pop, though he resisted the nostalgic associations of the work.

Avant garbage, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune, May 12, 2002 continued

"I think I was seduced by the faux age of the piece," he said. "It looked old, homey, warm, so it got me."

I liked the piece too and Kilgallen's romanticism didn't bother me at all; it was a welcome antidote to the cool, slick techno art that dominated much of the show.

My favorite piece was "Art After Death" a presumably tongue-in-cheek conceptual piece by Chris Kubick and Anne Walsh, who hired psychic mediums to contact the spirit of Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), the inventor of the boxed assemblage. Through the mediums, they apparently asked Cornell questions, and recorded the results -- art history by seance. The artists displayed one of the Whitney's genuine Cornell boxes beside headphones that played the psychic's revelations. Funny, but also electric.

Still and I both loved Robert Lazzarini's "Payphone." Lazzarini used a computer to stretch and tilt the image of a phone booth into something that looked like a high-tech version of the scenery in the 1919 German Expressionist film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." Then he fabricated the tilted booth in three dimensions from stainless steel, plastic sheet and other materials used in phone booths. It was stunning.

We both marveled at the disorienting effect of the piece and the sheer labor that must have gone into its construction. Computer-aided Photo-Realist sculpture -- this could be the one example of a work in the Biennial that might be in the vanguard of a new genre. It was, of course, electrified. "I'm trying to get past my electricity thing," Still said. "It may be unfair."

A few other pieces also were bright spots in what I thought was an otherwise dreary and incomprehensible exhibit. Among the lowlights were Keith Sanborn's totally white video with gull sounds in the background. As Still said, "Only in the art world could you get people to sit down and watch this."

Then there was Chris Johanson's dull faux folk art installation in the stair well. The catalog says Johanson's art has something to do with the skateboarding aesthetic in California -- I guess that explains it. Julie Moos' ordinary photographs of ordinary people were just plain dull (I'm not sure ordinary is all it's cracked up to be). The Atlas Group's imaginary art historical research notes were every bit as boring as genuine research notes, even if they contained inside art jokes and naughty sexual stuff.

Everywhere you looked in the Biennial were inept paintings, scads of interactive electronic displays as interesting as ATM machines and endless droning videos that you wouldn't watch if they came on television at 4:30 a.m. and you were an insomniac.

"I don't get most of it," Still said. "I don't negate it, I just don't get it. I hardly dislike anything anymore, really. If it doesn't grab me, I don't want to spend the energy disliking it. I used to just hate stuff, but I think that was an insecurity issue. Now I just try to figure out what was going through the artist's brain."

"I'm not sure we're really supposed to like it, you know. It's like a snooty restaurant, if you like everything, then everybody else might like everything too. It's a status thing. It's supposed to show us that there's an inner world. I prefer galleries to museums anyway, especially smaller, less well-known galleries. By the time art gets to the museums, it's old hat."

Old hat is right. The trouble with the Biennial is obvious: The curators were desperate to find anything new to satisfy the senile monster of modernity, which needs newness to survive. Trouble is, there hasn't been anything new on the art scene since at least 1970, so they grasped at straws of audacity and inscrutability, because new things always seem audacious and inscrutable at first, even when they are otherwise unoriginal and repetitive.

Still said that newness might not actually be necessary. "Nothing's new," he said, "but I guess there's always a new way of looking at things." True enough. As the "Art After Death" piece proves, a new context or interpretation is newness, even if the appearance of the art (or in this case the actual art) is decades old. I wish there had been more such Post-Modern contextualization in the show.

Whatever the context, the digital technology that dominates the Biennial is a new thing, but a digital photo, blown up to mural scale on an ink jet printer, is still a photo. Videos are just films by another name. Interactive computer displays are just like video arcade games, except arcade games are fun. Most of the gizmo art in the exhibit said nothing.

Still's disdain for electrified art seemed charmingly reactionary to me as we strolled the heavily technological Biennial, but I interpreted it more as a personal quirk, uttered in part as a running joke, not a genuine commentary on the state-of-the-arts. Having considered the highly electrified yet banal Biennial for a week or two though, I think Still might have been onto something a bit deeper than a running gag. Maybe contemporary art in general could use a little less electricity and a little more connection to the earth.

As for Still's own art, a few of his computer graphic works are on view at the "Digital Louisiana" exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center through June 9. Though he hasn't landed a New York gallery yet, he has a perfectly dreadful, overpriced basement studio

Avant garbage, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune, May 12, 2002 continued

in Harlem (a dreadful, overpriced studio is a NYC must) and he's eagerly producing a series of -- in my opinion -- gorgeous abstract paintings on plywood panel.

