

# Redefining Minimalism's Boundaries

A few months ago I saw an exhibition of the Oliver-Hoffman collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Many "mainstream" minimalist artists from the '70s, such as Donald Judd, were represented in this collection. I was struck by the large size, imposing monumentality and apparent immutability of many works in this show. By using industrial materials, especially metals and plastics, and avoiding human marks on these pieces, the artists imparted an impression of distance and permanence.

The work of five minimalist artists exhibited in *Material Consequence*, a group sculpture show currently at Otis-Parsons Gallery, reveals how minimalism has evolved. These artists' minimalist sensibilities have been shaped by recent art developments and show the influence of *arte povera*, feminism, postmodernism and installation art. They contrast strongly with the works in the Oliver-Hoffman collection.

Jacqui Den Hartog introduces imagery to minimalism, imagery which suggests natural forms and feminine shapes. *Untitled (Elephants III)* is a series of silhouetted elephant heads made of sheet rubber, strung together and draped from the gallery ceiling to floor. She shows the elephant as a symbol or caricature of the animal; in other works she represents industrial machines and storage tanks in simple, almost symbolic form. Like minimalism, which is an abstraction and simplification of everyday perception, a symbol

should also be an abstracted, simple and unambiguous image. But here the elephant head also reads as a flower and thus, perhaps, as feminine imagery. In this pluralist age, there is no single reading for anything.

In her smaller pieces, the sheet- and cast-rubber Den Hartog uses sometimes resembles lead slabs or painted wood. However, the pliant rubber invites tactile exploration; I confess, I touched the work. The tactile sensibility of these pieces seem very different from the imposing and distant works in the Oliver-Hoffman collection.

The concern for materials also marks the work of Jeff Colson, whose simple geometric pieces—all squares, capsules and spindles—have romantically aged and patterned surfaces. For these pieces collectively, Colson uses motor oil, gesso, enamel, graphite, doorskin, plaster, Bondo, plastic, oil paint, plywood, copper powder and resin. Using industrial materials is not new to minimalism, but the casual mix of art and industrial materials and the aged look of these pieces is different from the Oliver-Hoffman works. Carlson's pieces look like found objects. The addition of decorative elements, such as painted dots and zigzags, seems to be a postmodern influence, and the ephemeral look of the work seems opposed to traditional minimalism.

Patrick Nickell's untitled works are made of plywood and corrugated cardboard, even humbler materials than those in Colson's works. He displays sim-



ple shapes with rounded corners either flush against the wall, projecting perpendicularly from it, or leaning against it. He hangs some of the sculptures like paintings, and thus points out how convention, location and usage define an object as art.

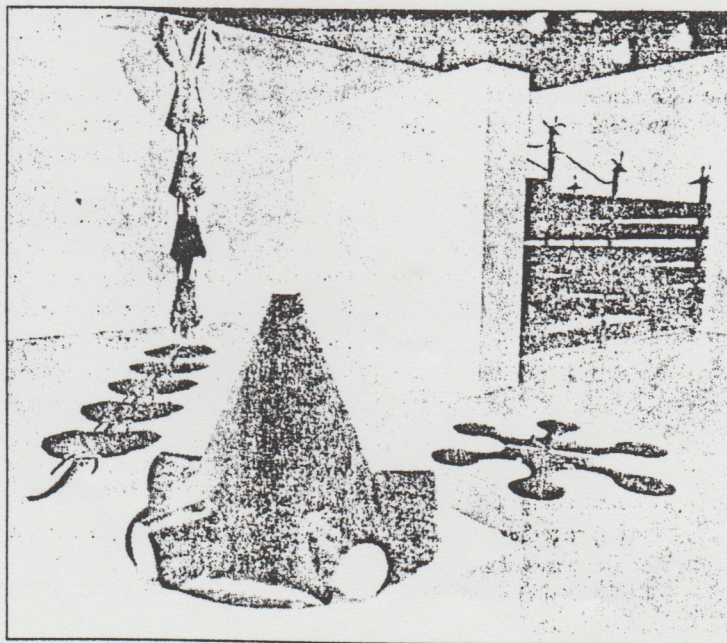
Like Den Hartog's and Colson's work, most of Nickell's works are modestly sized. The pieces do not seem imposing or monumental, perhaps because of their size and the materials used. However, the other two artists included in this exhibition, Peter Levinson and Nicola Rosalie

Atkinson-Griffith, show work that competes with architecture. Both use decorative elements which have been greatly simplified and de-estheticized to the point of becoming "dopey." Atkinson-Griffith's contribution includes plans and partial completion of a three-piece work to be installed in gallery display cases and on the south exterior gallery wall. The parts do not work together, but seem eccentrically composed of decorative elements at an overly-large or overly-small scale. Levinson's work, *Prospect*, is a large installation resembling a corral, with a wide-slat fence surrounding inner structures, decorated with awkwardly simplified "medieval" decorations. The entire piece becomes a castle with an inner keep, like a fantasy children may construct from boxes, only bigger. The structure and

the contained spaces seem ceremonial, sacred, and ludicrous all at the same time.

Again, these attitudes and sensibilities stand in sharp contrast with those exhibited in the Oliver-Hoffman works. However, in Chicago, I made one interesting observation. At a distance, Sol Lewitt's *Corner Piece #4*, made of painted wood, seems eternal and perfect, like much of the exhibited works. But on closer inspection, it had aged. The paint surface was cracked, and the piece had been transformed by gradual decay. In some strange way, in its altered state, Lewitt's *Corner Piece #4* now seems to be more in touch with the decorative, ephemeral minimalism exhibited in this show. And *Material Consequence* seems to invite a serious redefinition of the boundaries of minimalism. ■

*Material Consequence* through March  
10 at Otis-Parsons School of Design, 2401  
Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles.



Jacqui Den Hartog, *Untitled (Elephants III)* (foreground), and Peter Levinson, *Prospect* (background), installation view, at Otis-Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles.