

RONALD DAVIS IS NOT DOING WHAT YOU'RE SEEING DAVE HICKEY

Excerpted with permission from the catalog accompanying the Untitled. Art Fair exhibition of Ronald Davis works by Nyehaus, New York, during Miami Basel, December, 2015

Ronald Davis was born in Santa Monica in 1937, and snatched away to Cheyenne, Wyoming for a high plains childhood that failed to prepare him for cosmopolitan cotillions. After high school, Davis worked at sheet metal for two years and attended the University of Wyoming. Then, finally, inspired by Jackson Pollock's Wyoming roots, and Pollock's escape from them, he caught the art virus and set off in the direction of being a great artist. He studied at the San Francisco Art Institute. He received a National Endowment grant. In 1965, he moved back to Los Angeles and discovered his one true mentor, the legendary dealer, Nicolas Wilder.

In 1967 (*fig. 1*) and 1968, Davis had his first exhibitions in New York, first at Tibor de Nagy and then at Leo Castelli. Out of these exhibitions he sold paintings to the Museum of Modern Art, The Tate Gallery, London, the Los Angeles County Museum, The San Francisco Museum of Art, The Chicago Museum of Art. He was included in Documenta '68 in Kassel, and in the US pavilion of the Venice Biennale in '72. This, for a young painter at that time, was considered a good start, and Davis' artworks remained in vogue for another twenty years.

Even so, since the art world is heavily front-loaded, there is a good chance that you don't know Ronald Davis' artworks, and, if you don't, you should. He is part of a change that altered the ontology of the art world, and the wheel is coming round again. From 1964 to 1975 Davis painted his *Dodecagons*, the greatest series of abstract objects made in the United States in the twentieth century. These twelve-angled pieces of resin, polyester and fiberglass made Davis rich and famous, as they should have, but Davis liked the adulation less that he thought he would. The cultural *mise en scene* at that time was big hats, scarves, and handmade boots and Ronald will explain to you today that, not only was he born to be an artist, he was born to be a starving artist because he requires the hands-on discipline –



fig. 1 — Artforum, April 1967



fig. 2 — Bill Al Bengston

the intense quality of attention — that works best at the edge of catastrophe.

Also, Davis didn't like blue chip work habits: You had to work in the summer, which boys from Wyoming rarely do. You built ten objects for an east coast show. You built ten more for a west coast show. Twenty years of this frazzles the mind, since, in the rush from one to ten, one misses a lot of exits. The quality of the objects stayed steady since Davis don't do no junk. So he retired, moved to Taos, built a village of hogans and set about refining and upgrading what he'd done. The reasons for Davis' defection are legion. The first time I asked him why he moved, he said it was to get away from Frank Gehry and a clingy girlfriend although the reasons have changed over the years.

The Gehry-Davis kerfuffle began when Davis asked Frank to build him a studio in Malibu based on the footprint of a shaped, Davis artwork. It was done and Gehry was declared the *puto* of postmodernism, and the studio was so full of architects proclaiming Frank's genius, that Davis couldn't get much work done. Davis' contribution to the studio underwent slow erasure, because architecture always needs a hero and art has outgrown this defect. So Davis began manifesting anxiety symptoms. He wanted a studio for himself. He was miffed by symposiums about his studio to which he wasn't invited. Architects had colonized his first studio. No big whoops, but Davis was a Wyoming boy. Today, hoganed in Taos, Davis is still working steadily. He studies representational techniques, argues with his neighbors. He rarely mentions that "Frank Gehry's post-modern masterpiece" was in fact Ronald Davis' "first minimalist sculpture" — a difficult object on a plain at the 'Bu.

Having told you this story here, there is an additional point to be made. Los Angeles then isn't Los Angeles now. The Los Angeles art world now is just about perfect. It is not ideal, because, in an ideal art world, price and value harmonize — this according to Leo Castelli. Even so, anything you want from anywhere is readily available. Consultants, critics, market advisors, authenticators and art-whisperers sprinkle the sidewalks like beach sand. Billions of dollars that might have been spent on art, have been invested in huge warehouses to display art that has just gone out of fashion, further reinforcing the idea of Los Angeles as a provincial city. Rich collectors who can afford it buy art, but can't be bothered with taking care of it. The artists today all have BFA's and loftier honors, like tenure. Nearly everyone has an income and many have benefits.

