

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Anne Truitt's Spiritual Quest

As her death approached, was the artist starting fresh or beginning to let go?

by John Yau

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Anne Truitt, "Sound Ten" (2003), acrylic on paper, 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches (©annetrutt.org/
Bridgeman Images/Matthew Marks Gallery)

In 1965, while living in Japan with her three children and husband, Anne Truitt (1921–2004) wrote:

What is important to me is not geometrical shape per se, or color per se, but to make a relationship between shape and color which feels to me like my experience. To make what feels to me like reality.

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In her pursuit of reality, and the importance she ascribed to place in her life, starting with her childhood on the Maryland coast, Truitt merged three-dimensional columnar supports and color into a beguilingly nuanced experience that slowly reveals itself as we walk around the mute form in our midst.

In her exploration of the limits of perception, Truitt pushed the implications of Ad Reinhardt's almost imperceptible shifts in hue and Barnett Newman's precisely divided monochromatic fields into a new territory.

Truitt painted the surfaces of her sculptures in layers, each of which has been sanded down before the next coat is applied. As we make our way around one of her forms, all sorts of interactions take place.

Did the hue darken or lighten from one plane to the next, or is the difference the result of ambient light? I find myself becoming more aware of the interplay of reflection and shadow in a room occupied by Truitt's sculptures. What about that thin band of color running along the bottom? What does it mean to circumambulate the sculpture and still feel as if some part of it eludes you? What leads me inevitably to think about the relationship between beauty and an understated unease? Is it because I am reminded of how much of everyday phenomena escapes my attention?



Anne Truitt, "Sound One" (2003), acrylic on paper, 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches (©annetruitt.org/Bridgeman Images/Matthew Marks Gallery)



Anne Truitt, "Sound Seven" (2003), acrylic on paper, 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches (©annetrutt.org/Bridgeman Images/Matthew Marks Gallery)

These questions, which link what I see with the associations it stirs up and memories that rise to the surface, underscore that the past and present are connected, but also, to my mind and more importantly, that art and life are not separate. However inspired Truitt might have been by her encounter with the work of Reinhardt, she did not agree with his statement: "Art is art. Everything else is everything else."

In his comprehensive, beautifully written *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (2004), James Meyer, Truitt's most insightful critic, wrote: "Each sculpture is the residue of a memory or a chain of memories triggered during its completion."

We need not know what triggered Truitt's choices because she never represents them. With sculpture, she found a way to embrace her experience without turning it into an image or a narrative. In her work, this experience is translated into a color sensation that is modulated and subtle, an optical phenomenon linked to our moving body. We have to readjust our orientation to the physical world and open ourselves up to nuance.

Truitt's sculptures have often been described as eccentric because they do not fit comfortably into the well-established parameters of either Minimalism or Color Field painting, both of which she has been associated with. Yet it seems to me that this attitude toward her work is diminishing. Neither sculpture nor painting, her hybrid forms are unlike anything else that was being done at the time, and they should be recognized for that.

Truitt belongs to the small and distinct group of artists that Carter Ratcliff recently defined when he wrote in *Hyperallergic* of Joanna Pousette-Dart's shaped paintings: "[She] has found an original way to be original." (Ruth Asawa could also be placed in this group.)

For those who know Truitt's sculptures and paintings, the exhibition *Anne Truitt: Sound* at Matthew Marks Gallery (November 12 – December 19, 2020), which consists of a body of work that has never before been exhibited, will come as a surprise. In these paintings on paper, the merging of support and paint is unlike anything else in her oeuvre.

According to the gallery press release:

While making this series, Truitt described waking one morning with the impression that her sense of shape, structure, and proportion had departed her. "What is left is 'sound,' some kind of energy without name," she wrote. "It occurred to me that the 'name' of the things I am making out of the beautiful delicate strong paper is SOUND."

This statement implies that what had left the artist was her ability to recognize where she was in the world; her sense of measure had been replaced by feelings of chaos.

As the word "sound" suggests, these paintings are purely abstract and have little to do with physical place. The series consists of 14 roughly square, monochromatic works done in thickly brushed acrylic on unevenly edged handmade paper.



Anne Truitt, "Hover" (1999), acrylic on wood, 18 1/4 x 14 x 14 inches (©annetrutt.org/
Bridgeman Images/Matthew Marks Gallery)

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I was taken by the fact that, making these works the year before she died, she had stopped using a signature process she had long employed in her sculptures, of sanding between each coat of paint.

As a counterpoint to the paintings, the exhibition includes two box-like sculptures, both of which are 18 ¼ inches high. In “Hover” (1999), Truitt painted the sides a color she described as “orangey-apricot” and the top lavender, which she extended down the sides “a little tiny sliver.” The low height of “Hover” draws the viewer’s attention to the top, which seems to detach itself from the rest of the sculpture and float above it, a plane of lilac-colored light.

Emphasizing the physical, rather than the optical, something completely different happens in the thickly covered, brushy works on paper. Was Truitt starting fresh? Or was she beginning to let go, knowing that death was fast approaching? Maybe these two conditions are entwined rather than divergent. The size of the works echoes the field of vision when one is staring straight ahead. The first four paintings in the *SOUND* series are black. They are painted in viscous acrylic on paper with deckled edges. They have been mounted on a support in a shallow box frame, so that they float before the viewer — uneven, planar forms.

Truitt wanted the support and color to merge in her sculptures; she was not interested in making a painted sculpture. In her hands, the geometric form, with its different planes, becomes a complex synthesis of object, color, and light, an optical thing.



Anne Truitt, “Sound Four” (2003), acrylic on paper, 19 1/2 x 19 3/4 inches (©annetruitt.org/Bridgeman Images/Matthew Marks Gallery)

In a similar way, Truitt merges the paint with support in the *SOUND* paintings. The resulting works have a mineral-like presence; they resemble sheets of slate floating before us. The association with slate is especially true of the black paintings (which account for nearly half of the 14 works). At the same time, the heaviness of the works' material presence is undermined by the illusion that they are floating in the frame.

This contradiction is elevated to a poignant pitch by the scale, which echoes the viewer's concentrated field of vision.

Thinking back over Truitt's work, from her breakthrough piece, "First" (1961), which was inspired by the white picket fences of her childhood in Easton, Maryland, to these last works on paper, I was reminded of the final stanza of Robert Creeley's poem "The Rhythm" (1962):

The rhythm which projects
from itself continuity
bending all to its force
from window to door,
from ceiling to floor,
light at the opening,
dark at the closing.

In her investigation of the limits of seeing, Truitt was not a materialist. Through her work she expressed a spiritual recognition that one cannot see everything there is to see, even as we are pulled irrevocably forward, toward chaos and infinity. With the *SOUND* paintings, Truitt did not close her eyes or avert her gaze. She worked her way from black to milky white to bold red to gray. Color became visceral and rough, a celebration of the physical world in all its manifestations. In these paintings, I hear Truitt saying hello and goodbye.

Anne Truitt: *Sound continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (523 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 19.*