

BALANCING ACT:

ROBERT MANGOLD PRINTS 1968-1998

The Twentieth century conceit that science can be the universal panacea that perfects and imperfect world runs deep, but the practical applications of this modern reed have yet to displace the more arcane rules of nature, let alone our dependency on the inventive powers of intuition. With enough research and the right formulas, some say, all will be explained and accounted for, logically. Maybe, but not the imagery invented by Robert Mangold.

This artful geometry has greater kinship to the ordered randomness discussed in chaos theories, and increasingly to the sensual pleasures of line and form created by Henri Matisse, than to any brand of aesthetic or mathematical formalism. In Mangold's artwork squares with unequal sides inscribe into circles with their corners missing or at odds with containing forms, and triangles misbehave, tilting and combining in defiance of standard templates. Even in series of images that relate, process, and permeate around a common theme or figure, the experience of one image within a group does not necessarily provide the key to the others. These seemingly contrary demonstrations of inter-dependent line, shape and color nevertheless provide visual resolve. Like the profound "dynamic equilibrium" of Piet Mondrian's theory and practice, on longer examination, one begins to understand that Mangold's art is a masterful attention to refining a personal understanding of order. Decidedly handmade, the hows and whys of his aesthetic solutions have deceptively little to do with marks machined by a protractor or compass.

This is evident in Mangold's printed art as well as in his paintings. In the artist's first serigraphs of 1968 the formal relationships between internal X, V, and W divisions within muted cream, brown, and grey half circle shields are explored. These prints, like many that follow, are closely related to paintings of the same period, in this instance, a series of sectionalized forms and fragments that refer back to full configurations of which they are a part. *Seven Aquatints*, Mangold's first intaglios, released six years later, are related to a painting series in which noticeably (or not so) distorted circles and squares are inscribed within colored grounds. The untitled prints each have a square of color with the outline of another smaller square lifted out of the soft ground aquatint. When editioned, these deletions appear as white negatives in fields of blue, green, orange and grey. A second soft ground plate was added to print a pencil-like circular line in black. The size of this circle outline and that of the field are consistent in each of the prints, but their positions differ, as does the color, and with the shift, the line and edge change in their relationship thereby activating what would otherwise have been static compositions.

The artist has said that "edges make the structure, the colors make the surface." The passive colors of the 1970's serigraphs, typically solid monochromatic backgrounds of toned greys, muddy browns, dull greens, and ochre earth tones with a darker line

overprinted, were meant to emphasize the flat and neutral two-dimensional fields beneath the linear divisions. The artist's use of color, however, has opened to new invention, and its function has become interwoven with his forms. As a result, Mangold's palette has grown richer and more varied, with mahoganies, Prussian blue, aubergine, bright and Venetian red, typical of recent coloration. Many of his decidedly "off" tones, as well as the lush primary combinations he employs, are developed by layering several different colors of ink and/or by employing multiple runs of the same color ink at the press. In *Four Color Frame* from 1984 distinct rectangular blocks of color (that read as chartreuse, bright orange, aqua and acid yellow) are arranged like cutouts held in place by a single black line. On the printed page, the stark white of the paper acts like the wall of the gallery would for a painting, calling attention to the nature of the support in this case, paper, and its presence in the negative space at the heart of the composition.

The introduction of textures has added another complexity to the structure of Mangold's prints, as has the introduction of carefully selected handmade papers. In the late 1980's the unlikely pairing of touching forms in the *Frames and Ellipses* series of intaglios and woodblocks balance in part because

Masonite, laminated wood, and cork transfers both visually support and confront the outlines that contain them. In another untitled image of this period freely applied resists become expressionistic brush strokes of opposing lime green and bright orange. With an altogether new assertiveness of color and line Mangold then renewed his interest in compact forms and shapes of his early *Area* and *Shield* series. Irregular divisions still develop and define the internal and external shapes of these 1990 prints, the ground colors still give support, but now these elements are more integrated, and the prominent linear figures include ellipses that allowed to freely dance across the surface with grace and agility.

There is growing authority in those editions that reflects Mangold's comfort with the process and his control of materials. From the start, the artist has himself cut linear screens for his serigraphs and continues on occasions to cut the woodblocks for his editions. One senses the artist's direct involvement and pleasure in the possibilities of the various mediums. Over the course of the years he has employed screens, plates, and blocks, as well as producing a series of monoprints and offering a low-tech rubber stamp print and a high-tech computer-to-press photo polymer bookplate. The artist's visual vocabulary includes the physicality of multiple plates, incision, and abutting of paper. Some editioned images are very large format, while others are quite small. The compositions of the prints and the paintings may share and reflect concerns, yet the inherent quality of each discipline is respected. One hundred and eighty separate images have been issued to date, and more will follow.

While there is acknowledgement of cultural history in this visual exploration, it is only superficially that Malevich and the Suprematists are reminiscent in the cross-bar figures, or that the circle/squares of the early 1970's conjure up Vitruvian geometry. Euclid would be pleased by Mangold's wish to "present a simple, economical, and as wholly readable a statement as possible", but perplexed by his means of arriving at that conclusion. The artist's unpredictable arcs, improper circles, and off-square squares would find no explanations or diagram in his classic studies. Here there is no attempt to make or take a humanistic measurement of the world or to solve mathematical problems. Likewise it is the spirit of restraint exemplified by early Greek pottery that is honored by the ten aquatints in Mangold's or diagram in his classic studies. Here there is no attempt to make or take a humanistic measurement of the world or to solve mathematical problems. Likewise it is the spirit of restraint exemplified by early Greek pottery that is honored by the ten aquatints in Mangold's *Attic Series* rather than their imagery or form. While recognizing influences and acknowledging preferences, the artist's interests is expressed by his general appreciation of examples of intellectual directness, and his admiration of past accomplishments, rather than in an attempt to re-state or expand any stylistic mode or principle. Consistently it is the complicity of perimeter, division, color and line, symmetrical or asymmetrical, inherent or implied, that is of importance. Old mysteries are still present in these Twentieth Century visions.

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ROBERT MANGOLD
PRINTS 1968-1998

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