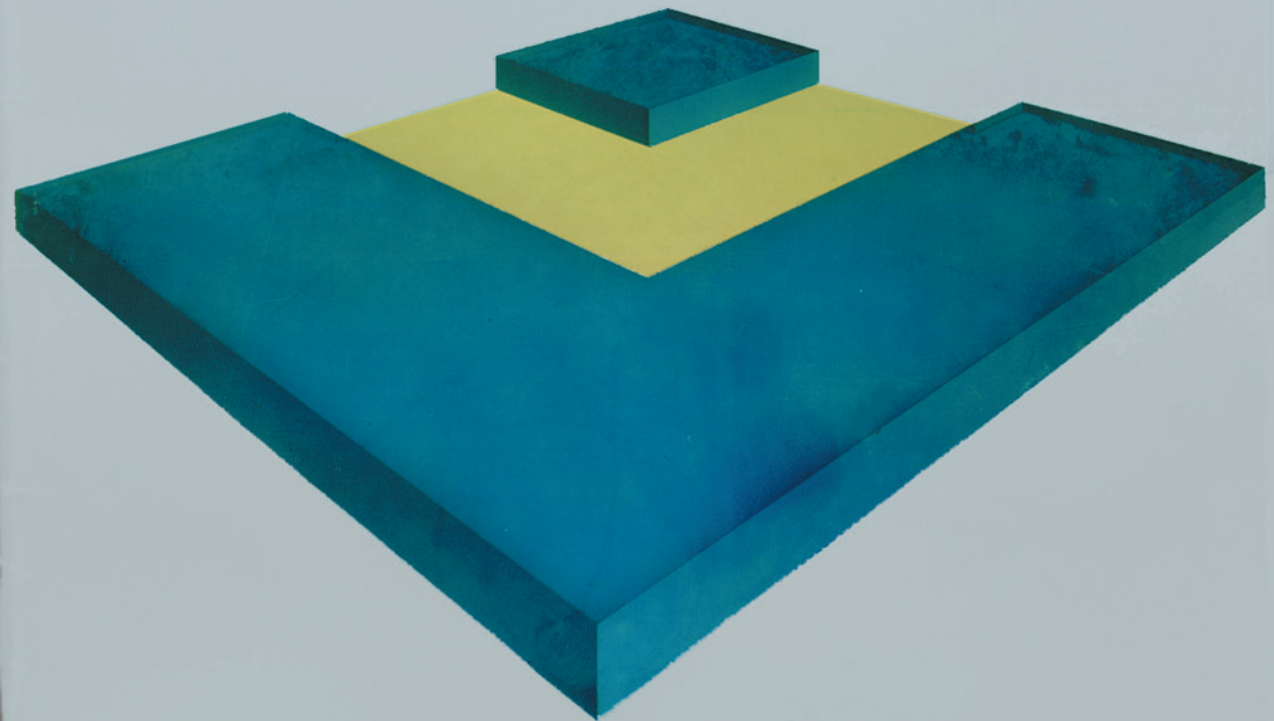


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**RONALD  
DAVIS:  
Surface  
and  
Illusion**

**MICHAEL FRIED**



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The paintings referred to in this catalog are from Ronald Davis's *Slab Series*, 1966. Michael Fried's article followed the artist's first New York one-man exhibition at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in October of that year. These paintings changed art history, because they were the first to be made of polyester resin and fiberglass and incorporated two-point perspective illusionism.