"I just wanted to get a taste of it," Still said of his reasons for moving to the Big Apple. "People are always telling me I must have hated New Orleans to move away. That's not true at all. I just felt like New York was the place I could get the most money for a painting. I hope to be able to make a living from my art. I don't see why any artist wouldn't try it, if they could."

Douglas MacCash

Four Abstractionists, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, January/February, 2001

"The most direct and perhaps the most calculated of the four artists is Sam Still at Suzanne Zinsel. Still is a Minimalist, a Non-Representationist, whose vocabulary is the polka dot that he multiplies across the surface of his latex on birch plywood paintings. Process plays a large role in Still's work. He apparently delights in fusing wood as paint and paint as wood, so that texture is also an integral part of each carefully orchestrated piece. *Blonde* presents a spray of off-white dots painted a bit heavier than the rosy ground whose glaze allows the grain to show through. More independent of technique is *Familiar*, a satiny, pale yellow piece enlivened by yellow/green dots over the surface. Here the wood grain seems to swirl beneath the scrim of yellow, adding a sense of light and atmosphere."

Julia McLellan

Art Season Opens, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, October 6, 2000

Sam Still: New Work at Suzanne Zinsel Contemporary Fine Art

"Still has produced a body of high quality art over the past two decades that has included decorative grids, post modern appropriation (a brilliant suite of Minimalist Donald Judd boxes, reproduced in used lumber), neo-conceptualist commentaries on the consumer society, computer-generated prints on sandpaper. One of the most consistently inventive artists on the circuit, Still could share the post-painterly abstraction purse."

Douglas MacCash

Ink Jet Mono Prints On Sandpaper, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, August 16, 1999

"Not every hit has to be a home run. A well placed single through the infield at the right time in the game is just as beautiful as a boomer into the cheap seats. The same is true of art exhibits. Nothing about the John Lawrence and Sam Still show at Suzanne Zinsel Contemporary Fine Art suggest that it was intended to be a major event, but it approaches perfection nonetheless. The exhibit is a modest affair. Each artist contributed eight small pieces, they are all practically colorless and they are sequestered in a narrow hallway of the two-story gallery...

...but don't wait for Lawrence's work to slap you in the face; it's not going to. It's quietly cunning and you have to let yourself enter it completely before you can really "hear" what the artist is saying. It's the same with Sam Still's new work. He calls the medium monoprinting, but don't expect the large, brushy prints made by printing directly on a printers plate. No, Still's works are designed on a computer, in the rudimentary "draw" program that comes with Microsoft Works word processing software, to be specific. Single edition ink jet prints might be a better description...

Whatever you call these small works, Still uses a very unconventional ground material. He prints out his designs on - of all things - fine, black sandpaper - the stuff you use to polish out scratches before you paint a care. he says there's a terrible racket as the sandpaper grinds through the ink jet printer, but he runs the paper through again and again, until he gets the depth of color he wants - which is uniformly dark, rich and velvety.

Still's designs relate to the minimalist grids of shaded cubes he painted in the early '80s. All you see are squares, cut into 16 smaller squares. Inside each square is a circle, sliced by a curved line. The effect is like a calendar that depicts nothing but the cycle of the moon. But that sounds more "readable" than these works actually are. They're very murky and mysterious, with layers of subtle bronze, olive grey and midnight blue-black ink over a background that glitters gently with the Carborundum grit of the Sam

Ink Jet Mono Prints On Sandpaper, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, August 16, 1999 continued

paper. Beautiful, but like Lawrence's work, you have to take the time to study these pieces: they're not going to stop you in your tracks.

In addition to the strength of the individual works by the two men, the show has a powerful harmony of its own - the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, as they say. First, look at how the two styles play off each one another. Lawrence demonstrates that geometric abstraction is everywhere in the environment, ready to be discovered; Still searches inward to create geometric abstractions from his imagination. The polarity of the two points of view produces a nice resonance.

Lawrence is as technically conservative as you can get; Still is the mad scientist, yet both men's finished images are classically Modern and there by compatible. Lawrence sneaks up on us with subtle romantic themes; in the Minimalist tradition, Still excludes any possible thematic meaning (he even titles his prints with the date they were made). But if Lawrence's geometric abstraction seems cool at first, oddly, Still's Minimalism is somehow warm - the two aesthetics should conflict, but instead strengthen one another by their subtle contrasts. You can't usually predict this kind of serendipitous synergy - you just have to enjoy it when it happens."