Fifty years ago, Los Angeles was Timbuktu with surf, big signs, and canyons with naked avatars. (I've seen them dancing in the morning mist over by George Herms' house.) The artists in that alien wasteland knew two things: They weren't in New York and they weren't even sure they were artists. They all had fallback positions: They might masquerade as architects, gigolos, waiters, motorcycle racers, surfers, fashion models, pornographers, couturiers, movie actors, chefs, and extras. Ed Ruscha and Billy Al Bengston (fig. 2) had a graphics store with invoices and business cards. Many claimed to be musicians and many, like Mason Williams, were, so you had to convince these outliers that they were artists because art, for them, art was this singular, magical, mundane thing that saved your life.

As many noted at the time, when compared to the New York art, Los Angeles art felt empty, and it still does — and this is not a fault. It just meant you aren't looking closely enough or at the right thing. New York art, however sleek, felt cluttered with ideas, positions, narratives, commentary, and cleverly positioned invitations for discourse — an early painting by Frank Stella (fig. 3) still feels like a feed-lot with too many cows. As a result, the bulk of my early writing consists of reading New York art through Western eyes. I always missed the Heideggerian subtext and I finally decided that I should have been missing it. My New York friends, after all, were trying to get in, you know. All my California friends were trying to get out — out of Freud, Marx, Heidegger, and La Pléiade over by the Whitney. That seemed the right way to be.

Ronald Davis was on his way out from jump. In an art world that was rapidly turning *grisaille*, Davis was a colorist who preferred Itten (fig. 4) to Albers. (No Mexico in Albers.) In a discourse of paintings that were willfully flat to the eye, Davis proudly produced muscular fields of illusion that infected colors with subtle nuance. In a discourse that was gradually embracing “time-based-art,” Davis lines were not drawn “in time”. They did not bear the inference of narrative. The lines were “snap-lined” — dead still with a steady penumbra of shadow on either side. Even his “abstract expressionist” explosions are more blobs than gestures, going in every direction at once. In a civilization of canvas, color mixers, and engineers, Ronald was a chemist — an alchemist of epoxy, resins, digital magic, and fiberglass.



