



CRITIC'S PICKS: NYC Gallery Shows at Paula Cooper, Matthew Marks, Hauser & Wirth

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by Charles A. Riley II

Critic's Picks is a new column featuring stand out art gallery shows in New York City, selected and reviewed by critic, curator and author Charles A. Riley II. In this edition, Riley chooses three noteworthy New York City gallery exhibitions from Chelsea and the Upper East Side featuring minimalism, realism and post-World War II abstraction.

“Carl Andre: Small Sculptures and Short Words”

Paula Cooper Gallery

The Minimalist sculptor [Eva Hesse](#) once wrote: “endless repetition can be considered erotic.” This idea can warm the often-chilly air of Minimalism, an aesthetic with impressive stamina that has survived the onslaught of many ages of the art of excess (including our own) since its heyday in the '70s. One of its Old Masters is [Carl Andre](#), whose solo exhibition of unexpectedly playful recent works, along with some of his earlier pieces, is a pleasant surprise.

With the addition of color and the revelation of a bit more of the artist's naked hand than many shows of Minimalism permit, this exhibition takes the work of a familiar artist and pulls it closer than the typically distant geometry permits.

Andre's own take on the echo effect of Minimalist process is the aphorism, “Anything worth doing is worth doing again and again.” For Hesse, [Donald Judd](#), and others in the core group of Minimalists, that mantra of recursive metamorphosis is the starting point.

The main attraction, in my view, is *Maple Spindle Exercise* from 1959. This piece revives an important moment not just in Andre's career (he had his start hewing wood) but the movement's rise. He started in 1958 carving timbers with a chisel and saw, shaping symmetries and geometries from the natural whorls and contours of maple beams. The linear architecture that is created by his serial arrays is all the more fascinating when linked with the “Black Paintings” of Frank Stella, with whom Andre was sharing a studio at the time.



“Maple Spindle Exercise” by Carl Andre, Quincy, Massachusetts 1959. 1 saw-carved maple block, 9 1/16 x 4 x 2 5/8 inches. © 2017 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.

Although Andre has been “officially retired since 2011” according to the gallery, the exhibition is mostly comprised of recent small-scale sculptures in a range of materials from Styrofoam to clay tile, plastic, and galvanized, painted and industrial metal. The shocker in this group is the floor piece (a familiar Andre maneuver) that is unexpectedly chromatic, with its shiny aluminum and vivid red squares in a checkerboard pattern.



“4 x 4 Al Red & Silver Square” by Carl Andre, 2015. Painted aluminum, 16 elements, each: 1/32 x 5/8 x 5/8 inches, overall: 1/32 x 2 3/4 x 2 3/4 inches. © 2017 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.

The playful colors lead back to the artist’s childhood, as he notes in a statement:

“What do little kids do? They crawl on the floor and they build with blocks. I just continued to do that for the rest of my life.”

“Carl Andre: Small Sculptures and Short Words,” February 11 through March 11, 2017, at Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 West 21st Street, New York 10011. www.paulacoopergallery.com

“Vija Celmins” Matthew Marks Gallery

Even in an age of abstraction, the rigorous cause of realism lives. Mimesis ebbs and flows with the taste of various periods even in modern art history, but the desire for an artistic truth to nature remains. Debuting at a new gallery (for her) with her first exhibition in seven years, [Vija Celmins](#) reasserts her status as a singular virtuoso of the representational mirror.



“Untitled” by Vija Celmins. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

The painted bronze rock sculptures that sit side-by-side on a pedestal with the original rock (titled *Two Stones* and *Four Stones* and both dated 1977/2014–16) and the trompe l’oeil chalkboards next to their models are sculptural versions of this one-to-one correspondence.

Celmins is best known for the gently undulating drawings, paintings and prints of waves, based on black and white photographs, that she started in the '60s. The most breathtaking wall in this generously spaced (lots of white wall) show is *A Painting in Six Parts* (1986–87/2012–16), using a picture she took 50 years ago from a pier in Venice, California. It lulls the viewer with that “mimic motion” that Wallace Stevens celebrated in his ode to the rhythms of the ocean’s surface, “Idea of Order at Key West.”

*The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.*



“Vija Celmins” at Matthew Marks Gallery, February 10 to April 15, 2017. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

When mimesis becomes even more audacious, and memorable, is the moment Celmins trains her vision on the stars. Next to painting the sea, the most impossible subject for realistic art would have to be the cosmos, as [Vincent van Gogh](#) well knew. The largest painting in the show (at nearly five feet in width and ostensibly endless in depth) is the delicate and infinitely absorbing *Night Sky #26*, an artistic moonshot of unforgettable ambition.

“Vija Celmins,” February 10 to April 15, 2017, Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, New York 10011. www.matthewmarks.com

“Nothing and Everything: Seven Artists, 1947 - 1962”

Hauser & Wirth

For depth of thought alone, “Nothing and Everything” is the show of the young year. Expertly presented by Douglas Dreishpoon, chief curator emeritus at the Albright-Knox, this show assembles works by [Louise Bourgeois](#), [John Cage](#), [Morton Feldman](#), [Philip Guston](#), [Franz Kline](#), [Joan Mitchell](#) and [David Smith](#) under the aegis of the abstractionists’ response to World War II.

I’m not generally a fan of audio or video incursions into an exhibition space, but a meaningful exception is the John Cage audio track that greets visitors to the gallery. Cage’s pianissimo is unlike the stentorian voice-over of many gallery films, and the selections (the enchantingly lyrical “Lecture on Nothing” and the 1966 version of “Radio Happening”) are wonderfully congruent with the understated tidal power of the art in the show, particularly the sculpture.

Cage had a direct influence on Philip Guston and Franz Kline, both featured in the exhibition via some of their most subtle work. The Kline is a rectangle firmly brushed in black on white. The Guston painting’s pale fire reflects the open chromaticism of an untitled painting by Joan Mitchell.



“Untitled” by Joan Mitchell, circa 1958–1959. Oil on canvas, 77 3/4 x 68 1/4 inches. © Estate of Joan Mitchell

Courtesy Private Collection, Paris and Hauser & Wirth.
Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

Paired beautifully with a commanding vertical bronze by Louise Bourgeois titled *Breasted Woman*, David Smith’s sculpture, *Forging IX*, is the highlight of the show for me. [Robert Motherwell](#), a dear friend of the artist, used to call Smith’s vertical sculpture “sentinels,” and there is a vigilance to the elegant posture of *Forging IX*, a delicately wrought sculpture in varnished steel.

Another Smith piece in the show, a rippling work on paper, seems to turn the slim silhouette of the sculpture on its side. This fluvial drawing, its currents of wine-dark purple pulling together four pairs of pulsing strokes, comes from a group that he made in his “clean” studio (as opposed to the shop-like metalworking studio) at Bolton Landing, where he moved from the city in 1940.



“Untitled” by David Smith, 1955. Black egg ink (purple) on paper, 17 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches. © The Estate of David Smith . Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

Smith stacked up drawing paper, the expensive handmade sheets mixed in with the cheap stuff, and simply reached for the next sheet, made the drawing and let it fall, still wet, to the floor as he reached for another. It has all the lightness of a piano piece by Cage, whom I see as the conductor of this terrific example of curatorial chamber music.

“Nothing and Everything: Seven Artists: 1947-1962,” February 2 to April 1, 2017, Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street, 32 East 69th Street, New York 10021. www.hauserwirth.com

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