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Donald Judd
CASTELLI GALLERY

Don Judd's two new plywood multiunit works, one cubic, the other rhomboid, are among his largest to date. The taller of the two is 6'5" high, larger than most people, and as a result, the new work represents a major jump in his internal scale and volumetricity. His usual pattern with floor or wall pieces (that were not stacked or "Stacks") was to establish their height below or congruent with the average person's line of sight. This prevented the objects from looking flat against their ground while it stressed their humanness and underplayed their quasi-architectural role.

One of the major challenges presented by Minimal sculpture's nonanthropomorphic unitariness is its relation to architecture, to which it constantly refers, and with or against which it must function. It is noteworthy that Judd made a piece comprised of concentric, sloping circular units for a show in the Guggenheim Museum while he makes squarish pieces for rectilinear gallery spaces. It would seem that he consciously accepts architectural space as playing a contextual role in his vocabulary of forms.

The new open-faced pieces at Castelli downtown are big enough to walk into, but only a child (with an inherently different scale) would make the mistake of doing so. They are just big enough to dwarf the gallery's enormous space, but not quite tall enough or wide enough to function as room partitions. In contrast to the general impression of Judd's deluxe fineness, the new works seem bulky and ponderous. They feel a little too big. It is as though they are eating up huge chunks of space and oppressing you as you pass between them. The cubes accept the axes of the room while the rhombi violate them by destroying the right-angle orientation of the room, causing a sense of disequilibrium. One feels that the set of cubes mediates between the normalcy of the room space and the disorientation of the rhombi; it is the principal link in an emotional continuum. The near theatricality of this work is in distinct contrast to the bland neutrality we have learned to associate with Judd.

Judd has always handled the spacing of his pieces as precisely as their sizing and shaping. The new works extend to the edges of their back walls, equidistantly separated from those walls and each other, with just enough space to allow their separate units a discrete reading as "specific objects" in a series. Their regular spacing, like that of the "Stacks" and the floor boxes, is as rhythmical as the asymmetrical spacing of the "Progressions." In both cases it parallels Mondrian's characteristic way of counting—rhythmically, repetitively marking time in his paintings. While speaking of Mondrian, two other similarities come to mind with Don Judd's work, despite the obvious disparity of the two artists in composition. The first is the near-religious fervor of their approach to geometry as the quintessential language of modern art; the second is their equally careful adjustment of their materials in units that range from tiny to huge, which provides them both with clearly readable internal scale. Judd, for instance, never isolates a single undemarcated solid cube in space. If the unit is a closed, four-sided one and lacks detailing of any kind, it is always grouped with others in a carefully spaced series so that its size can be read against the interstices and the space occupied by the other units. His single-unit pieces are generally articulated into planes when they are not divided into sections as they are in the "Progressions."

Judd's unstacked wall pieces are usually closed in front and are often open at the sides, while his serial floor pieces are usually closed on all sides. The only real precedent for the open frontality of the two new sister works is the huge three-tiered stack, 19 units wide, of long open-ended square "ducts" of 1968. This piece is usually exhibited against a back wall, like the new pieces, and locked between two side walls, and its orientation, as a result of the abutted stacking, is toward the wall at its rear. The new works occupy a hybrid position halfway between our expectations of his wall and floor pieces. Their frontality relates them to wall pieces, but their floor-bound cubic weightiness permits them no other location.

Judd tends to treat both wall and floor as planes that intersect his pieces so that they look as though they are emerging neatly from these surfaces. He emphasizes the verticality of walls and the load-bearing horizontal spread of floors, but he never uses the normal optical, perspectival, or somatic aspects of human physiology to pictorial advantage in his work. The only thing that's ever pictorial about a Judd sculpture is his handling of surface. We associate him with streamlined, luxurious metal finishes and bright industrial colors—red, green, or brown—or with the atmospheric transparency/translucency of Plexiglas. Plywood, a manufactured wood, has about the same amount of glamour associated with it as galvanized metal and an even more incident-rich surface. Left unfinished and undisguised it seems crude and structurally literal. In spite of the fine cabinetry with which the new pieces were obviously crafted, they convey a sensation of raw materiality which enhances the emotional force of their configuration. The new Don Judd seems bigger, rougher, more certain of his expressive means. His expanding scale befits him.

—April Kingsley