

REVISIONS: ANOTHER ALAN UGLOW AND TED STAMM'S MINIMALISMS

BY SAUL OSTROW



Ted Stamm, 78SW-9, 1978, oil on canvas, 32 x 20 inches 81.3 x 50.8 cm
© The Estate of Ted Stamm, Photo credit: Jason Wyche, courtesy of the estate of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

In this moment it appears, along with West Coast minimalism (Finish Fetish and Light and Space) the post-minimalist tendencies of the 70s and 80s are ready to return to center stage. Much of this work came to be marginalized when the conceptualizing sequences of Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Post-Modernism were established as defining the late 20th century. The artists associated with these subsidiary endeavors represent a wide range of approaches and practices, principally contesting minimalism's "pure", formalist, machine aesthetic. In hindsight it now appears that there were actually a number of different formalisms, which informed a number of different minimalism - for instance reductivist geometry, and concern for objecthood played a significant role in the work of such diverse group of painters as Walter Darby Bannard and Elizabeth Murray, Ralph Humphrey, Paul Feeley, Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe, and Doug Ohlson. These artists and others whose approaches stemmed from the geometric/ constructivist traditions were seemingly overshadowed because their works tend to exploit, and incorporate qualities which, at the time, were thought to represent abstract painting's dead-end.

Though under-acknowledged, Uglow and Stamm might best be considered artists whose primary audience are other artists and art world aficionados. Both had noted careers; exhibiting extensively in Europe as well as the States, yet neither were big

names. Why their stature in the community of artists does not translate into economic and institutional success is too complex a question to go into here; suffice to say that in the critical environment of the 70s their work just could not be understood, yet interest in it persisted as representing a minority report on what best typifies abstract painting's alternatives in the period of its supposed demise.

Alan Uglow (b. 1942, Luton, England) and Stamm (b. 1944, Brooklyn, NY) both died in New York City, at the ages of 69 and 40, respectively. Following the aesthetic trend of minimalism, both artists faced the challenge of sustaining abstract painting as an experiential medium. Uglow's approach tended toward the pictorial; his early paintings consisted of asymmetrical compositions of slightly curved stripes with short horizontal barbs that parallel to vertical edges of the canvas. These two slender elements were embedded in a subtly brushed monochrome background. Though austere in format, Uglow appeared to be ostensibly committed to a somewhat contradictory impersonal irrationality. Inversely, Stamm, who is best known for his shaped canvases, appears to be concerned with painting's object-hood, yet he never abandons his concern for material surfaces, and a residual optical illusionism. Though their respective works seem to be ordered by a discreet thematic series, the individual works appear to have been arrived at by empirical means. As such, their works do not seem to subscribe to the dominant critical criteria and goals of their era.

It is apparent that what underlies Uglow and Stamm's respective approaches is a shared understanding of abstract painting as an object of perception, rather than a sign, symbol, or a mode of expression. In this, Uglow and Stamm's works echo the highly conceptualized approach of Blinky Palermo, who was also strategically engaged with questions of seriality and difference, materiality, and intuition. In turn, their respective strategies of asymmetry, nuanced surfaces, non-associative compositions, and non-descriptive or systemized color appear to stem from the more subjective aspects of Malevich, Mondrian, and Newman's works. As with those artists, there is no linear course of development indicated in Uglow and Stamm's works as they address and re-address differing themes, using similar vocabularies that resulted in each iteration, introducing new terms and conditions.

Uglow and Stamm's exhibitions remind us that there was an array of practices that sought to establish abstract painting in its object-hood. Relative to this, Uglow and Stamm used geometric matrices as a means to present their viewers with traces of experiences,

rather than observations, or statements of fact. By resisting composition, systems, literalism, and illusionism, both these painters sought to register the liminal to move the viewer toward intuiting the nature of painting as both an object and an image. Thus, no element comes to have a habitual identity, nor a fixed function as opposed to the literalism and inherent materialism that defines the principle characteristics of minimalism. The artists move away from and differentiate themselves from Mangold, Baer, and Stella's pictorial rhetoric premised on conceptual, rather than perceptual systems.

While Uglow and Stamm's works had much in common with the types of geometric, and hard-edge abstraction being done at the time, what marks the differences of their work is that both these painters sought to establish abstract painting as something sensuously by emphasizing touch, materiality, and perception as embodied experience. In turn, their unlikely and incongruous uses of subtle perceptual shifts, which evolve from and then dissolves the reductive/essentialist syntax of geometric abstraction, are evidence of commitment to preserving the subjective. This, in turn, can be understood to be a manifestation of their respective resistance to reducing painting to a mode of problem solving that would result in endgame strategies.

By exploiting the concreteness of abstract painting, rather employing it within the context of an exercise in self-referentiality and indexicality, they utilized a vocabulary of refined visual effects to articulate a sense of presence and specificity, rather than a transcendent otherworldliness, or commonplaceness. They tested the limitations of what might be thought to be abstract painting in an experiential range. Each subsequently developed practices that deployed chance, reproduction and repetition as well as a number of various conceptual devices. These practices permitted them to articulate painting as a vehicle for the experience of being a senescent being in a world of artifacts. By these means Uglow and Stamm each independently engaged and explicated the ambiguous nature of the abstract painting's concreteness, while reformulating how its specificity might be established. While the conceptual strategies Stamm employed remained confined to the studio, Uglow's practice diversified in the 90's. As can be seen in the Zwirner show while he continued to make rigorously minimalist paintings, he also began to investigate other issues that stemmed from his interest in soccer as well as his concern for the self-referentiality of representation.

In an age of impersonal spectacle, by focusing on the small

pleasures of body, vision, and touch, Uglow and Stamm's work articulates the essential and qualitative, in opposition to the advantageous and quantifiable. In this aspect, their works represent a form of dissent from those instrumental and institutional logics that would standardize everything. They did this with rigor, rather than engaging in the self-indulgence associated with painter-lines and self-expression. They are similar to John McLaughlin, whose austere grid-based paintings also exude a suave, material sensuousness. Comparably, their work is not impossible to appreciate in reproduction - it is difficult because its intensity and subliminal affect of the object on the viewer. The materiality of the canvas, the hard-won substantiality of the painted surface, and their crucial scale has come to be lost when the paintings are represented as merely images. It was by these material means that these artists sought to induce a phenomenological experience of self, and in doing so offers up an alternative perspective as to how a reductive vocabulary and the issues of object-hood, literalism, and non-relational compositions may be deployed to produce a type of specificity that lead to indeterminate ends. It is in this affect, and the skill and insight they brought to their tasks that the growing significance of Uglow and Stamm's works lies.

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