

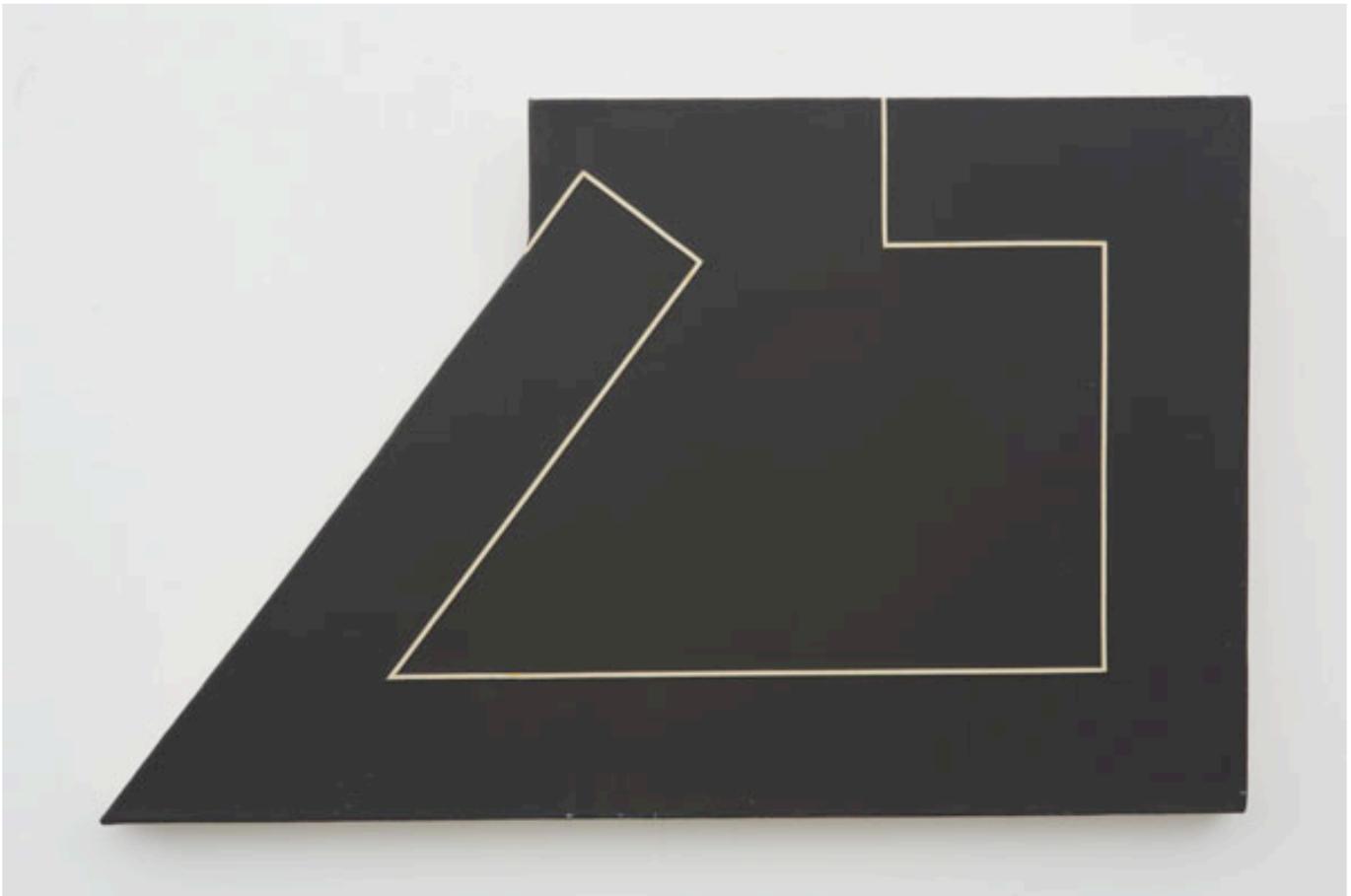
**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN

**TED STAMM** *Paintings*

*by Pac Pobric*

MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY | MARCH 28 – APRIL 27, 2013



Ted Stamm, "78SW-9," 1978. Oil on canvas, 32 × 20". Courtesy of the estate of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York © The Estate of Ted Stamm. Photo: Jason Wyche.