**ARTFORUM** cover:

**Six-Ninths Blue**

1966

72 X 131 inches

Polyester Resin, Fiberglass, and Wood

Collection of Robert A. Rowan

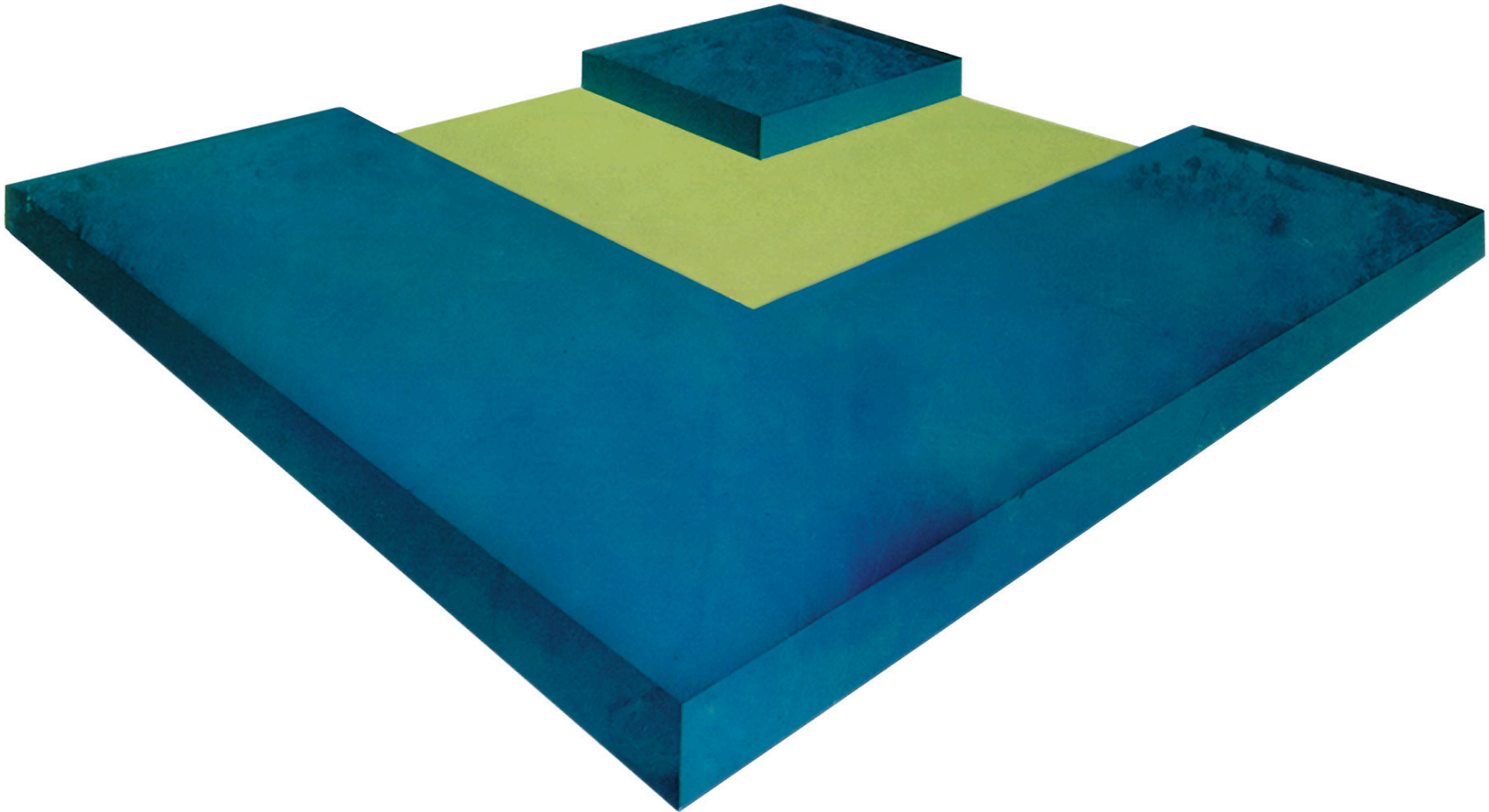
# RONALD DAVIS: Surface and Illusion

MICHAEL FRIED

Ron Davis is a young California artist whose new paintings, recently shown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, are among the most significant produced anywhere during the past few years, and place him, along with Stella and Bannard, at the forefront of his generation. In at least two respects Davis' work is characteristically Californian: it makes impressive use of new materials — specifically, plastic backed with fiberglass — and it exploits an untrammelled illusionism. But these previously had yielded nothing more than extraordinarily attractive *objects*, such as Larry Bell's coated glass boxes, or ravishing, ostensibly pictorial effects, as in Robert Irwin's recent work. (In the first instance illusion is rendered literal, while in the second it dissolves literalness entirely.) Whereas Davis' new work achieves an unequivocal identity as *painting*. That this is so is a matter of conviction. One *recognizes* Davis' new work as painting: in my case, with amazement — and, at first, distrust, even resentment — that what I was experiencing as paintings were, after all, made of plastic. Not that Davis' paintings are what they are in spite of being made of plastic or presenting a compelling illusion of a solid object in strong perspective. On the contrary, it is precisely Davis' refusal to settle for anything but ambitious painting that, one feels, has *compelled* him to use both new materials and two-point perspective. What

