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Alan Shields Greenberg Van Doren Gallery



Luckily for him, and happily for me, Alan Shields doesn't fit into any neat category. He's been linked to the so-called post-Minimalists, even as he traces his own heritage back to Kandinsky and Klee. Like both those artists' oeuvres – the touchstones of his aesthetic – Shields's work is sensuously dazzling, intricately constructed, and mystically vital. But it is also distinguished by considerable material diversity. Shields utilizes, among other media, thread cotton and beads.

Consequently, pieces such as *Dance Bag*, 1985 (one of fifteen works in the show), may be read as both painting and sculpture; made of richly colored strips of canvas, it is a three-dimensional construction composed of painterly gestures. Bedecked with beads and hanging from a single thread, the strips radiate outward and downward to suspend a circular tube some six inches from the floor. At once systematic and spontaneous, the work suggests a radiantly colorful dance. As Shields acknowledges, he is influenced by Native American rituals; therefore, this dance may be a sort of shamanistic initiation into the mysteries of nature. The round mirror at the base brings us in: We see ourselves surrounded by the color, as participant-observers.

As Shields has said, Native Americans believe that if nature gives you a good harvest – it is worth noting that the artist grew up on a Kansas farm – you have to give something back: Art is his way of doing so. He is also guided by animistic beliefs. “I try to kind of listen to the nature of the materials that I use,” Shields says, “and try to hear what they want to be made into” – an idea reminiscent of Kandinsky's synesthesia. As an artist directly influenced by fishing, he states that “long stringy seaweed” inspired his linear canvas strips, and that dipping a “thread or string” in a “vat of paper pulp,” to make his marvelously molten paper work, is like catching fish.

Geometric forms, such as the pyramid or grid, abound in his work. The pyramidal *Inside Out Passion Flower Bell*, 1975-79 – a remarkably patterned and colored work – is but one example. Sometimes the geometry dissolves into wildly meandering lines or receives a playful title, such as *Sweetie*, 1974, *Jack in the Lima Patch*, 1983, *Something Goin' On & On*, 1984, thus becoming tempered with a sensuous deliciousness.

Because of his use of textiles, Shields has been called a craft artist – he sews well, and sometimes uses a sewing machine. But the distinction between art and craft is obsolete, and perhaps was always naïve. It might be better to call Shields' difficult-to-categorize oeuvre something like “American abstract naturalism,” given its unique respect for nature as material resource, and as an aesthetic joy to behold. **DONALD KUSPIT**