



'Untitled, 1980': an example of Donald Judd's vertical stacks, a form he repeated sporadically from the Sixties onwards. ©Tate, London 2014

Donald Judd by Oliver Basciano

If childhood influences an artist's work, Donald Judd's lifelong interest in space may well have been subtly informed by the wide low terrains of the Midwest surrounding his 1928 birthplace: Excelsior Springs, Missouri. The sculptures that made Judd's name in the early Sixties were spare, plain boxes and cuboid frame sculptures created from industrial materials and arranged in various configurations on both the floor and wall. But Judd was interested in art being much more than the discrete object.

He would exhibit them both within gallery spaces internationally and outside - most famously in the harsh grasslands surrounding Marfa, Texas - giving viewers permission to focus their attention on not just the form of the artwork but the space surrounding it, above it, below it and even, in the case of his hollow, architectural, works, inside it. He had no desire to impose any framing device, theoretical or physical, onto a work other than the choice of its location, be it a building or a landscape. Judd was an astute, no-nonsense chronicler of the art scene in the form of his writing for *ARTnews*, *Arts Magazine*, and *Art International*, as well as his later academic writing. He wrote that the choice of a work's placement must be 'contemporary with its creation'. The art did not end with the material object, but crept around the thing, bringing the entire site into its jurisdiction.

In the early Sixties, such a radical redefinition of an artwork was something that Judd consciously, albeit gradually, undertook. He studied art history and philosophy at Columbia in the late Forties, and one of his earliest surviving works is a pretty bad

figurative painting from 1950. The work shows a woman, nude, perched on a chair. She looks a bit uncomfortable. The best thing to be said about the composition is that, retrospectively at least, one can see the faintest of inklings of Judd's interest in architecture and design. The figure sits with her back to a wardrobe, framed by its bulky form. A beam runs to the corner of room, just above her head. To the woman's left is a window only slightly in view. A sliver of light suggests freedom beyond this claustrophobic environment.

Judd's forays into figurative painting were thankfully brief. He would soon demonstrate his first attempts to rid himself of the baggage of art history that he had been taught in the lecture hall, notably in his woodcut works. These are mostly printed as a single colour and when on occasion Judd used two, the palette is notably contrasting. 'Untitled (Schellmann 41)' (1968–9) and 'Untitled (Schellmann 50)' (1968–9) are typical to this period. Imprinted into the thickly inked sheets, carving a gap in the evenly printed cadmium red parallelograms of both works, are a series of parallel lines showing the bare paper beneath. In the first work, these stretch across the shape to completely separate the bars. In the latter, the lines join up with each other, just before reaching the bottom of the shape, to form a series of elongated right-angled U-shapes. Taken as a pair, the works offer different perspectives on the primary site of the composition. In the first, the red bars dominate the picture; in the second it is the space between that draws the viewer's attention.

Yet, for Judd, this was the right message delivered with the wrong medium. The woodcuts were made in an art world where Abstract Expressionism was all-pervasive. Judd admired artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, impressed by their rejection of figuration and the manner in which they drew the viewer's attention to the medium of painting and the fallacy of representational work. Pollock's drip paintings tested the boundaries of the canvas's edges – it feels as if the viewer is only party to a portion of the painting – detail of a much larger work performed by the artist. Rothko, working after the earlier Kazimir Malevich, asks his audience to see the possibility, the physicality of colour.

Yet despite their impressive work, Judd felt that it was still restrained by its medium. 'The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall,' the artist wrote in his 1965 landmark essay 'Specific Objects'. 'A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it.' For Judd it was the artist's job to set and determine the limits of a work, not the material. This thesis was borne out in pieces such as 'Untitled, 1960', a series of vertical perspex-fronted aluminium boxes attached to the wall like shelves; 'Untitled, 1971', a row of boxes placed evenly on the gallery floor; and 'Untitled, 1972', a hollow copper box with an enamel-painted interior.

Judd's legacy does not end with the works that now lie in museum collections worldwide. The artist as academic is now commonplace but Judd was one of the first to take that role. His forays into furniture and building design have become an example for generations since, with Rachel Whiteread and Franz West among those citing him as an influence in their cross-disciplinary experiments. Judd built his first chair in 1973 when he bought his now iconic ranch in Marfa, Texas. This 340-acre site Judd went on to fill with his work and that of others - including Dan Flavin, Carl Andre and Claes Oldenburg - and has since become a place of pilgrimage. This itself has proved an influence on art projects in which the journey to their remote location is half the experience (not least Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's abandoned, fully stocked, Prada store, located 37 miles northwest of the town). Texas – that most American of states – is an apt epicentre for all things Judd. When asked in 1966 why he disavowed compositional effects, the artist answered unequivocally, 'Those effects tend to carry with them all the structures, values, feeling of the whole European tradition. It suits me if that's all down the drain.'

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