incites amazement is that that ambition could be realized *in this way* — that, for example, after a lapse of at least a century, rigorous perspective could again become a medium of painting. Davis' paintings are, I suggest, the most extreme response so far to the situation described in my essay *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings*.<sup>1</sup> Roughly, Davis has used perspective illusion — the illusion that the painting as a whole is a solid object seen in two-point perspective from above — to relieve the pressure under which, within that situation, the shape of the support (or literal shape) has come to find itself. The limits of Davis' new paintings present themselves as the edges of a three-dimensional entity rather than of a flat surface; and in fact it is virtually impossible to grasp the literal shape of paintings like *Six-Ninths Blue* and *Six-Ninths Red* just by looking at them. (One is forced, so to speak, to *trace* their limits and then see what one has.) As a result, the question of whether or not the literal shapes of Davis' new paintings hold, or stamp themselves out, or compel conviction a burning question within the situation referred to — simply does not arise. More precisely, it does not arise as long as the illusion of three dimensionality remains compelling: if, in a given painting, for whatever reason; the illusion is felt to be in jeopardy, that painting's ability to hold as shape is rendered questionable as well. (Something of the kind may happen in *Two-Ninths Grey*, in which the projected object is not, to my mind, sufficiently comprehensible. What, for example, is the precise relation of the two gray blocks to the larger red slab on which they seem to sit? In general, Davis can not afford much ambiguity or indeterminacy, both of which compromise his paintings' apparent objecthood.)

A great deal, then, depends upon the power of the illusion; and it was, I believe, in order to achieve that power



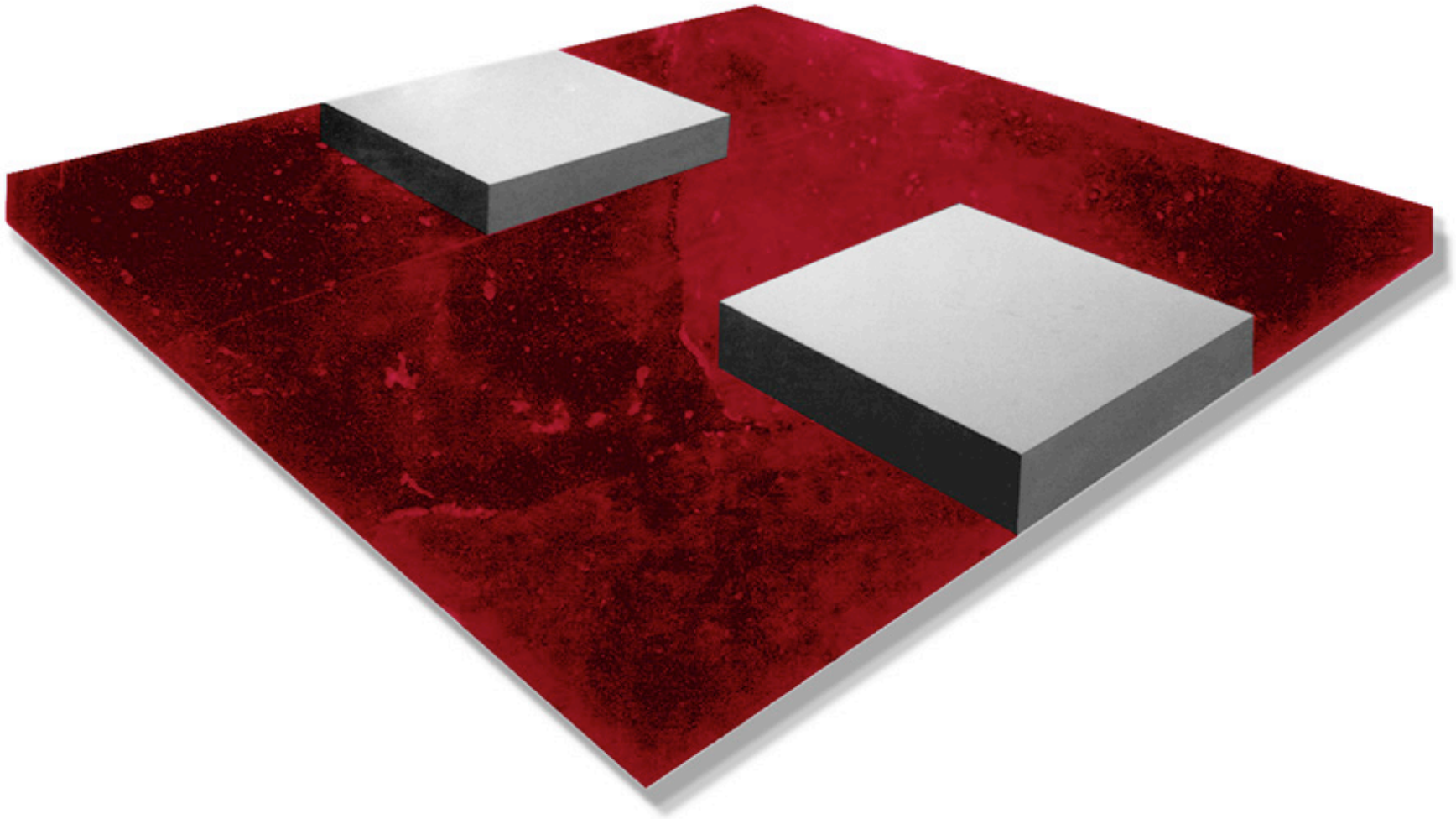
- **Six-Ninths Blue**, 1966, 72 X 131 1/4 inches, Polyester Resin, Fiberglass, and Wood.  
RD#: PTG 034, Collection of Robert A. Rowan.