Douglas MacCash

Sub-laminal Consciousness, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, November, 1998

"The subtle work of Sam Still at Suzanne Zinsel Gallery slowly seduces the eye as it moves beyond appearance to effect, association, and intellectual appreciation. Painted, sanded, and sealed surfaces of carefully selected square grounds reveal the full complexity of each work when we allow our consciousness to be formed by the work rather than impose our will upon it. The effect is not unlike the experiences of looking at Southern Song landscape painting in the lyrical mode and intricate interlace patterns of a carpet page from the Celtic Lindesfarne Gospels. We are drawn into almost palpable dark mist only to discover a landscape that yields its intimate secrets to the involved eye. We may pull back whenever we wish, stopping at the level of appearance, feeling, association, or intellect, and we will be rewarded by the experience, but fullest satisfaction comes from an appreciation on each of these levels. Like the plywood and the repeated workings of the surfaces of which these works are made, the multiple layers are much stronger than any single one.

As our eyes become accustomed to the dark mists of color with circuloid openings like passages in cloud cover through which rays of sunlight shine, we realize the patterns formed by the wood grain and revealed through these openings extends beneath this film of color. Nuances of color and indeterminate space interact with the varied construction materials - plywood, glue, latex paint - was pioneered by Arp's assemblages made with table saw and painted wood with their suggestive iconography and the importance of chance.

Use of plywood is rooted in two precedents. One is the popular art of domestic building and decoration. The other is Minimalist use of pre-manufactured commercial materials. The domestic roots are in the beautiful woods finishes that decorate the spaces in which we live and work, admired for their color and the pattern of the grain, admired so greatly that we simulate these qualities in Formica faux design. But these beautiful woods like the birch so popular for cabinets are a scarce resource now, and getting scarcer, and have become affordable only as "solid" wood veneers, and we are back to the idea of illusion again. Still finds his materials in their natural industrial habitat as Carl Andre found his squares of steel lying on the ground, David Smith used stainless steel, cutting torch, and industrial grinders, and Donald Judd experimented with the possibilities of simple form and repetition that he continues to explore in Marfa, Texas.

Still's selection of the severe formality of the square has roots in an art that developed contemporarily with the art of Arp. This geometry emerges from Cubism in the paintings of Juan Gris, Piet Mondrian, and Kasimir Malevich, often infused with a Neo-Platonic idealism and the idea of the avant-garde, a sense of geometry that appears again in the work of Judd in sculpture and Ad Reinhardt in painting with a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, messianic ideals.

And like their work, Still's work may be infused with a romantic sense in the amorphous patina of color that appears to lie over the topographic grain pattern of color and in the simplicity of the square. The element of chance in Arp, the dynamic equilibrium of Mondrian, and the sensuously painted surface and titled square of Malevich's *Supremacist Composition: White on White* are reflected in Still's chromatic cloud plane, the selection of sheets of plywood from piles and stacks at the building supply store, and his manipulations of the proportions of the squares. The rigorous geometry of the square is mediated by dimensions that are short of multiples of the conventional foot: 59 1/2" instead of 5 feet, 47 1/2" instead of 4 feet, and 23 3/8" instead of 2 feet. The effect is to thwart any unconscious measuring as we look at the pieces individually, adding another element that makes each work different from the others. Could this be an intentional pun on those odd dimensions of works listed in the descriptions beneath artworks in books or catalogs? Or is it the art historian's imagination operating in overtime again?

Sub-laminal Consciousness, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, November, 1998 continued

The synthesis of the geometric and the organic, the sculptural and the painterly, using the English translation of the German *malerisch* from Wollflin's provocative essays, and the question of the relevance of historical references and the associated ideas offers an interesting solution to the debate between Harold Rosenberg's defense to Abstract expressionism and Clement Greenberg's advocacy of Post-Painterly Abstraction. The irregular patterns formed by the wood grain parody both the gestural expressions of the 1950s built on a substrate of the subconscious mind and the critical rejection of that paradigm. But Still has "found" these "gestures" created through modern technology as "ready-mades" and has "assisted" them. We might even include these parodies of the gesture with the layered side and the apparent overlay of color as multiple dimensions of the idea of *faux* design. Instead of the artist's hand simulating nature as inferior decoration, it is impersonal nature, technology, and the artist's spontaneous discovery process converging in a parody of spontaneous expense.

