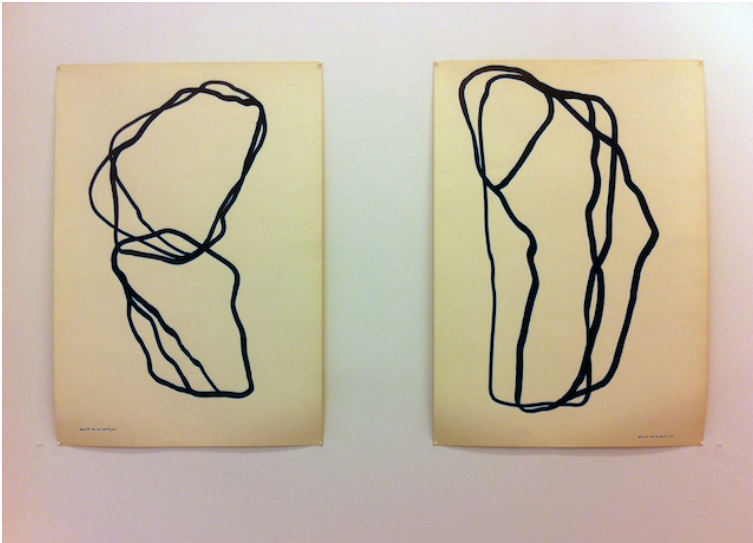


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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Undiscovered Territory: Will Horwitt's Objects in Space

by Thomas Micchelli on January 18, 2014



"Will Horwitt: Drawings from the 60's," installation view of two untitled drawings from 1965, ink on paper (all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

In 1965, when Will Horwitt was 31, the world was opening up for him. He won a Guggenheim Fellowship in sculpture, followed three years later by a Tiffany Purchase Grant. His work was beginning to attract the attention of heavyweight collectors and eventually it found its way into such major public collections as the Guggenheim, Hirshhorn, Albright Knox and Yale. By 1985 he was dead of lymphoma.

Six of the ten ink drawings in a beautifully focused show at Schema Projects, *Will Horwitt: Drawings from the 60's*, are from 1964; the others are from 1965. Together with three bronze sculptures from 1959, 1961–62, and 1972, they display an exquisite sensibility — elegant and unvarnished, seasoned and probing, restless and relaxed — whose erasure from the art world's consciousness appears to be as much an accident of fate as a vestige of the artist's predilection for self-effacement.

The gallery's website tells us that four years before he died, he wrote in a sketchbook, "to be, not to be seen." The ambiguity of that statement — is he talking about his art, himself or both? — floats upon the ephemeral, experiential nature of art, which is underscored by another quote: "Sculpture isn't about the object, it's about the space around it."

This may be viewed as a step toward the dematerialization of the art object, a trend that picked up speed in the mid-to-late-'60s. And, as if to parallel that movement, the earlier drawings in the show consist of solid abstract forms, while the later ones are linear. This contrast is not a curatorial choice but an indication of the artist's actual practice, in which massed brushstrokes of ink wash gave way to calligraphic black contours. It also encapsulates the viewer's experience, leading from an appreciation of form to a contemplation of non-form.



"Will Horwitt: Drawings from the 60's," installation view of three sculptures, "Curved Space" (1972), bronze; "Leda" (1961–62), bronze; "Sleep" (1959), bronze

Horwitt was a sculptor, and these are a sculptor's drawings. There is a graspable sense of weight and surface within the loose application of brush and ink that is not far removed from the fluid tactility of Rodin's watercolors. Horwitt's three black bronzes, grouped in one corner of the gallery on low pedestals or on the floor, are classically organic abstractions with clean lines and softly molded forms. While his sculpture has been linked to the early modernism of Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp as well as the surrealist-inflected abstractions of Isamu Noguchi, these three pieces seem to reject the sense of expansion found in much of the earlier sculptors' work.

Rather, they surrender to gravity and, through their simplicity of means, retreat into a dense compaction of material and its resultant activation of the surrounding space (in fact, the latest piece in the show, a squarish, softly rounded shape from 1972, indented across the middle like a pillow, is called "Curved Space").

This interchange between the grounded and the intangible has less to do with older forms of abstraction than it does with the work of an artist like Christopher Wilmarth, who was nine years younger but died two years after Horwith, committing suicide at the age of 44 while in treatment for depression.

Wilmarth combined geometric elements of wood, steel and bronze with blown, flat and curved glass. He endeavored to create a form of post-Minimalism infused with a self-professed spirituality and poetry (his well-known suite of etchings, *Breath* (1982), was based on seven poems by Stéphane Mallarmé), often planting his works on the floor so that the glass, standing upright, confronts the viewer both physically and metaphorically as a modern industrial material chosen for its quasi-immaterial properties as well as a literal spatial plane presenting both a barrier and a portal.

Like Wilmarth, Horwith assimilates Minimalism's formal interrogations while defying its materialist dictates. His sense of the object in space is physical without excluding the metaphorical, a layering of medium, surface and image that is even more apparent in his drawings than in his sculpture.

Four of the six drawings from 1964 are of blunt, blocky forms that wouldn't be out of place in the imagery that Philip Guston started developing half a decade later. The ink is watered down and brushed, soaked and sponged onto the paper, its colors evoking stone, clay, rust and blood. The forms are lumpen but not leaden, their surfaces shimmering with subtle shifts of translucent color.



Two of the ink wash drawings are of boulder-like objects; the other two feature an array of organic-looking shapes spread across the surface of the paper like rocks in landscape. The other two from '64 and the four from '65 resemble stones as well, but wireframe versions of them, with contour lines looping, bending and overlapping to create the shapes.

These drawings are distinctly different from the ink washes — as kinetic as the massed shapes are still. Despite having arisen from a similar impetus, the washes stay wedded to the page while the contour drawings shake free of constraints, breaking into a dervish-like astral dance.

What is especially striking about the line drawings are the lines themselves, which are roughly a half-inch in width and apparently made with Sumi ink. The densely pigmented blacks are so penetrating that, when you get up close, they seem to obliterate the surface of the paper, giving you the sensation of looking not at a line but into a void.

“Will Horwith: Drawings from the 60's,” installation view of four untitled drawings from 1964, ink on paper

Such an effect, though doubtlessly unintentional, accentuates the paradox of the contour line — the material mark as an imaginary interface between the illusion of form and the illusion of space — by lending the borderline its own sense of spatial depth and doubling, in a peculiar way, the implications of Horwith's statement that what matters is not the object but the space around it.

It would probably be a mistake to push this train of thought too far, but there has to be a material reason for the uncanny dynamism of these forms beyond their obvious graphic snap. Yes, our perception is shaded by the artist's death at 51, but the relative obscurity that followed his abbreviated career doesn't fully explain why his artwork feels like undiscovered territory — animated from within, following its own logic, pulsing with an inquisitiveness that concludes with an inescapable blankness. When we look at it, we may not be able to distinguish its fatalism from its rapture, but we can tell it is a record of moments that counted.

Will Horwith: Drawings from the 60's continues at Schema Projects (92 St Nicholas Ave, Bushwick/Ridgewood, Brooklyn) through tomorrow. (01/19)

<http://hyperallergic.com/103792/undiscovered-territory-will-horwitts-objects-in-space/>