



ART REVIEW: The Culture of Alan Shields

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by Janet Goleas

The late artist [Alan Shields](#) (1944-2005) was a mid-western export with equal parts gumption, vision and invention. A straight line could probably be drawn from the American heartland to the font of the artist's resourcefulness—a kitchen table aesthetic that fueled both his art and his radical bohemianism—but some deeper digging would be required to understand the fierce intelligence, indefatigability and labyrinthine dialectic that fueled his art.

A good starting point for this kind of digging would be the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Water Mill, where guest curator Jill Brienza has organized a spirited overview of Shields's complex oeuvre in "Alan Shields: In Motion," on view through January 19, 2015. Selected paintings and sculpture, works on paper and canvas, stop-action animated shorts and performance all go a long way toward fleshing out the man and the artist.

Resolutely individualistic, Shields owned his aesthetic the way a leopard owns its spots. Emerging in the sizzling ferment of New York's art world in the late 1960s, his hippie-ish, off-the-stretcher paintings rose to prominence at lightning speed.

Unlike many of his peers, Shields wasn't questioning the-next-inevitable-step, he was establishing his own culture. A post-Minimalist, his art embraced pluralism and theatricality. It predated the Pattern & Decoration (P&D) movement by side-stepping the art world's considerable resistance to ornamentation and overall condemnation of craft traditions. How did he do it? The way a leopard wears its spots.

For anyone concerned about the nature/culture divide, it's pretty much resolved here. Shields not only employed means that were traditionally female (sewing, weaving, beading), he pulled the canvas from the wall and then gave it a front, a back and an interior. He turned the structure of pictorial space on its ear and expanded the language of gesture by trading in the brushwork of Abstract Expressionism for decorative switchbacks drawn from the needle of an industrial sewing machine.

He revolutionized printmaking, advancing the dialogue of perception itself with complex pictorial surfaces that gave way to volume and depth of field. The Shields avatar continues to influence the work of contemporary artists ranging from [Jessica Stockholder](#) to [Jim Lambie](#) to [Lauren Luloff](#), and his aesthetic reach is one that crosses platforms, mediums and milieus.



"Maze" by Alan Shields, 1981-1982. Acrylic and thread on canvas, cotton

belting, Velcro and aluminum pipe, 87 x 219 x 219 inches. Estate of the artist, courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York. Photo by Daniel Gonzales.

Central to the Parrish exhibition is the sculpture/painting *Maze*, 1981-82. Something of an engineering marvel, *Maze* is Shields's magnum opus, both in scale and complexity. It dominates the Parrish installation like a latter day Temple of Dendur, yet it can be disassembled and fit, more or less, into a duffle bag. Drawing visitors inside, its crisscrossing lines, painted tubes and canvas walls makes viewers participants in the work as they walk its concentric interior.

As if inviting the viewer into the mind of a painting, the logic within Shields's pageant of color and form remains mysterious, exhilarating in its madness and dizzying layers. The paint-saturated walls look variously like repurposed tablecloths or parachute skins splattered with cranberry juice. Ornamented with diamonds, dots and squares, the structure offers a fractured pictorial space that invites the viewer to observe the world through the gestalt of a kaleidoscope.



"Maze" by Alan Shields, 1981-1982. Acrylic and thread on canvas, cotton belting, Velcro and aluminum pipe, 87 x 219 x 219 inches. Estate of the artist, courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York. Photo by Daniel Gonzales.

Still, like all mazes, implicit in one's entering is one's exiting. To his credit, *Maze* is not spectacle—it's intimate and indiscernible and lacking detours, false doorways and other parlor tricks; it is definitely not entertainment. Key to his art is that for all of his flaming hoops, nothing is calculated: the driving conclusion is the work itself. Robert Hughes remarked of Shields's contemporaries, the artists Richard Serra and Barry LeVa, that their work functioned like "verbs without nouns," an apt characterization of Shields, too, and of an art that celebrates action while defying description.



