

ARTFORUM

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Critic's Pick

Alan Shields: *Something Goin' On & On*



Be Careful Dear L.R., warns Alan Shields in the title of one of his sewn drawings from 1974. A stitched and multihued watercolor orb sits slightly off-center on the handmade paper sheet, like a flower child's disco ball or a lost planet. Circles are a prominent feature of Shields's works, as are triangles and diamonds; spend enough time in this exhibition, the first solo survey of his work in New York in eleven years, and you might find these shapes forming a linguistic code. Indeed, like letters they construct the foundations of mandalas, pyramids, and other dreamy, biomorphic forms, which evoke ancient times, end days, and the cultural fabric of the 1960s and '70s.

A self-described "farm community person" from Kansas, Shields was familiar enough with sewing machines while growing up, but it wasn't until his move to New York and friendship with Claes Oldenburg that he began to view stitching as an artistic tool, making abstract paintings and sculptures by embedding thread, glass beads, yarn, and rope on unstretched swaths of canvas. "I had to find my own niche, my own thing," the late artist said in an interview reflecting back on the New York art world of the late '60s. This meant not worrying too much about where painting was going, and instead developing an individual approach, which cared for the historically high and important formal and experiential questions of the medium via low materials. Eventually Shields moved off the grid to Shelter Island, New York, where, despite the many waves—and storms—of styles throughout the '80s and '90s, he continued to tend his own personal painterly garden. He was nothing if not determined. **LAUREN O'NEILL-BUTLER**