Following another historical association, Still's works may be read against the background of color field abstraction in a Mark Rothko and nuanced veils of color of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis staining unprimed canvas. The appearance and the effect of these different artists may be similar, but whether Still's work is the expression of similar ideas will not be known unless we ask. But, could this not be considered another example of faux design? The "right" answer to these questions may be less important than the fact that they are possible.

In this essay we have suggested different perspectives from which to appreciate Sam Still's newest work. All of them maybe intended. None of them may be true. But the fact that the works suggest these ways of reading and experiencing them whether on a level of appearance, feeling and association, and intellect is the sign of interesting work. And if we choose, we may enjoy them for their formal qualities, materials, and method as semiotic and semantic form."

Karl Volkmar

Abstract Artists cover All The Angles, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, October 17, 1997

"Dressed in puritanical black and bearing their childhood scares, most contemporary artists treat joy as suspect emotion. Still, you couldn't prove that by Steven Kline and Sam still, two New Orleanians whose rare talent is to translate the Crescent City's joie de vivre into handsomely crafted abstractions. Both have fine shows in the warehouse district this month.

Still's most recent outings, in the early 1990s, were comprised of conceptual works, but his new show looks back to his early abstract painting and sculpture. Here he creates calmly elegant wall pieces that bridge the gap between those categories. Like lazy susans scattered across the wall, his rectangular, painted plywood objects are designed to be spun, letting the viewer mimic the painter's own working method as he considers every the piece from every angle. This fresh "spin" seems to lift the burden of seriousness that causes so many abstract painters plod; here everything bespeaks a sensuous acceptance of accident and organic patterns.

Working backward to create his pieces, Still sands heavily painted surfaces until all that remains is a delicate bloom of stained pigment bound into the grain of his wooden support. sealed with varnish and a few veils of translucent pigment, his pieces have a glowing, atmospheric depth. His imagery - pale bubbles and forms that suggest frying eggs - seem to rise organically from the wood grain: emblems of wholeness that sustain extended meditation."

Chris Waddington

At Play In The Fields Of Abstraction, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, November/December, 1997

"For some time now, there has not been nor have we realized any new frontiers to break in abstract painting. What we have is an immense playing field in which artists try to stake out their own bit of territory which in some way has already been occupied at some point by someone else. The perimeter of this playing field is ringed with work of this century's abstract pioneers: Kandinsky, Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Pollock, Rothko, Reinhardt, etc., etc. All of these artists tore through the visual and conceptual

barriers of their time and staked out places for themselves on the leading edge. What we are left with is an enormous but static piece of territory surrounded by art that we have yet to catch up with and which will be difficult to surpass. How do you get past Reinhardt's black paintings? What is on the other side that will reflect our new times? Things today are much tougher.

The flip side of this semi-depressing situation is that eventually there will be some way out of this predicament. This is reason enough to continue to work and plug away at abstraction because at some point on the perimeter of this field is a breaking point which will be exploited and breached to allow a redefining of abstraction in a new time and a new millennium.

At Play In The Fields Of Abstraction, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, November/December, 1997 continued

Having gone through that, it was satisfying to see so much abstraction in the galleries during the Art For Art's Sake cycle of exhibits. Although there wasn't anything earth shattering, there was plenty of interesting work. *Kick Ass Paintings* is the title of Sam Still's show of interactive lazy-susan like paintings at Suzanne Zinsel Gallery. These are a series of 11 untitled works on plywood which have been sanded down through layers of thicker paint to reveal what appear to be lightly stained surfaces which radiate a dark luminosity. The paintings are mounted to the walls using 360 degree ball bearing swivels, so that they can be spun and readjusted at the viewers whim. All of the works contain virtually the same visual elements, a group of four circular forms that are stained or painted a little more opaque than the background. Some of these forms have circular forms within, like the yolk of an egg. The paintings are like spin art in reverse, where the fun comes not in spinning to make mini-Pollocks but from spinning finished minimalist paintings to provide multiple views and multiple associations. On a wall of the gallery is posted a sort of users manual, reading simply Look, See, Touch, Enjoy. Therein lies the key to the work.

It is not easy to describe these works. There is no left or right and no top or bottom. What I saw is not going to be exactly what you saw. Each of these paintings has it's own seductive qualities, but overall, I think the most effective of these paintings contain more detail rather than less. This is not to say that the less defined images do not work or would not be satisfying on their own, but with a room full of visually similar works, it is the more defined which stand out. #4 is composed of four light green spheres over a ground of orange rust with streaks of yellow to one side. The largest painting, #8, has a ground of transparent charcoal with four large circle tinged with red.