"Maze" by Alan Shields, 1981-1982. Acrylic and thread on canvas, cotton belting, Velcro and aluminum pipe, 87 x 219 x 219 inches. Estate of the artist, courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York. Photo by Daniel Gonzales.

The son of a farmer, Alan Shields grew up in rural Kansas among stories of the Santa Fe Trail and local Indian legends. He learned to sew from his mother and sisters, studied engineering and

theater at Kansas State University, and moved to New York before graduating, in 1968. Within a year, he had burst upon the art world like an exploding piñata. His first solo show at [Paula Cooper Gallery](#) was a rousing success, leading to purchases by the Whitney Museum of American Art and MoMA. By 1971, he had bought a home on Shelter Island on Long Island's East End, where he transformed his own life into something that reads like a John Steinbeck novel.



"Maze" by Alan Shields, 1981-1982. Acrylic and thread on canvas, cotton belting, Velcro and aluminum pipe, 87 x 219 x 219 inches. Estate of the artist, courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York. Photo by Daniel Gonzales.

In Eel Town near Coecles Harbor, Shields created a working compound and ornamented his home and studio with a mélange of buoys and ball fenders, fishing nets and beaded tree-necklaces. From there he could navigate the art world while living off the land, mostly.

With his shaved head, full beard, rainbow-colored nails and assorted tattoos, Shields fished and hunted, grew vegetables, raised his children and maintained a studio filled with sewing machines and the rudiments of his unorthodox working methodology. Once he took up full time residence there, and until his death in 2005, the six-foot-and-then-some Shields became a captain for the North Ferry, shuttling passengers between the island and Greenport, his bald head glinting in the sun like a character from Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

In *J & K*, 1975, located in the same gallery as *Maze*, Shields all but eradicates the picture plane, dangling fillets and garlands of Milanese beads from a row of epaulets that line the long upper edge of the painting, essentially doodling with impunity inside a framework of narrow canvas strips. The effect is one of joyful abandon and an effusive, infectious sense of bliss.

Likewise, in *Dance Bag*, 1985, strips of pigment-saturated canvas and beadwork are cinched at the top, fanning out toward a circular base with the approximate diameter of a hula hoop. Hanging over a mirror, the assemblage reflects its own ornamented interior in a triumph of candid self-examination. Nearby, the sculpture *Ajax*, 1985, hangs from the ceiling like a gigantic tie-dyed birdcage.



"Dance Bag" by Alan Shields, 1985. Acrylic, canvas, glass beads, thread on aluminum tubing, 40 x 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of the artist, and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. Background: "Ajax" by Alan Shields, 1972-73. Acrylic, cotton belting, beads, thread aluminum tubing, 96 x 96 x 96 inches. Estate of the artist, courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York. Photo by Daniel

Gonzales.



“Dance Bag” by Alan Shields, 1985. Acrylic, canvas, glass beads, thread on aluminum tubing, 40 x 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of the artist, and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. Photo by Daniel Gonzales.

Lining the long hallway galleries, a sampler of the artist’s smaller works and selected prints touches on the breadth of his focus. Stitchery and layers of rich, pigmented paper pulp morph into mandalas and loose grids in *My Sweet Daddy Back* and *Eggs Are Ready*, testament to the poetic rigor and gentle anarchism in his aesthetic canon. Rarely on view, two stop-action animated shorts by Shields, *Balletfire*, 2005 and *Birth of a Nation*, 2003, run continuously on a large monitor in the main gallery. Emphasizing the interactive nature of Shields work, *Into the Maze*, a collaborative dance work conceptualized by the curator, was performed earlier this month by the Stephen Petronio Company.

I’m guessing that artists like Alan Shields come along about once in a lifetime. He was one of a kind, and his presence can still be felt here on the South Fork and, mightily, in the art world.

BASIC FACTS: “Alan Shields: In Motion” remains on view through January 19, 2015. The Parrish Art Museum is located at 279 Montauk Hwy, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.parrishart.org.

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