fig. 3 — Frank Stella

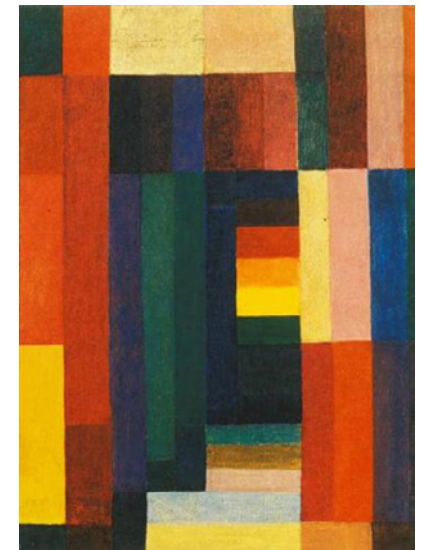


fig. 4 — Johannes Itten



fig 5— Sam Francis

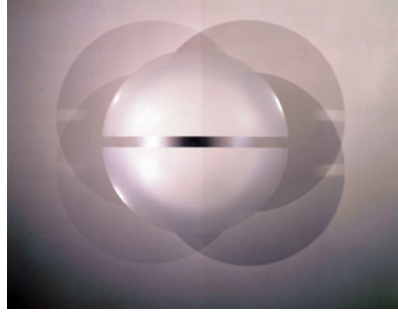


fig 7— Robert Irwin



fig 6— Richard Diebenkorn

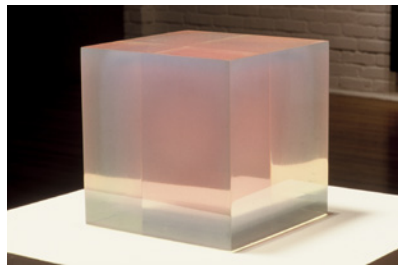


fig 8— Peter Alexander

He was alone among his peers like Sam Francis (fig. 5) and Richard Diebenkorn (fig. 6) in his avant technology, alone among the artists he inspired, like Robert Irwin (fig. 7) and Peter Alexander (fig. 8), in his shameful complexity. He owed a debt to Kelly (fig. 9) and Stella but that was paid in full with his first New York show in which he became their peer. Lynda Benglis (fig. 10) owed a debt to Davis, but that is almost too obvious to mention, because all that they had done was disappearing — being replaced by text and Xeroxed photographs and what could be further from a *Dodecagon* than that.

My point here, as Davis will tell you, is that Ronald Davis is not really making paintings, not properly, no more than Robert Irwin's scrimms are paintings. Davis is making objects positioned on the wall as Donald Judds are positioned on the floor (and the wall, too). So today, in retrospect, it's easy to see that the shaped object on the wall, enlivens that whole wall; the snap-lines that seem to stop at the edge of the wall enliven that wall. Object-makers from Kelly to Stella to Davis are the bastard fathers of that emptiness. The fact that this has never been argued before, I attribute to the fact that east coast critics are looking at and looking for the wrong things. They are looking for pictures and composition. They should be looking at feigned illusion and flat-lined opticality.

Here are two simple California examples: Ed Ruscha has a drawing entitled "*SHE SURE KNOW HER DEVOTIONALS*". It's more a feigned quote than drawing but New York critics think semantics. They want to know who "she" is? Who is responsible for the intensive "sure?" They are looking for semantics. Ruscha is looking at phonetics. What are three formulations of the "shh" phoneme in English: She. Sure. —tionals. Academics look at Davis' "Five Twelfths" and see garden furniture. Davis sees a complex field for illusory opticality frozen flat because you're supposed to see what's there.

All this is more a guess than an argument, of course, so, many times, I think, Davis, in his bitchy, contrarian mode just sees things backward. He will take Jackson Pollock's bottom-to-top practice of layering and glazing color and turn it around. He will begin with the geometric pizza pan, paint and pour opaque color blobs into their places, then add translucent

overlapping resins, then pull the pizza from the tray and see what it looks like. It looks like a Pollock painted backwards but who in the hell ever thought of that? Ronald Davis did.

Part of my point here is nobody “loves” a Davis, a Stella or a Bridget Riley. The paintings present us with a complex invitational form of dirty dancing and not everyone is up to this category of response. As a result, the paintings are as sexy as they are aggressive and exciting. Even so, they still propose that we see them as they are, flat and still, so one pushes back against the chromatic distortions to achieve some sort of ground zero, if only for a moment. I am not, however, proposing some art-historical teleology in which images move from concave to flat to convex. I am simply proposing that artists go where the energy is, if that is their predisposition.

I saw Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* flat and still one time. I fought my way back through all that fettuccine to the frozen thing. I saw what Pollock had painted. It was magnificent and a great place to start with Pollock. Most viewers these days just presume that Pollock is portraying a “dance,” and leave them behind about one quarter realized. The idea that his lines have direction is still one percent calculus and 99 percent *gris-gris*.

My point here is that, with Davis, Stella or Riley, we stop the image on the wall. The idea is not to seduce but to render something complex plain. All of these works have nuanced answers that exploit the *Dodecagons*’ twelve foot horizontal width — a size that guarantees a one-picture wall, an architectural footprint like the one Davis conjured up for Frank Gehry to build.

The historical revisionism in the paintings of Davis, Stella and Kelly, of Anthony Caro’s sculptures of that time, is lost to us now, even though the history of all the objects that followed them could not exist without their precedent. Sometimes first is best, so consider the default mode of modern art in, say, 1935. Every painting had a frame. Every sculpture had a base, everything rhymed rectangles. There was a rectangular wall, upon which a rectangular frame was hung, within which a modern painting was enclosed.

What happens next, in the 50’s and early 60’s is that painters like Davis, Kelly and Stella dispense with the frame. Without the frame, the wall upon which the paintings were hung became a ground rather than a support.

