

HYPERALLERGIC

MARCH 12, 2021

LURED BY TWO CONTEMPORARY MASTERS

by John Yau



Robert Grosvenor, "Untitled" (2019), lacquered aluminum, blue, 11 7/8 x 92 1/2 x 56 1/2 inches (Photo: Steven Probert, © Robert Grosvenor, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

I was stopped in my tracks when I entered the gallery. Directly ahead of me was "Untitled" (1971), a five-panel painting by David Novros, measuring around 10 feet high and 13 feet wide. Each panel was a different size, which immediately distinguished it from other large geometric abstractions. Directly to my left and right, in separate gallery spaces, were two sculptures by Robert Grosvenor.

This is the kind of dilemma art lovers live for: what do I ponder first?

Suffice to say, the exhibition, Robert Grosvenor and David Novros, at Paula Cooper Gallery (February 27 – April 3, 2021), tugs at and rewards you, whatever direction you choose.

There is so much to see and contemplate, from the two aforementioned sculptures and monumental painting to models, notebooks, and watercolors, as well as drawings by Novros and collages by Grosvenor. In fact, long after I left the show, certain works floated up in my memory, calling me to return, like the mythical sirens that haunted Odysseus and his crew.

Had I looked at them carefully enough? Had I seen what was really there? This kind of slow looking does not happen as often as I would like. And when it does, I remember why I moved to New York from Boston in the mid-1970s: it was to immerse myself in what the city had to offer.

What struck me about Novros's "Untitled" was that it is a geometric painting whose internal elements seem to keep changing. There is no center, nor is there an overall structure or grid in which the different rectangles and L shapes fit. And yet, even as I could not discern the logic guiding the painting, I did not feel there was anything arbitrary about Novros's decisions.

Another thing that struck me about “Untitled” was Novros’s use of white, both in the thin vertical band on the painting’s far left and in the irregular H shape just to the right of the midline. A pale gray vertical rectangle, flanked by two different blues, keeps the white areas from dividing “Untitled” into totally separate configurations.

At the same time, the thin white band becomes an opening, implying an impossible passageway. I cannot think of another geometric abstract artist who uses white this way: as both a space (the band) and a color (the H shape).

There are four sculptures by Grosvenor in the show. Each could have been made by a different person, even though it’s also evident that they are by one person.

This points to a deeper connection between these two artists, who were members of the artists’ cooperative and gallery Park Place during the 1960s — while each has his preoccupations, neither of them ever developed a brand. Their art arose out of pursuits rather than the desire to make products.

One of Grosvenor’s preoccupations is moving vehicles, be it cars, boats, planes, or rockets. The aerodynamic shape of these vehicles, as well as their efficiency, seems to be a central concern, but the artist is also interested in their beauty. Can the work speak to all three without becoming flashy or status-driven?

In addition, Grosvenor seems deeply interested in design challenges. One gallery contains the immaculate hull of a racing boat made of blue lacquered aluminum resting on a pedestal. “Untitled” (2019) has a semicircular front with a long, trapezoidal cavity extending from the narrower back. Stripped down to shape, color, and flawlessly smooth surface, it is a marvel of aerodynamic design.

As I have written elsewhere about Grosvenor, “the sheer sense of joy is evident,” along with an unlikely mixture of whimsy and seriousness.

In the gallery directly opposite, a light green, nosecone-like shape lies on the floor, as if it has just keeled over, inexplicably. Made of spray-painted sheet metal, “Untitled” (2019) feels engagingly, tenderly, and amusingly awkward, particularly in comparison to the racing-boat sculpture. The use of auto body filler to seal the bottom sheet to its housing add a human touch to the work.

The fact that it is lying on its side, leaving the bottom of the cone-like shape visible, adds to its mystery. Is this something that Grosvenor found and altered? Did it once have a purpose? And if so, what? As with Novros’s “Untitled,” Grosvenor’s sculptures seem to want to step beyond the physical boundaries of their bodies.

Each of the three works I have described thus far transported me in a different direction. And, at that point, I had not even seen everything in the exhibition, which makes it one of the most exhilarating shows I have visited in recent memory.

Grosvenor’s “Untitled” (2020) is an orange Valmobile scooter from 1961, the last year it was produced in Japan by the Hirano Motorcycle Company (production began in 1956). Known as the “suitcase scooter,” the handlebars, crossmember, and front wheel were stored beneath the seat. “Untitled” is the metal suitcase resting on its back wheel and front stand, with everything you need to drive it off presumably beneath the seat. The ignition key, attached to a rabbit’s foot, is visible in the back.

In addition to the five-panel painting, “Untitled,” Novros is represented by two sculptures, watercolors, inks on paper, disassembled notebooks with unframed sheets of paper affixed to the wall, and notebooks on shelves, amounting to a plenitude of work dated between 1978 and 2019.

Again, I was in a quandary. There was so much to look at and think about, how could I take it all in? I realized that I couldn't.

Some of Novros's works are geometric, while others are a concentrated flurry (or should I say fury?) of marks. In each grouping of drawings and watercolors, what I always sensed was an intensely distilled focus, a rigorous line of inquiry.

In 1975, while I was still living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I bought a catalogue for the exhibition Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality, which opened that year at the Rice Institute for the Arts in Houston, Texas. It had a foreword by Harris Rosenstein and a dense, theoretical essay by Sheldon Nodelman. This was the first time I saw these three names linked together.

Remembering that catalogue, I was reminded of Novros's lifelong interest in paintings made for a specific place. As he put it in a Brooklyn Rail interview (June 2008), speaking about traveling in Europe in his early 20s:

"Seeing the Alhambra in Granada was an extraordinary experience for me. It was the first time that I understood painting as something other than an object hanging on a wall. I thought that paintings could be in a fixed place, made for that place, made for the light of the place, experienced kinesthetically."

In a notebook dating from September 1981 through November 1983, where he wrote "Windows and Walls" on the inside cover, Novros investigated geometric structures based on the rectangular grid of window panes framed by bands and, separately, extended horizontal rectangles divided into different, abutted sections of color. In these works, structure, color, and light are inseparable.

While Marden and Rothko are widely recognized and regarded as innovative artists, Novros has not gained a similar appreciation. It is also clear to me that what has gone unacknowledged in the art world are the different ways that Novros might have inspired Marden.

These were only some of my many responses to an expansive and generous exhibition — which was not about the marketplace, as many of Novros's works on paper were marked Not For Sale on the gallery checklist.

Stopping to look once again at the painting "Untitled," seeing once again that its five panels are all different sizes, it became even more apparent to me that the painting grew organically. When he started out, Novros probably did not have a fixed composition in mind. The painting arose from an improvisational process.

It seems obvious that an institution ought to give Novros the drawing exhibition he has long deserved, and document it with an extensive and thorough monograph.

Finally, there are many works in this exhibition that I did not even mention — all of them are rewarding.