The New York Times

Don Dudley

By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 6, 2011

I-20 Gallery

557 West 23rd Street

Chelsea

Through Feb. 19

The exceptionally handsome arrangements of sleek, monochrome panels in this show might be taken for the works of a canny young Neo-Minimalist. Turns out, Mr. Dudley, 80, was an active player in the turn to hedonistic simplicity in painting in the late 1960s and early '70s, first as a Finish Fetishist on the West Coast and then, after moving to New York in the early '70s, in the Mondrian to Brice Marden mode. Mr. Dudley was in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1972 Annual, devoted to contemporary American painting.

The basic components of the works in the I-20 exhibition — Mr. Dudley's first solo since 1985 — were created in the late '60s and early '70s. Each of two murals, made by nailing short lengths of painted Homasote to the wall, creates a field of parallel lines: an octagon in satiny red folded into a corner and a metallic green pyramid. They have the optical punch of Frank Stella's early paintings.

The main attractions are grid-based configurations (here newly organized) of narrow, vertical metal panels, each about 4 by 1 feet, and bent back at the top and bottom edges so they float slightly off the walls. Panels organized in a nine-over-nine block are flawlessly spray-painted shades of silvery blue.

Another piece — consisting of two deep-purple panels centered one above the other and flanked by cream-colored ones, and four more ochre panels outermost — has the structure of an altarpiece. As if made for a Euclidean mystery cult, it is classically modern and modernistically timeless.

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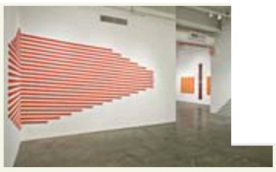
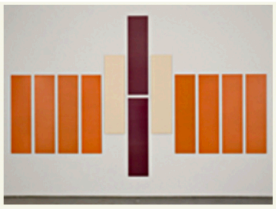


Don Dudley at I-20, installation view with *Red Corner*, 1969, left

Don Dudley
Untitled (Aluminum Module)
1974/2010
I-20

Don Dudley
Green Triangle
1968
I-20



Don Dudley
Untitled (Aluminum Module)
1974/2010
I-20

Chris Dorland, Don Dudley and Shirley Irons at I-20
Photo by Patrick McMullan

I was walking across West 23rd Street on Saturday night and ran into Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz. "I thought you were snowbound," exclaimed Roberta, and I explained that I had whisked into town for the (delayed) opening reception for 80-year-old Finish Fetish artist Don Dudley. "We didn't know about it," Roberta responded and soon the two critics were conversing animatedly with the tall, majestic Mr. Dudley.

A few months ago, artist Chris Dorland, a tagger and Finish Fetish artist himself, went for dinner at the loft of one of his former professors at SUNY Purchase, painter Shirley Irons. While they were discussing Dorland's wall commission, recently unveiled at Lincoln Center, Shirley's husband, Don Dudley, who has been a professional furniture maker for 30 years, announced, "You know I was a painter, too." He took Dorland into his storage space and began to unwrap pieces that he had not taken our since the 1960s. Chris Dorland told me, "Even his wife was unaware of their existence."

Dorland was astounded at a subtle body of work, done on aluminum panels, which the Los Angeles-born Dudley had exhibited in Germany in the 1960s. Dorland immediately phoned one of his mentors, curator Simon Watson, who soon arrived at the Dudley loft and realized he had stumbled on a treasure trove of minimalist masterpieces. Watson takes up the story, "I immediately made a list of five Chelsea galleries and considered the pros and cons of showing Dudley's 1960s work at each of them. I selected I-20 gallery, because the gorgeous afternoon winter light coming off the Hudson gave this classic California work the right illumination."

A rave review from Ken Johnson followed in the *New York Times*. For someone who has shunned the limelight, Don Dudley enjoyed his star turn immensely last Saturday night. Even more astounding than the actual show was a suite of Dudley drawings, which I-20 Gallery director Jonathan LeVoi unveiled in the back room for artist Meghan Boody, camera ace Patrick McMullan, Rochester dealer Tippi Watson and half a dozen collectors.