that Davis gave up working in paint on canvas and began to explore the possibility of making his new paintings in plastic. In any case, the fact that in his new paintings color is not *applied* to the surface in any way, but instead seems physically to lie somewhere *behind* it, makes the illusion of objecthood infinitely more compelling than would otherwise be the case. In this respect Davis' new paintings represent not only an inspired resuscitation of, but a deep break with, traditional illusionism: in the latter paint on the surface of the canvas creates the illusion of objects in space; while in Davis' paintings whatever makes the illusion is not, it seems, situated on, or at, the surface at *all*. (The illusion of objecthood is intensified still more by the way in which the colored plastic — in which Davis has also mixed mirror flake, aluminum powder, bronze powder and pearl essence — not merely represents but imitates the materiality of solid things.) Conversely, the surface of these paintings is experienced in unique isolation from the illusion. It has been prized loose from the rest of the painting — as though what hangs on the wall is the surface alone. In Davis' new paintings a detached surface coexists with a detached illusion. (In this respect his paintings are the opposite of Olitski's, in which there is "an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface."<sup>2</sup>) Indeed, the detached surface coincides with the detached illusion: which is why the question of whether or not the shape of that surface holds or stamps itself out does not arise. Davis deliberately — and, I think, profoundly — heightens one's sense of the mutual independence of surface and illusion by rather sharply beveling the edges of his paintings from behind. This means that even when the beholder is not standing directly in front of a given painting, no support of any kind can be seen. The surface is felt to be exactly that, a surface, and nothing more. It is not, one might say, the surface of anything — except, of

course, of a painting.

Moreover, Davis' surface is some thing new in painting: not because it is shiny and reflects light — that was also true of the varnished surfaces of the Old Masters — but because what one experiences as surface in these paintings is that reflectance and nothing more. The precise degree of reflectance is important. If the painting is too shiny the surface is emphasized at the expense of the illusion; and this in turn under mines the independence of both. At the same time, Davis' paintings make transparency important as never before: not because their surfaces are experienced as transparent — one does not, I want to say, look through so much as past them<sup>3</sup> — but because the layers of colored plastic behind their surfaces vary in opacity. The relation between the surface and the rest of a transparent object is different from that between the surface and the rest of an opaque one: roughly, in the former case it is as though the beholder can see all of the object, not just the portion that his eyesight touches. In Davis' new work this difference becomes important to painting for the first time, by making possible, or greatly strengthening, the relation between surface and illusion that I have tried to describe.

