

Donald Judd

Salzburg Villa Kast
24 July—28 August 2021



Thaddaeus Ropac

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Opening: Saturday, 24 July 2021, 11am—1pm

Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg

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DONALD JUDD at Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg presents a group of works from 1977—1991, a period in which the artist's work was defined by the principles that had formed his artistic vision. The exhibition provides insight into the diversity of Donald Judd's formal and material repertoire, highlighting his distinctive visual vocabulary and deliberate use of mathematical proportions. Spanning works in plywood, painted wood, plexiglass and aluminum – media through which he interrogated the relationship between form and color – the exhibition features work that has never previously been exhibited, alongside seminal floor works which remain at the core of Judd's practice. The earliest example of this type of incised cadmium red light floor work was exhibited in Judd's first ever solo exhibition at Green Gallery, New York (1963—64) and now forms part of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's collection in Washington, D.C.

It was during the 1980s and early 1990s that Donald Judd's work was largely conceived and shown in Europe. During this period, he lived in Switzerland and began his collaboration with the Swiss manufacturers that resulted in new artistic developments such as his multi-colored wall pieces in aluminum. 'Exuberance is not, or was not, the word that comes to mind in connection with Donald Judd [...] but his latest work makes this exhilarating playfulness as obvious as his intellect,' remarked art critic Larry Berryman in his description of Judd's work from this time (*Arts Review*, March 14, 1986). A series of exhibitions in galleries and institutions across Europe followed, including a major retrospective in 1987 that was organised by the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and travelled to the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf; Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin.

Highlights of the exhibition include three rectangular plywood floor works – one with a plain plywood surface and two painted in Judd's signature colour of cadmium red light. The wood boxes are relatively inert as forms, with height being the smallest of their dimensions. Each work features an aluminum inlay of varying configurations set into the upper exterior plane. With his free-standing wooden floor works, Judd had liberated himself from the wall and thus from pictorial associations. He consistently returned to forms first used early in his career and worked on a new group of rectangular floor boxes – from which the three works in the exhibition originate – from 1989 onwards. These works, fabricated in Douglas fir plywood, are either painted cadmium red light or unpainted. While each work has a trough that runs the length of the top plane, the inlaid aluminum tube or cylinder is unique, setting each work apart from others in the group. Two works from this group – one unpainted with a thin-walled tube and one red with a solid cylinder inlay – are permanently installed in Judd's Ranch Office in Marfa, Texas, which further speaks to the importance that this specific group held for the artist. A second red painted piece from this group is now part of the collection of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark.

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Placed directly on the floor, level with the viewer, the plywood works eliminate any factual or conceptual demarcation from their surroundings. The cadmium red light underlines Judd's deliberate use of color, which he viewed as something physical, a concrete formal entity. The cadmium red conveyed the shape of objects more precisely than darker hues, by defining their edges and the structure of their surfaces. Simultaneously, the vivid color lends the works a forceful visual presence in space. Judd had used cadmium red light paint on wood since 1961 and noted in a 1971 interview: 'I thought for a color it had the right value for a three-dimensional object. If you paint something black or any dark color, you can't tell what its edges are like. If you paint it white, it seems small and purist. And the red, other than a gray of that value, seems to be the only color that really makes an object sharp and defines its contours and angles.'

In contrast, the unpainted work is characterized by the moiré patterns of the Douglas fir plywood, which lends a tactile richness to the surface. The lack of paint allows the viewer to readily identify the material, thereby steering the artwork further towards the realm of real objects. The natural color of the plywood must nonetheless be understood as a color in its own right. Judd described this interrelationship between material and chromaticity in the following terms: 'I don't like plain plywood or plain concrete to be considered without color. So to me they are colored.' He continued: 'But it's best to consider everything as color.' By comparison, the deliberation behind the chromaticity – or absence of it – becomes all the more evident through the juxtaposition of the painted and unpainted works in the exhibition.

Two wall works, made from clear anodized aluminum and lined with colored plexiglass, recall Judd's signature format of vertical stacks. Yet the horizontally orientated, open rectangular boxes and the component units within are composed using a different set of parameters. Instead of a closed form that projects from the wall, the works are frontally orientated, allowing the viewer to peer into the units. For Judd, the openness of his objects was not merely a technical point but integral to his concept of the work. The combined effects of light and the contrasting materials – a polished plexiglass surface against matte aluminum – emphasize the three-dimensionality within the box, offering a particularly multi-layered perceptual experience.

The earliest work in the exhibition, a plywood wall-mounted box from 1977, is on show for the first time. The works from this group are also referred to as 'meter boxes', since they very specifically measure 100 x 50 x 50 cm. Judd's first three-dimensional works had been constructed in wood and he favored this material for its rigidity and high stability that allowed for great precision. In this case too, the grain of the wood becomes an integral part of the surface, in line with Judd's belief that artworks should preclude illusion. After exploring the use of metal from the mid 1960s onwards, he returned to plywood as a material in 1972 – his preference lying with Douglas fir.

Judd favored an approach to production borrowed from industrial processes and established the manufacturing of his artworks as a collaborative effort between himself and technical experts. Throughout his artistic career, he trusted specialized manufacturers with the production of his highly precise objects. These included Lehni AG and Alu Menziken in Switzerland, the New York based Bernstein Brothers for metalwork, as well as Peter Ballantine, Judd's principal craftsman for plywood works. In the late 1980s, he founded a workshop near his studio in Marfa, Texas, which allowed him to further explore the possibilities of Cor-ten production.

The skilled manufacturing processes and craftsmanship allowed Judd to continuously challenge material boundaries in his ongoing work. In the early 1990s, he designed a template through which aluminum was extruded and then anodized. This resulted in a series of 12 differently colored forms, three of which are presented in the exhibition – in yellow, turquoise and black-green (all 1991). These works demonstrate Judd’s ongoing exploration of the principles of space and form, with a particular focus on color, while the meticulous geometric construction emphasizes the purity of the material.

Throughout his career, Donald Judd sought to create an art form with no further symbolic meaning or grand philosophical narratives, letting the work speak for itself. His mode of working was always characterized by a balance between continuity and variation, persistence and change. He was deeply concerned with the fundamental ways in which we experience not only sculpture but, ultimately, the world around us.

Judd has a rich history of museum exhibitions in Austria, with solo museum shows in the cities of Vienna (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1977; MAK, Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in 1991 and 1994—95), Innsbruck (Galerie im Taxispalais, 1974) and Bregenz (Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2000—01). His work has been exhibited throughout the United States, Europe and Asia, and is in museum collections worldwide. Most recently, a major retrospective of Donald Judd’s work was presented at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2020.

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