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SITE SPECIFICS

Iran Do Espirito Santo: Deposition at Sean Kelly Gallery



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Prior to its canonization as a bona fide art historical movement, Minimalism was widely dismissed as overly simple and utterly lacking in content; the term "minimal art," coined by the philosopher Richard Wollheim, was originally intended as criticism. The Brazilian artist Iran do Espírito Santo has often been associated with the Minimalists, and at first glance, his third solo exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery appeared to be itself nearly devoid of content: the only works presented in the main galleries were a subtle, site-specific wall painting and two black rectangular objects. Yet as with the best Minimal art, sustained viewing of Espírito Santo's work opened up crucial questions about vision, perception, materiality, spectatorship, and architectural space.

The site-specific work, entitled *En Passant*, transformed three contiguous walls into architectural representations of the grayscale; each wall was divided into narrow, parallel stripes that gradually ranged from white to black. According to the statement from the gallery, these grayscales alluded to a photographer's darkroom test strip. The work was lit from above by a skylight muted with scrims, ensuring that each viewer would have a different perceptual experience of the piece depending on the time of day and the weather.

The grayscale, with its relation to photography and the painter's range of colors, evokes the methods and practices of pictorial representation, which seeks to divide the chaotic field of visual phenomena into coherent, legible parts. In viewing *En Passant*, however, one noticed that the ideal order of the grayscale was subtly disrupted by the play of real light and shadow along the walls, so that the white end of the spectrum might appear oddly dulled, or the dark end eerily illuminated. Because one's experience of the piece depended on the interplay between the representational element of the grayscale and the contingent or real element of light and shadow in the exhibition space, the piece appeared to suggest that the concepts of perception and representation cannot easily be disentangled from one another.

In addition, by recasting the gallery walls as primarily perceptual phenomena, Espírito Santo subverted the logic of earlier site-specific art. Whereas Minimalist and Conceptual artists had rejected the illusionistic space of painting in order to call attention to the real architectural and social structure of the gallery, Espírito Santo reimagined architectural structure as itself inscribed between the real and the illusory. Yet, characteristically, the implications of this gesture were not fully elucidated in the work, but rather left open to the viewer's speculation.

The two other major works in the exhibition, both entitled *Deposition*, also negotiated the problem of real space versus representational space. Each of these nearly identical pieces consisted of a large sculptural representation in black granite of a matted and framed picture. The choice of a large scale and a heavy, monumental material for these works emphasized the status of the picture as a physical (or even architectural) object. At the same time, the exaggerated size of the *Deposition* pieces, along with their extreme simplicity of form, tended to establish the objects as caricatures, or icons of themselves, thus bringing them back to the realm of representation.

Ultimately, the strength of Espírito Santo's practice is not his treatment of any single aesthetic or philosophical issue, but rather his dexterity in weaving together multiple problems and projects that might otherwise seem unrelated, and thereby producing unexpected results. This approach of course runs the risk of lapsing into inconsistency, inconclusiveness, or incoherence, and there were indeed moments when the combined effect of the works in the exhibition seemed somewhat vague. Yet overall, the instability of Espírito Santo's practice appears inseparable from its promising tendency toward what the avant-garde once termed experiment.

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