Consisting of rows of vertical rectangles on deep, sensuous paper, each of the ten drawings is a distinct and different examination of color progression: some of them primaries, some meditations on darkness, others a delicate mix of sublime whites and lavenders. The conscientious craft of these pieces takes your breath away like a fine wine and, though they echo Ellsworth Kelly and John McCracken, the Dudley drawings stand, as a visual experience, completely on their own.

I mentioned to Don Dudley that the statuesque presentations of color reminded me of works by Robert Moskowitz and Anne Truitt. He was pleased. "Anne Truitt and I traded drawings in 1972. She understood the affinity of our work." The Dudley discovery is the kind of optimal adventure that many of us in the art world live for. It is especially pleasing that such a dignified and sparkling gentleman is its beneficiary.

CHARLIE FINCH is co-author of *Most Art Sucks: Five Years of Coagula* (Smart Art Press).

Art in America

REVIEWS MAR. 18, 2011

Don Dudley

NEW YORK,
at I-20

by Sarah Schmerler

This exhibition marked Don Dudley's first solo outing since 1985, and an impressive array of catalogues from the (now 80-year-old) artist's past exhibitions was fanned out on the gallery's desk. They largely documented group shows, from 1972 to 1989, in which Dudley appeared along with some of his better-known contemporaries—Richard Artschwager, Jennifer Bartlett, Anthony Caro.

The catalogues were yellowing, but the works on the wall—eight ambitious, Minimalist-inspired geometric pieces and six abstract Finish Fetish paintings on gently curved aluminum panels—felt fresh, optically powerful and utterly relevant. They made a case for the direct, optical pleasure that simple, well-wrought, color-based works (completely lacking in backward-looking irony or heavy-handed conceptualism) hold for contemporary viewers, no matter the work's provenance or the artist's age. Put another way: more octogenarian artists ought to grace Chelsea's walls.

Pieces ranged from 1966 to 1979, with one 1974 series reconfigured for I-20.

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Throughout his career, Dudley has cho- sen his materials and methods judiciously, achieving complex effects through impressively simple means. The Finish Fetish works, the earliest in the show, have a decidedly West Coast feel (indeed, the artist lived in California in the 1960s when he made them). Matte, pale colors have been applied in slow, subtle gradations, which seem to blend and change in relation to your point of view and the gallery's ambient, natural light. (According to gallery literature, Dudley used Murano automotive enamel that, when sprayed onto surfaces, bonds at a 45-degree angle, "allowing for maximum light refraction.") *Lavender Prism* (1966–67), for instance, is a 7-by-13⁄4-foot tapered rectangle of the titular color. At its center, rainbow hues (red/orange, yellow/white, blue/purple) appear in thin bands.

The rigid geometries, repeating patterns and bold, opaque colors of "Untitled (aluminum module)," 1974/2010, a series of thin-gauge aluminum panels (each 463⁄4 by 12 inches and crafted by Dudley after his move to New York City in the early 1970s), contrast with the "eye-of-the-beholder" vibe of the Finish Fetish works. In one piece, two deep maroon modules are stacked vertically and flanked by a bright white module on either side. Another consists of 18 panels in cooler hues of pale blue, dark blue and gray. All the panels in this series are interchangeable; they can be (and have been) configured to respond to a particular space.

Best, however, are the installations Dudley made in the late 1970s using 2-by- 8-inch pieces of Homasote (fiberboard made of recycled paper) slathered with a single, solid color of acrylic paint. He assembles them like "bricks" to create large shapes on the wall. The 20-foot-wide *Red Corner* (1979) contains 23 red rows that span one of the gallery's corners to form an irregular octagon. *Green Triangle* (1978) is an 8-foot-high pyramid shape in pale green. Not a single pencil line was in evidence on the wall behind either of these painstaking installations. The payoff: form and color that seem to float of their own accord.