It's no longer popular to believe that art follows a single trajectory, but the truth is that certain artists follow clear paths. The painter Ted Stamm is a good example. Since his death in 1984 at the age of 40, the artist has had only three solo exhibitions in New York. His recent show at Marianne Boesky is his fourth. Each inevitably took on the character of a retrospective, and what has emerged quite clearly is

the teleological nature of his work. His art relied on specifying problems and pursuing them tirelessly, and while the work jumped around in terms of quality, it didn't necessarily do so in terms of the questions he proposed, nor did he ever lose any of his ambition.

The Boesky show begins in 1973, when Stamm was still making relatively traditional paintings: square or rectangular formats, with an emphasis on painterly abstraction. Some of these pictures may be better than others, but by the standard of his later development, they seem to have been a blip. It's not that they fail to propose interesting questions. In "#5", (1973) a thin line of unprimed canvas runs along the painting's periphery and frames a flurry of rich black paint. It's a curious picture, no doubt, but ultimately unsatisfying, and Stamm must have realized as much. He painted at least two others like it in the same year ("DCR 1C #13" and "OR-SC [Olivia RL-5c]"), both larger in scale, but neither picture seems to have given him an obvious sense of direction. They feel altogether too familiar; we've all seen paintings like these before.

But the question of scale and dimension also involves another: the role of shape in painting. Before a full year had passed, Stamm began to focus more fully on the overall structure of his work, and soon after he discarded the more traditional square and rectangular supports. His attention turned elsewhere: to the shapes of shadows, or the design of a baseball diamond. What Stamm saw in these models was an escape from the burden of composition. If he took anything from his earlier experiments, it was that the shape of a painting should be specific and that the problem with more traditional configurations was their seemingly accidental nature. New structures allowed him to more deliberately choose the shape of his work, opening an expanded range of possibilities for art that could feel altogether fresh.

The majority of the pictures in the exhibition—and certainly the best ones—develop from this discovery. By 1978, Stamm's *annus mirabilis*, he had begun his "Wooster" series, a group of paintings and drawings named after the SoHo street on which the artist lived, where he once noticed a pentagonal shape embossed on the sidewalk. All these pieces share the same pentagonal structure, but the works range in complexity. The simplest pieces, represented by a group of 13 small wood paintings, all painted in singular colors, evolve from a basic premise: that the measure of success for a shaped picture depends on how the structure of the work is addressed by the paint on its surface. To integrate one into the other, Stamm employed a monochromatic strategy capable of binding a single field to its shaped support.

The success of these works lies in their modesty. They follow the path of least resistance, which an ambitious painter like Stamm was bound to abandon. The better part of his energy was invested in a great task: realizing a shaped painting which didn't need to rely on the monochrome to fully integrate its surface with its support. The show's best painting, "78SW-9" (1978) does so through a basic division. The painting is split into two highly specific shapes that are separated by a thin line of unprimed canvas, which is not unlike the strategy he used in "#5" five years prior. Though the work is painted black, it isn't a monochrome. By dividing the surface of the work into two strikingly individual shapes, Stamm effectively uses the monochrome against itself, ending up with a painting that fully resolves its overall shape with the highly idiosyncratic design of its surface.

Yet Stamm wasn't always able to successfully resolve the problems his work proposed. His aspirations sometimes outpaced his practice, and after 1978, his work wavered. The following

year, he painted a number of pictures in a new series dealing with speed and movement, which he called his “Zephyr” works. These paintings introduce more radically designed supports and painting techniques, but the work stumbles while trying to juggle all these variables. “2YR-6”(1979) is the most egregious in its failure. The admittedly interesting shape of the work nevertheless entirely clashes with the black paint on its surface, resulting in a deep cognitive dissonance. It’s difficult to imagine that Stamm, with his abundant visual intelligence, could have seen the painting as a success. (Still, not all the works resulting from this series are so weak. An undated painting entitled “DRG-37” is not on view at Boesky, but was exhibited at Stamm’s 2011 show at the Minus Space gallery, and is possibly the artist’s crowning achievement.)

Still, Stamm’s achievements outshine his shortcomings. Certainly the strategies he employed are not unfamiliar to 20th century art. By the time he began making shaped paintings based on shadows and baseball fields in the mid 1970s, Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly had already made works which relied on predetermined structures. So Stamm didn’t invent the approach, but no matter; his success was that he managed to push it forward, with his best work realizing radical new compositions and possibilities. Stamm’s best work is singular, and its aspiration towards the resolution of a series of very difficult questions is commendable. In the end, he was never a derivative painter. His greatest feat may be that his work can only be truly judged against itself.

**509 W. 24th St. // NY, NY**