

Fx Reflects

Kenneth Noland @ Almine Rech



Kenneth Noland, *Version*, 1982

It was with great delight that I saw Kenneth Noland's current exhibition at Almine Rech today. I feel as though Noland is one of those artists whose work is easily recognizable but that I know very little about. The concentric circles, stripes, and odd shaped canvases were so integral to the revolution in postwar American painting that they became household images. Yet beyond the familiar circles so central to Greenberg's pronouncements about abstract art, very few other paintings came to mind when thinking of Noland.



Kenneth Noland, *Pink Lady*, 1978

The current hanging at Almine Rech is surprising for the variety of the artist's work across the past 50 years. Although it retains the concern with color, canvas and the essentials of painting, it does so in many different ways. The familiar tensions between color and line, the dethroning of the rectangle, and of course, the circle, the vulnerability and excitement of the edges, continue to be his concern until the end of his life.



Kenneth Noland, *Play*, 1960

The first thing I noticed on entering the gallery was not simply the odd shape of the canvases, but also, the unanticipated use of colors. He uses both shape and color to challenge the viewer's perception of art, questioning what we expect a painting to be, as well as what it will do, and how we will interact with it. The role of shape in this is clear, but he also uses color in ways that completely refuse to allow us to indulge in the sumptuousness of painting. For example, the sprayed pink surface of *Pink Lady*, 1978 offers an area of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. Nothing about it makes us want to move closer, spend longer or develop in sympathy with the image. As such, this and others remains the perfect example of Greenberg's notion of post-painterly abstraction. Where the shape of the canvas, the absence of gesture, and the resultant cool acrylic surface challenge everything we know about painting. Not to mention the fact that a work such as this can be physically difficult to look at thanks to the glare resulting from the acrylic sheen.



Kenneth Noland, *Comet*, 1983

In one of the side rooms, we see Noland's *Comet*, 1983, a work that harks back to the strips and parallel lines of the 1950s and 1960s, but not. The thick paint applied with a spatula gives the suggestion of being luscious, but is, in fact, as cold and distant as any of the thin spray painted surfaces. Even though the material has a glistening texture, there is no mistaking its plasticity. That said, the small hints of gesture and emotion are thrilling: the paint going over the edge of the canvas, the drips and splashes that have (we assume mistakenly, but no doubt they were intentional) found their way into the colour field change everything. In addition, when the edges are no longer even, the lines no longer perfectly straight, our attention becomes focussed on the edges, the patterns, the tensions, and the chance smudges of painting. These moments become more serious than the color field itself, and we try to connect to the human hand behind its execution.



Kenneth Noland, *Into the Cool No.9*, 2006

I think what is most striking about these works today is that they haven't lost their radicality. Whereas an artist like Warhol becomes romantic in retrospect, and we indulge in his play with color and light, in his painterly gestures, Noland's surfaces remain harsh, and difficult to look at. They are unrelenting in their commitment to challenging everything we know about painting.