east of borneo

January 26, 2011

Lost Opportunities: The Early Work of Don Dudley

by Saul Ostrow

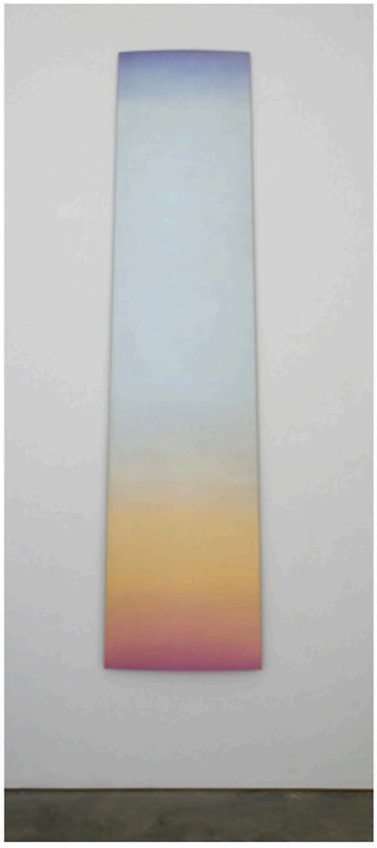
Don Dudley, *Murano II*, 1967. Acrylic lacquer on aluminum, 22.5 x 22.5 in. Photos: Cary Whittier. All images courtesy of the artist and I-20 Gallery, New York.

Last spring I went to a dinner in New York at the loft of the artist Don Dudley. In the seventies he made some great Minimalist works that literalized flatness as structure as well as surface, and he exhibited a modular piece at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972. By the eighties he was exploring the space between painting, sculpture, and design by producing object-like works that embodied a sense of imminent functionality. A selection of Dudley's work from 1966-79 is currently on view at I-20 gallery in New York, his first solo show in 25 years. I'm not sure how, but the conversation that night drifted around to the subject of Dudley's having come east in 1968 from LA. This was perhaps a strange time for a young artist to leave, just at the moment

when Southern California was emerging with an art world identity of its own.

There was a new sensibility developing, an attitude that was characterized as “cool,” and broadcast an in-your-face hedonism at odds with the darker stance affected in New York. On the East Coast, artists inhabited abandoned manufacturing spaces and tended to identify with the workers in the old iron and steel industries of the rust belt. In Los Angeles, by contrast, artists were more aligned with small, specialized contractors in the aerospace, automobile, and furniture-building industries. They were experimenting with new materials and finishes—plastics and resins, molded wood, aerosol paints—to make work that examined the phenomena of space and light, the forms of an car-dependent mass culture. These artists ranged from Larry Bell to Robert Irwin, Peter Alexander to Craig Kauffman, Billy Al Bengston to Ed Ruscha. Many of them showed with the resurgent Ferus Gallery, by this time no longer a beat collective but an ambitious commercial enterprise. **1** These diverse artists were united by the principles of color, materiality, precise craftsmanship, and intellectual rigor. In the midsixties Dudley was a young artist trying to break into this scene, finding it more closed than he would expect.

After spending a year and a half in Mexico, Dudley and his wife and children had returned to San Diego in 1959, where Dudley found a job working at the nearby La Jolla Art Museum. He exhibited his work around La Jolla, but in 1964 they decided to move back to LA (his birthplace). He continued to make artwork but couldn’t get anybody to take much interest in it, so he decided he needed a new start in a new city. He loaded up a station wagon with everything that would fit and put the balance of his work from 1958 to 1966 into storage. His intention was to give New York a year and then come back if things didn't work out. Well, things did work out—as evidenced by the shows he quickly got. The problem was that he couldn’t afford to continue to store his work in Los Angeles or to have it shipped, so he had a friend document the pieces and then destroy them, following the example of his fellow San Diego–to–Los Angeles outsider, John Baldessari. **2**



Don Dudley, *Skysnare*, 1966-67. Acrylic lacquer on aluminum, 84 x 21 in.

Knowing this story, my fellow dinner guests and I were all interested in finding out what kind of work the young Don Dudley had been making in his brief Los Angeles stint. So, Don went into the storage area in his apartment and pulled out a glassine-wrapped work from the period, one of the pieces he had fit into his station wagon all those years before. What emerged from the packing material appeared to be a monochrome spray painting on a rectilinear metal support, whose surface was slightly convex. It was pristine, and looked as if it could have been made yesterday. Most significantly, the piece did not carry a sense of déjà vu—it was not familiar at all. What Don had done in his own unique way was synthesize LA’s sixties aesthetic and intellectual concerns into a single plane of color. If Dudley’s painting had any affinities, it was to Robert Irwin’s dot paintings, and his disks from 1966–69, or David Novros’s fiberglass modular paintings, and the cast-resin sculptures of Peter Alexander. **3**

The story does not end here, though. Dudley was planning to hang some of these works in his loft on the occasion of his eightieth birthday party. After some further discussion I offered to host the party and exhibition at my house. The resulting installation included ten works, all of which are are on aluminum that is very slightly convex and is supported from behind by a thin wood structure.

