



Larry Zox: Stephen Haller Gallery

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If you're interested in modernism's effluence, you might take a look at the work of Wade Guyton, Carrie Moyer, Sam Durant, Jorge Pardo, or Milena Dragicevic. Taken as a group, these artists address both modernism's formal emphases and that quintessentially modern idea that vanguard art should go hand-in-hand with vanguard politics. Consider, for example, Barnett Newman, in 1962: "Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly, it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism." It's a long way from this kind of idealism to today's artists; or to the work of Larry Zox, a largely forgotten painter whose career was the subject of a recent thumbnail survey at Stephen Haller Gallery.

A third-generation postwar American abstractionist, Zox started his career in the early '60s with assemblages of painted scraps of paper stapled onto upson board that nod to the manly messiness of his AbEx forebears. In the years that followed, he evolved a mature, even iconic, style--something like a poor man's Frank Stella with the heart of Morris Louis. It featured simple, hard-edge geometric shapes painted in acrylic on linen and unprimed canvas, with ribbons of raw fabric disrupting symmetries and slicing up unexpected juxtapositions of color. In series based on signature shapes including "diamonds," "scissors," and pinched-parallelogram "geminis"--choice examples of each were on view--Zox explored the painterly issues of the day (a systematic approach, the materiality of medium and support) while maintaining a modest idiosyncrasy. Here, in the provinces of the post-painterly, one makes one's mark by leaving graphite lines visible, by recklessly yanking the masking tape off the canvas, and with a skillful palette. The coyly asymmetrical Double Gemini: Isabelle Miter, 1969-70, for example, pulses because of the way Zox juxtaposes tangerine, orange, blood orange, mint green, bright green, and maroon. In the long

run--especially when, as occasionally here, the works are framed in natural birch--the results of all Zox's deliberation end up looking like '70s interior decor. Decades after its launch, the vanguard's arrow plunges to earth, lodging in the wall over a rec room's modular sofa, or behind a wet bar.

More successful, a delicious red, black, and cream composition titled Banner, 1962, shows Zox looking back to the original avant-garde. Perhaps the Russian reference is a rebuke to the political pretensions of Newman et al. Mostly, though, Zox is just painting, and not making a show of it, either. The repressed drive behind today's autopsying of the modern, stem to '60s stern, may lie here: neither in a wistfulness for the marriage of art and politics nor in a yearning for a vigorous Left, but in a curiosity about what it must have been like to make art before Conceptualism dissolved the traditional disciplines; when an examination of history could be as simple as a glance over the shoulder, resulting in just another variation in a hybrid, decadent, patient, deadpan, more or less unjustifiable practice. It seems not so long ago, yet the mindset is very far away.

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