Finally, I want at least to touch on the character of the illusionism in these paintings. Despite its dependence on the rigorous application of two-point perspective, it, too, is new in painting. Roughly, the illusion is of something one takes to be a square slab (some portions of which have been removed), turned so that one of its corners points in the general direction of the beholder, and seen from above. What seems to me of special interest is this: the illusion is such that one simply assumes that the projected slab is horizontal, as though laying on the ground; but this means that



- **Two-Ninths Gray**, 1966, 72 x 131 1/4 inches, Polyester Resin, Fiberglass, and Wood.  
RD#: PTG 032, Location Unknown (2000)

looking down at it could be managed only from a position considerably above both the slab itself and the imaginary ground-plane it seems to define. Moreover, the beholder is not only *suspended above* the slab; he is simultaneously *tilted* toward it — otherwise he would not be in a position to look down at the slab at all. In Davis' new paintings the illusion of objecthood does not excavate the wall so much as it dissolves the ground under one's feet: as though experiencing the surface and the illusion independently of one another were the result of standing in radically different physical relations to them. Davis' illusionism addresses itself not just to eyesight but to a sense that might be called one of *directionality*. There have been strong intimations of such a development in recent painting, notably that of Noland and Olitski; in fact, I recently claimed of Olitski's spray paintings that what is appealed to is not our ability in locating objects (or failing to) but in *orienting ourselves* (or failing to).<sup>4</sup> This seems to me dramatically true of Davis' new paintings as well.

The possibilities which Davis has been able to realize in his first plastic paintings still seem to me scarcely imaginable. The possibilities which they open up belong to the future of painting.

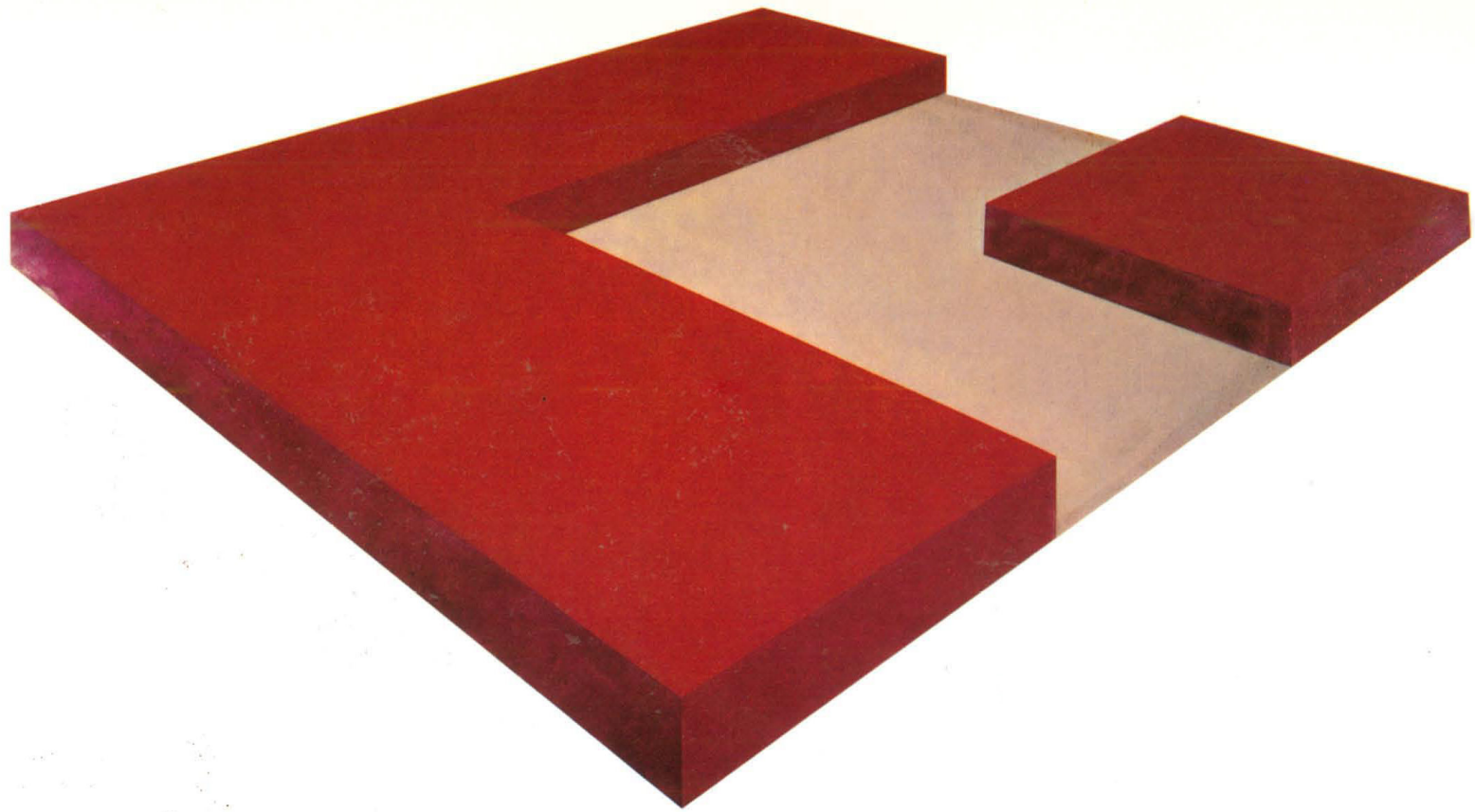
1. *ARTFORUM*, Vol. 5, No. 3, November 1966 (reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, 1998).