The works are modest in size, ranging from squares (22 by 22 inches) to tall (84-inch) verticals whose rectilinear forms slightly taper from 22 inches at the bottom to 19 inches at the top. The vertical edges of all the works are very thin, so rather than protruding they hug the wall. In this manner Dudley counters the thickening of the stretcher bar that began with Jasper Johns and Frank Stella as a means of emphasizing painting's objecthood, and which Tony Delap was using at that time to illusionistic ends.

Dudley's works appear at first to be monochromes, but they really aren't. The colors range from a decoratively appealing palette of whites, to saturated yellows and violet and blue metallic (metal flack-looking) pigments. Liminal shifts of color and tone produce noticeably different spatial and perceptual effects. In part this is because Dudley used industrial lacquers with a Murano antireflective coating, whose application in differing directions catches the light in a distinct manner. The destabilizing effect of the paint, the shape, and the convex surface emphasize the integral relationship between each painting's physical size, materiality, composition, and form.

Don Dudley, *Sky Prism*, 1966-67. Acrylic lacquer on aluminum, 21 x 21 in.

The slightly bowed surface causes shifts in color, or appears to. In some cases, such as in *Sky Prism*, or the vertical *Violet Prism*, a spectral effect (or halation: a bright patch of light) has been painted into them. In *Murano I*, *II*, and *III*, the color shifts respectively take place at the edges or inversely down the center. These effects at first look as if they are a result of reflection or refraction due to the slight bowing of the work's surface, rather than Dudley's intentional intervention into the literal nature of the work. The one exception to this formula is *Skysnare*, a lyric, multicolor, almost Rothkoesque vertical work whose soft-edge transitions from orange, to yellow, to white to blue from bottom to top push the work in a direction where object, optical

effect, and color transitions do not come together as an integrated transcendent whole.

Given Dudley's pared-down vocabulary and ostensible anti-illusionism or literalist approach, we might think of him as a formalist. Yet his works articulate a very different type of formalism from the one being practiced on the East Coast at the time. These works' particular qualities move beyond the reductive definition of painting as object and process that was being advanced by Brice Marden and Robert Ryman, and instead encourage a more phenomenological or analytical understanding of painting (both the act and the thing) as being a complex assemblage of material characteristics and optical effects. Yet they are more physical and material than works by Robert Irwin.

The exciting thing about this group of works, beyond their aesthetic effect, is that they are a reminder of the multifaceted issues concerning color, surface, and materiality that stem from Minimalism's (and art concrete's) concern with the ambiguous nature of painting's objecthood. In turn, from these works one gets the sense of an important course within Minimalism as well as abstract painting that has gone unacknowledged and unexplored. This is not to imply that Dudley didn't follow the right path, given that the specific objects, which all deal with oblique observation of the seventies, are equally rich—and if things were reversed I would probably be bemoaning the fact that Dudley had followed the course indicated by these paintings, rather than the one he did.

COLOGNE

GALERIE THOMAS ZANDER

DON DUDLEY: "MODULAR SPACES"

● This arguably overdue European exhibition of Dudley's minimalist works included small watercolors, larger acrylic works, and installations made of parallel lines of tiles fixed to the wall, and was a triumph by any standard. Born in Los Angeles in 1930, Dudley is best known for his affiliation with the Finish Fetish movement of the 1960s. His monochrome works and color field paintings—handsome and rigorous responses to artists such as Jackson Pollock, Kenneth Noland, Robert Motherwell, and Frank Stella—remain perfectionist emblems of the era. In the early days of the exhibition several pieces by the artist, who also works with industrial construction materials such as aluminum and homasote, had already been reserved by European collectors and institutions, at prices from €50,000 to €95,000 ($64,000 to $122,000), while a large European foundation purchased a wall installation.

Skysnare II, L.A., 1966–67. Acrylic lacquer on aluminum, 84 x 21 in.