

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Tales of Brave Ulysses

November 9 – December 22, 2023

2nd and 3rd Floor Galleries

Garth Greenan Gallery and Van Doren Waxter are pleased to announce *Tales of Brave Ulysses*, an upcoming two-venue exhibition opening November 9, 2023, which explores the personal and working relationships of four prominent Post-War American artists: Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, Alan Shields, and Richard Van Buren.

During the late-1960s and early-1970s, the dominant art world ideology of formalist abstraction, with its roots in Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, was being challenged by a new generation of artists. Centered in downtown New York, their artistic and moral values were tempered by the intense social and political struggles of the day. Eschewing Minimalism's impersonal methods and dogmatic prescriptions, these four artists instead embraced craft and process—cutting, sewing, tacking, and pouring—upending traditional distinctions between media and rethinking established roles of artist and viewer. Loving, Pindell, Shields, and Van Buren were at the vanguard of this material revolution in contemporary art, a loosely defined artistic movement since referred to by critics as Post-Minimalism or New Informalism. In the midst of this radical upheaval in art practice and criticism, these four artists forged an enduring personal and creative bond. While deeply influencing each other in both spirit and in style, each artist nevertheless maintained a distinctly singular voice and practice.

From the late-1960s onwards, Shields's studio served as a frequent gathering place. He was famous for his boisterous persona and uncanny ability to do high-quality work while in the company of friends, behavior which aptly earned him the moniker, "Mr. Partytime." This sensibility is reflected in his colorful large-scale installation, *Maze* (1981 - 1982), constructed of painted aluminum piping wrapped with vibrantly dyed and sewn canvases. One could interpret such a work as a playful riff on Minimalist predecessors, like Tony Smith's imposing geometric monochrome *Maze* from 1967.

The artists' individual relationships had their own flavor and function. Shields and Loving often had protracted conversations about art and art history. Shields and Van Buren, by contrast, almost never discussed art, save for the occasional shop talk about dealers and galleries. Despite the amount of time these four artists spent together, their visual lexicons would remain highly distinct.

Many of these artists describe influence as if it were occurring beneath the work itself, at a foundational level. "Influences are who you spend your time with," Van Buren has said. The group always supported each other with camaraderie and good humor. Their differing sensibilities continuously demonstrated new possibilities for their individual practices. Van Buren—who notes that a family member's intrusion into the studio during work hours can launch him into a "complete state of fear"—still tries to channel Shields's preternatural ease in the studio. In a 1975 interview with Shields, originally published in *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, Pindell broached what she called the "hostile question" directly, asking him which artists he admired. He quipped that it was H.C. Westermann, primarily for his acrobatic ability to "walk on his hands." Clarifying his cryptic response, Shields went on to describe the enigmatic character of influence as something stemming from residual feelings one gets from another's work—feelings that can be played with for a time, but not so long as to fundamentally alter one's own personal expression.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible to deny obvious parallels among these artists' respective crafts. Canvases have been freed from their rigid stretchers, which we see both in Pindell's early monochromatic painting *Untitled* (1976) as well as in Shields's *Space Sisters* (1972-1974). Some works recast the iconic Minimalist grid in new light, like Pindell's cut-and-sewn painting *Untitled #24* (1978-1979), Loving's vivid quilted painting, *Square* (1973-1974), or Shields's monumental delicately-threaded painting *Hart Sunkist Lie* (1969). One might say the same of Van Buren's sculptural installation *Untitled* (1969/2023), where scintillating globs of translucent polyester are hung from

the wall in orderly but irregular rows from bundles of fiberglass strands, like organic specimens in some scientist's lab.

According to art historian Jenni Sorkin, for several of these artists, "embracing the historically low status of textiles was a way to reclaim personal histories and embed individual artistic practices with sublimated narrative content." For Pindell and Loving in particular, craft was often seen also as a stand-in for race or gender, which would become major contexts for showcasing their work.

The Whitney Museum of American Art was a singular institution in facilitating these discourses. In 1969 and 1970 the museum acquired two of Shields's works, and in 1969 he was included in their annual exhibition, the same year as his solo show at Paula Cooper Gallery. Loving had his first solo exhibition of hard-edge paintings at the museum from December 1969 to January 1970, a body of work he would soon abandon. Feeling constrained formally and conceptually, and feeling his work neglected to reflect his lived experience, Loving tore up a bunch of geometric canvases, before stitching them back together again in improvised compositions. This act would catalyze an aesthetic he retained for the rest of his career, exemplified by iconic paintings such as *Untitled* (1973). Despite enjoying similar early success with his Minimalist sculpture, Van Buren would soon abandon it, producing delicate cast polyester sculptures that demonstrate a persistent fascination with chance, process, and the generative capacity of art. In 1971, Loving and Pindell would both be included in the Whitney's controversial exhibition, *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, and the following year, Pindell, Loving, and Shields would appear together in the museum's annual exhibition.

While New York City played a formative role for all of these artists, in the early-1980s Van Buren and Shields would leave the city for secluded Maine and Shelter Island, respectively. Nevertheless, their mutual creative and personal bonds would persist for decades. The galleries will also co-publish a fully illustrated catalogue with two new essays by Sarah Cowan (Assistant Professor of Art and Art History at DePauw University and author of *Howardena Pindell: Reclaiming Abstraction*, Yale University Press, 2022) and Amy Rahn (Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Maine at Augusta).

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to represent Howardena Pindell, Richard Van Buren, and the Estate of Al Loving. Van Doren Waxter is pleased to represent the Estate of Alan Shields

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