2. At the moment I wrote this article, I had evidently not yet arrived at the argument of "Art and Objecthood" (reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, 1998); had I done so, I probably would have found a way to characterize Davis' paintings other than in terms of an illusion of "objecthood," a loaded notion in the essay I was soon to begin.  
—M.F., 1996

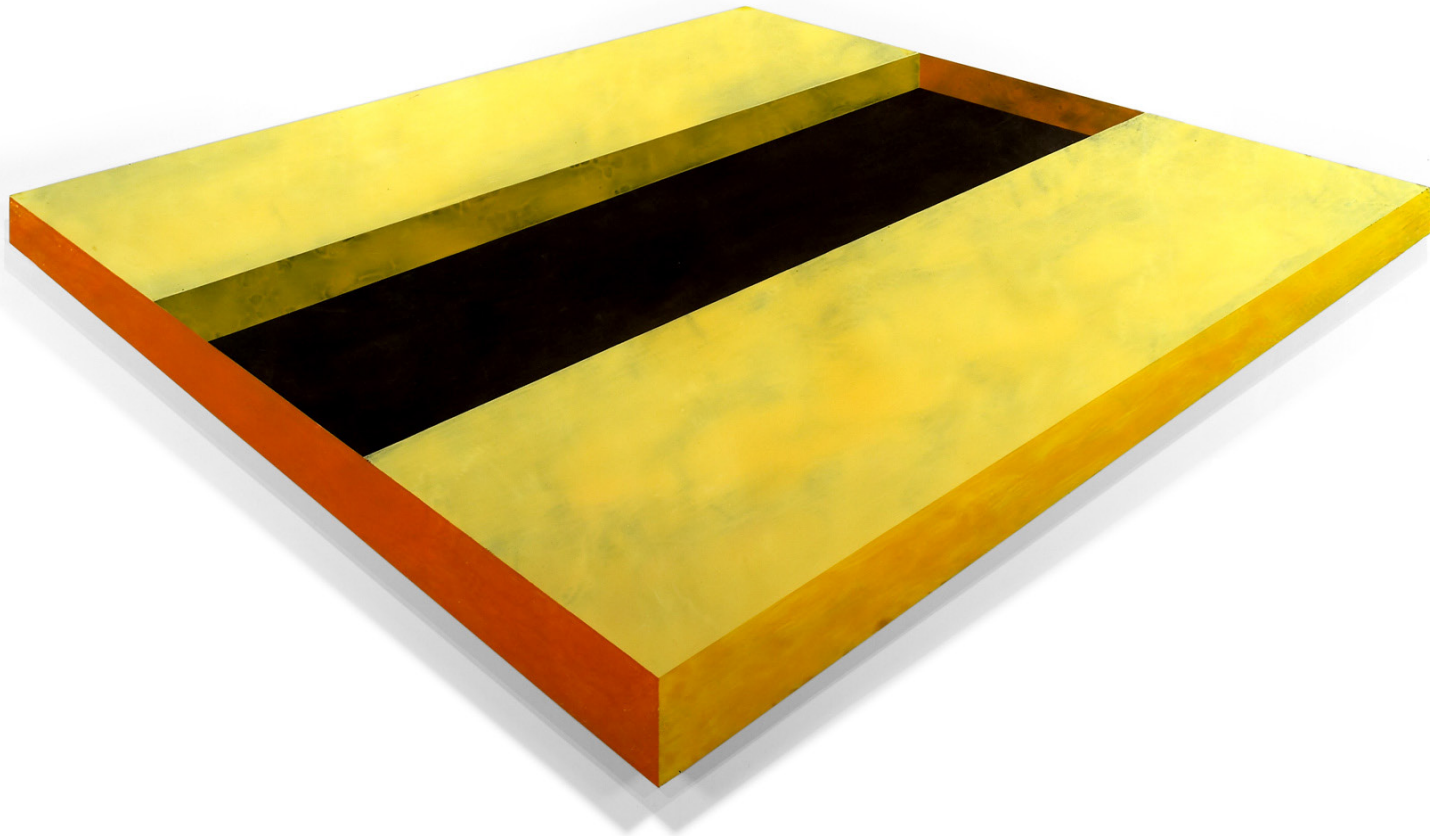
3. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the 1966 Venice Biennial." in *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957—1969*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993. p. 230).