The element of movement and the ability of these images to be transformed multiple times make the placement of them on the wall an interesting and crucial function. #9 is placed in a corner of the gallery. Faint violet circles within circles hover over a yellow orange background. At first, it looks as if the painting is too close to the wall to spin fully, but misses the wall by just a fraction. Just the right touch of anxiety and relief. This to me added dimension that makes the work come alive. I wish that more paintings had been placed in conflict. To have one a little closer to the wall, the floor or the ceiling so that the image would not completely rotate would have been nice and frustrating."

Jeff Ruben

Pfund Litz: Needful Things, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, January/February, 1992

"Pfund Litz is on exhibition at Suzanne Zinsel, and he may be a rare oasis in the current desert of New Orleans art. First, who is Pfund Litz, and what is he up to?"

His exhibition is a collection of wall installations poking fun at our consumer society. The installations are made of objects of consumer society, cigarette packages and the advertisements and information that make up our society. The advertisements and the information that go with each "box" are not explanatory commentary. They are the refrains of our consumer society - *quality time* is perhaps my favorite. No one seems to know, but it is a jingle that we have been sold. Pfund has located our weak spot. We consume slogans that have no meanings, and thus the slogans consume us.

We are the empty signs of post-industrial society. We are capitalism's excess, the abscess of what should have been the wealth of nations but which is now the liquidation of persons.

We are but signs of the conquest of capitalism.

We no longer are.

We only signify. To borrow from Stephen King who borrowed from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (but didn't tell us): we signify "needful things." The things of our culture need us.

Needful things. Things that need to consume us.

We are at the endpoint of Picasso's cubist nightmare or Beckett's endgame - we have no legs and we wear trash cans as our clothing.

There is no we.

At the end of Picasso's cubist nightmare lies the modern box.

It is fitting that Pfund also packages his witty attacks on our system in boxes. Boxes is an appropriate image for his humorous critique. Boxes may well be our national emblem. We, the children of Ronald Reagan, will buy anything if it comes in the right kind

Pfund Litz: Needful Things, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, January/February, 1992 continued

of box. And there is an entire industry devoted to trying to figure out what kind of boxes we like. Art, as I have complained in these pages, has fallen prey to that industry. Art has been boxed in by the culture's boxes, and Pfund good naturedly points an accusing finger by refusing to do art the old fashioned way, and yet he hasn't quite succumbed to the silliness of the culture.

Pfund exercises are terribly self-conscious. He has produced boxes to criticize other boxes. His criticism is itself consuming; his criticism boxes in. And who knows if his boxes will become "something" in the future, something needful, something we need to have.

For the moment, Pfund's work is precisely that, fun. There is a critique that goes with fun, and he has avoided taking himself too seriously. He also realizes that his wall pieces may undo him in the future - and like Picasso he may have to reject himself in order to do more and better work. Until then, Pfund's curious boxes are worthy of a peek or two. Don't be afraid to laugh. You won't hurt his feelings."

Jesse Nash

Sam Still: New Work, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, March/April, 1991

"Artist Sam Still advocates social responsibility in his conceptual exhibit *Consumer/Citizen* at Suzanne Zinsel Gallery, 328 Julia Street. Visually the show is made up of twelve 11 x 11 inch shadow boxes built for the artist by a framer in his employ. The austere grouping of uniform wooden pieces suggests a continued interest in minimalist aesthetics which were last seen in still's excellent *Appropriation* at Delgado Community College in 1988. In that show, rather severe, wooden, geometric constructions were hung in series, bringing to mind - in spit of the uncharacteristic material - the work of seminal minimalist Donald Judd. But in the current exhibit, the wooden boxes defy the muteness of minimalism by containing a series of verbal equations: "Consumer, Flag Burning/Citizen, Banking Crisis"; "Consumer, News Entertainment/Citizen, News Information"; "Consumer, Mapplethorpe/Citizen, S & L Crisis." These brief, frequently provocative binaries imply - among perhaps other things - that while the consumer is distracted by transient, superficial concerns, the citizen remains aware of real issues of real gravity. These analogies are printed in half-inch, black lettering on canary yellow paper. The style of the print was selected by the printer and the color of the paper by a Kinko's employee, taking the minimalist custom of having one's art produced by industrial process one step further, by allowing others to make critical decision.