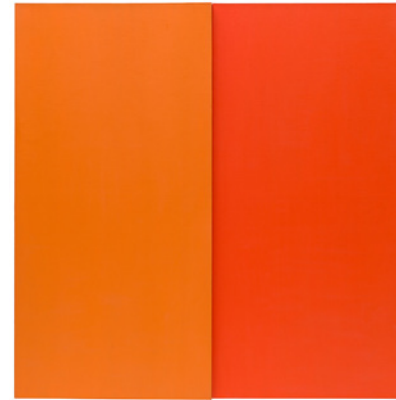


fig. 9 — Ellsworth Kelly



fig. 10 — Lynda Benglis

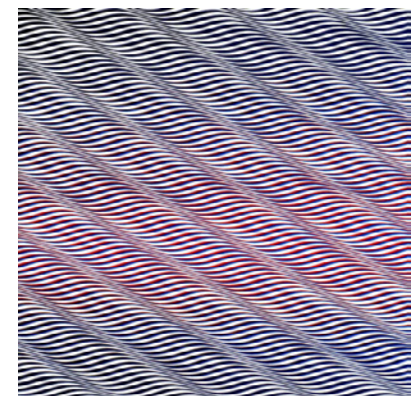


fig. 11 — Bridget Riley

This figure-ground relationship between the painting and the wall was intensified when these paintings began to skew off the rectangle. It was intensified further with Davis' illusionary excavations into the center of the painting and into the ground supplied by the wall. Anthony Caro's dispensing with the base and the volume of his sculpture had a similar effect. In both cases the space of the painting and sculpture was aestheticized. This fiat allowed art to conquer the room or the lawn.

With the walls of the gallery *de facto* aestheticized, the entire artistic *mise en scene* was altered. The walls masquerading grounds enclosed what began to be called an "art space" within which anything might take on the character of art. A home for minimalist sculpture, conceptual art and installation art was created. This, because you just can't sit a minimal work of art or an installation out in the hallway like a Rodin or a tub of palms. The space needed to exist, the shaped paintings made it an active space that provided an aura for all within it. Minimalism, conceptual art, and installation art follow from there and proliferate, along with a vague idea of the gallery space as a secular church.

So, by 1965, 1935 was gone, and the environment of art blossomed like a flower. By 1975 Ronald Davis was becoming gradually inured to proving the same equation again and again and so began a return to loose painting (his "Music" series). He ultimately retired to Taos to pursue more exotic projects. So if we pursue the torturous flailing of American art in the 1960's, Davis' paintings, which never used paint, stand somewhere near the center, seducing the wall within and without the painting itself, creating an activated space within which painting could not naturally develop, as Al Held mistakenly believed. Rather the space, exploded, demoting what came before and elevating what came after, and within this apotheosis, the colorful, shaped objects of Davis, Kelly and Stella were routinely treated as transitions — they weren't; they were the key that turned to unlock the future.



Complements, 1969, 50 x 140 inches (shaped), Polyester Resin and Fiberglass, Slabs II Series (PTG 0099)

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POST LEE



Lemon Yellow, 1969, 50 1/2 x 132 inches, (shaped), Moulded Polyester Resin and Fiberglass. *Dodecagon Series*, (PTG 0082)

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POST LEE



Lemon Yellow (left); *Backup* (at right), 1969, 60 1/2 x 136 inches, (shaped), Moulded Polyester Resin and Fiberglass, *Dodecagon Series*, (PTG 0069)

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POST LEE



Four And Twenty, 1970 (quadtych), 80 x 250 inches, (shaped), Moulded Polyester Resin and Fiberglass, *Block Series*

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POST LEE



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Tim Nye of Nyehaus, Brooklyn, NY, minding the booth at Untitled. Art Fair, part of Miami Basel Art Fair, December 1-8, 2015. At left is *Complements*; behind Tim is *Lemon Yellow*.



Tim Nye at work at Untitled. Art Fair, part of the Miami Basel Art Fair, December 1-8, 2015. Behind Tim are *Lemon Yellow* and *Backup*.

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