4. Not the way one looks past an object so much as the way one looks past a reflection.

5. In the catalog essay to Olitski's exhibition (reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, 1998) at the Corcoran Gallery.



**Six-Ninths Red**, 1966, 72 X 131 1/4 inches, Polyester Resin, Fiberglass, and Wood.  
RD# PTG 036. Collection of The Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, NM



**Two-Thirds Yellow**, 1966, 72 X 131  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches, Polyester Resin, Fiberglass, and Wood.  
RD#: PTG 038. Collection of The Jewish Museum, NYC, gifted via The Barnett and  
Annalee Newman Foundation.

**RONALD DAVIS** was born in Santa Monica, California on June 29, 1937. Raised in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Engineering student at the University of Wyoming 1955-56. Worked as a sheet metal mechanic 1957-59. Found his calling as a painter in 1959 at the age of 22. Studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, 1960-64. Started painting as an abstract expressionist, the influences and elements of which would be incorporated into many of his future paintings. Yale-Norfolk Summer School of Music and Art grantee, 1962. In 1963 began to paint in a hard edge, geometric, optical style. Began showing his paintings at museums and galleries in 1964. Moved to Los Angeles. First one-man show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery, LA in 1965. Made geometric shaped illusionistic paintings using colored polyester resins and fiberglass from 1966 until 1972. These paintings laid to rest the demand that important abstract paintings not be illusionary. Colored planes of splattered resin created the surface of pictures that depict deep space reminiscent of Renaissance perspectives, paradoxically retaining the flatness, composition, and color of Modernist painting. Instructor, University of California, Irvine, 1966. First one-man show in New York at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1966 followed by a solo show at Leo Castelli in 1968. Paintings acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Gallery, London, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Chicago Art Institute in 1968. National Endowment for the Arts grantee, 1968. Purchased a Buchla synthesizer and began to do sound sculpture and compose electronic music. In 1972 built a 5000 square foot studio/residence in Malibu, CA. collaborating in its design with architect Frank Gehry. Learned silkscreening, lithography, etching, and papermaking from Ken Tyler at Gemini, GEL and Tyler Graphics, Mt. Kisco, New York. Returned to acrylic paint on canvas in 1973. In 1975-78 painted the large scale, geometric, and illusionistic Snapline Series. Painted Floater Series 1978-79; Flatland Series, 1980-81; Object Paintings, 1982; Music Series of abstract expressionist paintings in 1983-85; Freeway and Freeline Series 1987; Spiral Series 1988. Began designing paintings using Macintosh computers in 1985 using the 3-D rendering and animation programs *Modeler* and *Presenter Pro*. Continued intensive involvement with computers using them as his primary sketching and drawing tool. Traveled to Taos, NM in 1990 and purchased a 10 acre lot north of Taos on the Hondo Mesa. Began building a complex of six living and studio buildings, the designs based upon the Navajo dwelling hogan, collaborating with architect Dennis Holloway and anthropologist Charley Cambridge. Discovered the relationship between the Hogan corbeled dome and prior work. Built a number of Hogan Frame *Spirit House* log sculptures and showed the 18' diameter X 12' high octagon *Hondo Hogan* in Los Angeles in 1991. Sold Malibu studio and permanently moved to Arroyo Hondo, NM in 1993. Davis returned to shaped pictures in 1996, using the encaustic (wax) medium and pigment color on illusionistic compositions on shaped wood constructions designed on his Power Macintosh. These paintings continued Davis' preoccupation with "painting as an illusion of an object," a style that has been called "Abstract Illusionism" and related to the style labeled "Lyrical Abstraction."