Still's agenda is most direct, even obvious: to declare the moral complacency endemic to a consumer society, but whatever self-righteousness one might perceive initially is mitigated by the context of the exhibit itself. Sam Still acts, in the consumer society, as art salesman and Suzanne Zinsel gallery is his place of business. One will reasonably discern some irony in Still's rapprochement of consumer values in that setting. He is no doubt conscious of that inevitability and welcomes the complication of the issue. Sam Still has, with *Consumer/Citizen*, asked onlookers to consider their place in the consumer society, but he has also, more than anything, primed his audience for continued speculation into his ultimate motives as an artist."

Douglas MacCash

Constructions by Sam Still, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, February 15, 1991

"Sam Still is currently showing a collection of intellectually applaudable but formally disappointing works. the wall hung constructions are shallow wooden boxes containing commercially printed leaflets under glass. The leaflets challenge us to take a thoughtful look at our relationship to the world. At the bottom of each leaflet, the words :Consumer/Citizen" appear. Above them, projecting analogies of the kind familiar to those who have taken the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, other words or ideas are

contrasted. Example include "Flag Burning/Banking Crisis," "Abortion/Sex Education," and "NEA Funding/Tobacco Subsidies."

The analogies focus attention on the myopic vision of many Americans, engendered by the societal role they play as either thoughtless consumers or responsible citizens. The message could hardly be more topical, particularly in these Lenten days of self-examination and self-denial.

Yet the leaflets are too large for the shadow boxes; their edges curl around the boxes' interior edges and their messages are hard to read. The leaflets would have been much more effective as carnival handouts - an interesting contrast to the fundamental Christian literature so ubiquitous in the Vieux Carre."

Roger Green

Appropriation, New Orleans, LA, New Orleans Art Review, November/December 1988

"Sam Still's recent exhibition of sculpture in the art gallery of Delgado Community College was an ironic paean to the halcyon days of the sixties minimalism. As such, it was a nearly classic eighties show.

Still's wall mounted wooden boxes allude to the work of Donald Judd, but unlike his austere and precise models, Still's are rough hewn and splotchy. Still's sculptures are composed of scrap building material that has been boldly fastened with phillips screws and partially coated with patches of white spackling compound. Thus, Still's "appropriations" are not exact replicas a la Levine, but affectionate approximations; they are like studies after master works in an art student's sketch book. Like many of today's artists, Still appropriates the look of past work, yet divorced from the original milieu and historical context his work is imbued with different meanings.

In the post-everything atmosphere of today, an artist has license to indulge in concerts hitherto unthinkable; to pile irony upon irony, to appropriate and replicate the work of others. In his new work, Sam Still has taken the dead pan "what you see is what you get" credo of minimalism and turned it on it's head. Still's sculpture pays loving homage to a kind of art many find cold and bloodless - how po-mo!"

David Rive

Sam Still: Colored Ink Drawings, New Orleans, LA, Times-Picayune/Lagniappe, May 29, 1987

"I'm obsessed with boxes," says painter Sam Still, whose exhibit of colored-ink drawings at Evan-Landry Gallery is appropriately limited to portrayals of miniature boxes, rendered in perspective and viewed from above, with their tops and two abutting sides showing.

The diminutive boxes are drawn in pencil, then covered with bleeding, transparent washes of colored ink in high keyed, contrasting hues. In all of the drawings, the boxes are arranged in inflexible grids, with each box occupying a small, rectangular piece of paper that is attached (along with others of identical size) to a white ragboard background.

The point of these untitled abstract exercises is to express repetition with change. The regularity of the grids is effectively countered by subtle differences in the coloration and shape of the individual boxes.

Given the narrow bounds of the project, the artist has achieved a surprisingly wide variety of efforts, most importantly with regard to apparent cool or warm temperatures. That is, many of the boxes colored green or blue suggest cubes of ice, while those colored orange or pink seem to be glowing with interior light. The suggestion is intensified by the ragboard backgrounds, which may be black, white or gray.

However, far from fully exploiting these dramatic differences in temperature and thus mood, the artist colors all of the boxes in each composition in the same combination of hues. As a result, such differences as exist between the individual boxes are uncommonly subtle, documenting accidents rather than deliberate or studied choices.

Still's ink drawings are sensitive exercises in the synthesis of antithetical properties - regularity and irregularity, as achieved with instruments and by hand. Fastidiously executed, his delicate art should subtly, but amply reward viewers willing to enter its' rarefied world."

Roger Green