

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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## ANNE TRUITT *Threshold:* *Works from the 1970s*

by Jonathan Goodman

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Anne Truitt's career looks larger and larger as time goes on. Born in Baltimore, educated at Bryn Mawr in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and working most of her life in Washington, D.C., Truitt developed a radically spare aesthetic, which slightly prefigured the sleek, industrial forms of 1960s Minimalism. However, unlike such figures as Richard Serra and Donald Judd, who favored raw, rugged steel and repetitive, linear sequences, Truitt turned toward the creation of the exquisite individual object, highly finished and nearly hieratic in its unflinching simplicity. At first glance the work in the Matthew Marks exhibition may seem nearly oppressively plain, yet after spending time with her sculpture, viewers begin to see the small details that separate Truitt's art from its industrial cousins. Not always, but often, thin bands of color ring the top or bottom of her vertical sentinels, creating contrast and even the beginnings of a highly original perspective. The solitary presence of these tallish standing structures seems to have emerged from a high point in the relatively brief history of Minimalism; the title of the exhibition, *Threshold: Work from the 1970s*, indicates just how specific this period was for the artist.

Truitt's craft was remarkably refined: each of the six wooden sculptures on view boasts an exquisite surface of acrylic paint, composed of many layers of color sanded down and covered over, eventually removing any trace of the brush. Two of the sculptures are remarkable in their rare horizontal orientation. "Grant" (1974) comprises a 12-foot-long wooden slab, painted a light blue, topped by a shorter slab painted yellow. As a whole the piece is haunting in its utter material perfection, although this is hardly the endpoint of its interest value: the object also manages to exert an unconscious yet spiritual pull on its audience. The beauty of Truitt's work looks both backward and forward; influences might range from Greek caryatids to the exquisite but roughly manufactured steel forms made by Serra and Tony Smith. One should recall that Truitt, in the 1970s, was a woman working within a highly macho field—and holding her own at that. The near-religious sensibility of her sculpture, alongside the pains taken to create an immaculate surface, reveal her to have been an artist fully in keeping with both the past and the future of art.

“Jaunt”(1977) is a vertically-oriented sentinel painted orange. To liven things up, but to do so through careful posturing, is key to Truitt’s aesthetic, and in the case of “Jaunt” she has added two thin bands of color—yellow and white, respectively—to the very bottom of the sculpture, giving the sculpture its “jaunty” air. One would hardly think that so minor a modification would have so major an effect, but there you have it: the bands of paint at the bottom create a complex contrast with the object’s primary orange hue, all cohering to form an engaging yet simplified structure. The compositional field of Truitt’s painting “26th July ’73 No. 2” (1973) is similarly energized by two thin stripes of white on a planar ground; the isolated lines might be figures in a field mostly devoted to the ground behind them. Yet both focus and complexity are heightened when the viewer takes time to notice contrasts. Truitt’s “Landfall” (1970) is slightly bulkier in its dimensions, the result being that comparison of this object to a human body doesn’t seem quite as accurate as it does with the narrower sculptures. Almost sky blue in color, “Landfall” proves itself capable of maintaining interest on its own as an abstract rather than referential work of art.

The show at Marks has been well installed, emphasizing the bare, even lonely effect of these independently standing works of art. Additionally, the white-on-white paintings, part of Truitt’s *Arundel* series, show us the extent to which the artist is willing to do away with any visible trace of the hand. One invariably feels, in this highly sympathetic show, that the dictum “less is more” is expressed to an extraordinary degree. Truitt doesn’t cater to popular taste, and it may be that some of today’s audience will find her art too reductive for comfort. But for those who came of age at an earlier time, in the 1970s, each work here is a revelation in its ability to engender emotion through seemingly minor adjustments of color and form. One hopes that the show will create a larger public for an artist whose sense of shape and finish remains remarkable some 40 years after her work was made.

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