• **WORKS IN PERMANENT COLLECTIONS:** Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art, N. Y. C.; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Tate Gallery, London; San Antonio Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Art; Whitney Museum, N. Y. C.; Virginia Museum of Art, Richmond; Phoenix Art Museum; The Art Institute of Chicago; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.; Denver Art Museum; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D. C.; Wallraff-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany; Palm Springs Desert Museum, California; and numerous other collections.

• **ONE-MAN SHOWS:** A total of 57 Solo Exhibitions including: Leo Castelli, New York, 1968, 1970, 1974, 1976; Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1979; Asher/Faure, Los Angeles, 1982, 1983, 1984; John Berggruen, San Francisco, 1973, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1982; Kasmin Gallery, London, 1968, 1971; Galleria Dell'Ariete, Milano, Italy, 1972; Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, 1971; Oakland Museum, Oakland, California, retrospective, 1976; Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, 1979; University of Nevada, Reno, 1977; San Diego State University, 1980; Trump's, LA, 1985; New York Academy of Sciences, NY, 1986; Sedona Art Center, Arizona, 1987; BlumHelman Los Angeles, Santa Monica, California, 1987, 1989, 1991; BlumHelman New York, 1981, 1984, 1988; DEL Fine Arts, Taos, NM 1992; Jaquelin Loyd Contemporary, Taos, New Mexico, January 1998.

• **GROUP EXHIBITIONS:** Included in numerous local, national, and international shows since 1963 including: *Painting and Drawing Annual*, 1963, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA (First Place Award); *II Biennial American de Art*, 1964, Cordoba, Argentina; *A New Aesthetic*, 1967, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D. C.; *4 Documenta*, 1968, Kasel, Germany; *31st Corcoran Annual*, 1968, Washington, D. C.; *XXXVI Venice Biennial*, Venice, Italy, 1972; *71st American Exhibition*, Chicago Art Institute, 1974; *Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture of the 60's and the 70's from the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection*, 1975, University of Pennsylvania; *The Theodora Pottle Memorial Collection of Contemporary Art*, 1978, Macomb Public Library, Macomb, IL; *American Painting of the 1970's*, 1979, Albright-Knox, Buffalo, NY; *Reality of Illusion*, 1979, Denver Art Museum; *Art in Los Angeles - 17 Artists in the Sixties*, 1981, LA County Museum of Art, *Gemini, GEL: Art and Collaboration*, 1984, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; *Prints from Tyler Graphics*, 1985, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; *Digital Visions: Computers and Art*, 1987-89, Everson Art Museum, Syracuse, NY; *New Mexico Sculpture*, Stables Gallery, Taos, NM, 1991; *Seven Painters*, 1995, Nicholas Alexander Gallery, NY.

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**RONALD DAVIS'** resin and fiberglass paintings of the late sixties laid to rest the demand that important abstract painting not be illusionary. Colored planes of splattered and solid colored resin were painted face down on a Formica table mold, so that the color resides behind the actual glass-like surfaces of the shaped pictures. The illusionary and depicted deep space was inspired by the Renaissance perspective of Paolo Uccello, the perspective studies of Marchel Duchamp, as well as the galactic drips and splatters of Jackson Pollock, the striated canyons of Clyfford Still, and the push-pull of Hans Hoffman. His mastery of the language of color, perspective geometry, space, time, and his virtuoso paint handling lend profound poetry to his work. His work can convey extreme wit, sensitivity, and at the same time a no-holds barred toughness.

His paintings are a complex strata of paradoxes. They combine new to painting surf board technology with ferocious Jackson Pollock like freedom, Renaissance perspective, Duchamp's visual puns, and Piet Mondrian's balanced precision. Davis brought to reality the beginning of a new age of the painterly possibilities of post-Einsteinian concepts. Influences of Ronald Davis' splattered, geometric, resin paintings of the middle and late sixties can be seen everywhere in today's art world.

Ronald Davis has been exhibiting his work since 1963. He has had a total of 58 one-man shows in major galleries and museums all over the world. His work has appeared in countless major group exhibitions and his paintings are in important museum and private collections all around the world.

— Ronnie Landfield, artist, NYC  
from catalog for *Seven Painters*  
Nicholas Alexander Gallery, NYC



# RONALD DAVIS

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