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Small Judd show provides just a taste of his ambition

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Courtesy of John Berggruen Gallery

For several weeks, until its contemporary art auction Tuesday evening, Christie's had on view one of the great spring exhibitions in New York: 37 sculptures by Donald Judd (1928-1994) installed on two high floors of a midtown office building.

Twentieth-floor views on all sides drove home the shaping force of Manhattan architecture on Judd's sensibility. His mania for precision and his play with sculptures' internal forms and with the occlusions and disclosures of shifting viewing angles all seemed to express a will to redress the careless, arbitrary or servile details of the city's most durable structures.

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John Berggruen's presentation of a single late serial piece by Judd gives us faint feel for the artist's response to the world, despite the work consisting of 12 identical forms, variously colored, in extruded aluminum.

But the Judd pieces here do evoke his ambition to give structure to the experience of a space. The units' symmetric, channeled design in section also suggests an intended critique of sculpture in relief.

Viewed frontally, the dozen forms, hung at specified intervals and height, run the eye around the walls as if on rails. The channeled grid volume of each piece comes clear in an end-on view. Sight down two or more in a row and they seem to be piping light around the gallery periphery.

The 12 elements embody a common quality of Judd's mature work: his reliance on professional fabricators. That way of working meant no laxity on Judd's part. He was ferociously difficult to please, as the cold perfection of the work on view might suggest. The precision of Judd's sculpture has led people to see an idealizing impulse behind it. But Judd saw himself as empiricist and his work as sharpening the perceptions of a public addled by encountering falseness daily on every front, from advertising to architecture.

Judd sought explicitness and intelligibility, not content. The intake of clear vision would be content enough, could it be achieved. And that experience would not exclude perceptual illusion, contrary to what some critics have said, but would set illusion plainly against the stable background that supports it. Hence the emphasis on color that came late into Judd's work, including the piece on view.

Berggruen presents only a sliver of Judd's art, but it will begin to inform anyone who does not know his work firsthand.

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For instructive contrast, Berggruen has placed among the Judds several sculptures by Berkeley native John McCracken, long associated with Los Angeles, now living in New Mexico.

McCracken makes his work by hand and that difference is felt here, despite the seamless finish of his plank and column forms.

One dreadful piece, "KA-WHO-SO" (1985), a large plank mottled with candy-apple red and gold, nearly disfigures the show. It muddies a key sensation that McCracken's work can produce: the impression that it cannot be touched because its sleek resin finish will never dry.

A piece such as the deep blue plank "Path" (1988-92) plays this deceptive impression against its dumb reality as a flat rectangular beam leaned upright against a wall, giving it almost enough internal tension to qualify it as sculpture, even if the contemporary art context did not.

For yet more contrast, Berggruen has extended a small survey of Alexander Calder sculpture and drawings timed to coincide with "The Surreal Calder" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (through May 21).

An American immersed in the interwar Parisian art world, Calder had ideas about sculpture very different from the minimalists'. He saw it as a mode of invention not dissimilar to doodling, toy-making and folk art, though informed by the convergence of figurative tradition and industrial age materials.

Berggruen's selection touches several extremes of Calder's art: the most humorous, the smallest and the most formally challenging in terms he himself originated.

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Butterfield at Anglim: Consistency on an artist's part can look safe or rote in a society hooked on novelty. Some people probably view Deborah Butterfield's work the same way, as some do Judd's, because she has confined herself to one subject -- the horse -- for about 30 years. When will she move on?

Only someone who takes Butterfield's sculptures for generic inventions rather than portraits would ask. Horses as individuals, to anyone who knows them as Butterfield does, will always surpass the powers of sculpture to depict them.

Anyway, "depiction" only names the broad sense of Butterfield's task. Finding and assembly take much more effort, as her primary materials are scrap metal and deadwood.

Seeing in such scavenged stuff the makings of an animal portrait defines a special gift. In Butterfield's finest pieces, such as the small-scale bronze, "Gracie" (2006), the components seem to have assembled themselves magically into the likeness of an animal. Just try imagining it disassembled and facing the task of reconstructing it.

Butterfield complicates the representational depth of her work by casting its components (even the steel elements in one case) in bronze, which then requires masterly chasing and patina. "Gracie" makes an especially wonderful example because its stick forms look like brush and ink strokes drawn in space by a fluent hand.

The current show presents Butterfield at the top of her form, in more than one scale, but it contains signs of struggle. Not even she hits the target every time. Often enough, though.