

# MIGNONI

*“It’s best to consider everything as color.”*

– D. Judd, “Back to Clarity: Interview with Donald Judd,” in *Donald Judd*, exh. cat. Staatliche Kunst-halle Baden-Baden, 1989, p. 94

*“We tend to discount a lot of meaning that goes on in life that’s non-verbal. Color can convey a total range of mood and expression, of one’s experiences in life, without having to give it descriptive or literary qualities.”*

– K. Noland, "Color, Format and Abstract Art: An Interview with Kenneth Noland by Diane Waldman," 1977, reproduced in K. Stiles & P. Selz (eds), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, p.123

Purity of color and clarity of form. The desire to create art that was unburdened by allegory, ideology, or existential angst. These threads connect the work of Kenneth Noland (1924-2010) and Donald Judd (1928-1994), two of the greatest American artists of the twentieth century. Born within five years of each other, Noland and Judd emerged as artists during the post-war economic boom years and, having absorbed the lessons of the European modernists and Abstract Expressionists before them, eagerly sought a new way forward for abstraction. Their use of color was particularly provocative, whether seen in the bright frontality of Noland’s post-painterly canvases or Judd’s ruminations on the physical presence of color via serialized forms. By letting their work be about color itself, rather than using hues to evoke emotion or as decoration, Noland and Judd opened up the field of non-objective art for generations to come.

Noland’s gloriously variegated art originated from his training at the legendary Black Mountain College in his home state of North Carolina, then headed by former Bauhaus educator Josef Albers. Albers and his faculty helped ignite a passion for color that would be pivotal throughout Noland’s career. Noland’s exposure to the geometric abstraction of Piet Mondrian, the magical color-moods of Paul Klee, and the joyful hues of Henri Matisse proved equally invaluable. This confluence of influences would separate Noland from the New York School and their Surrealist-inspired desire to express the inner working of the soul. Instead, his attention was solely focused on the act of painting itself.

While taking courses at Black Mountain College in 1950, Noland formed a close friendship with Clement Greenberg, the esteemed critic of the day who articulated the modernists’ preoccupation with the properties and processes specific to each artistic medium. Greenberg introduced Noland to the world of Abstract Expressionism, as well as the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler, whose remarkable technique of staining unprimed canvas inspired Noland’s own mature style. Yet unlike the diaphanous clouds of Frankenthaler or the frenetic sweeps of Pollock, Noland embraced geometric shapes and clean lines that brought the utmost clarity to his main concern – the visual impact of color. “I do open paintings,” Noland once stated. “I like lightness, airiness, and the way color pulsates. The presence of the painting is all that’s important” (K. Noland quoted in K. Moffett, *Kenneth Noland*, New York, 1977, p. 51). Over the course of his career, his expansive series of concentric circles, chevrons, diamonds, plaids, stripes, and shaped cavasses were all used as a vehicle to observe the interaction of color. His areas of unprimed canvas and innovative method of centering his compositions (in-part influenced by the therapeutic methods of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich) did away with

# MIGNONI

the Abstract Expressionists' obsession with all-over painting, while his vivid, soaked-in pigments maintained an obdurate flatness.

Noland began exhibiting his breakthrough concentric circle paintings in New York in 1959, while Donald Judd was completing his Masters in Art History at Columbia University and trying to advance his own art. At this time, Judd was working with increasing dissatisfaction in painting and felt uneasy with the spatial illusionism that inevitably arose when pigment was applied to the flat plane of a canvas. His development of extremely reductive three-dimensional forms coincided with his tenure as a critic for New York's leading arts periodicals, which saw him review hundreds of contemporary art exhibitions. The insights gained from his constant exposure to new art undoubtedly affected his work, particularly his abandonment of painting in the early 1960s.

As both artist and critic, Judd followed the evolution of Noland's career with great interest. In 1963 he wrote, "Noland is obviously one of the best painters anywhere" (D. Judd, "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine*, September 1963, reproduced in D. Judd, *Complete Writings: 1959–1975*, Halifax, 2005, p.93). He would repeat this statement again following Noland's 1965 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, writing at length and in great detail about the effects of Noland's colors within their formal arrangements. But within his earlier 1963 article, Judd had also lamented the limited nature of painting in general, essentially mounting an argument for his own practice. Painting, he claimed, lacked "the specificity and power of actual materials, actual color and actual space" (D. Judd, *ibid*, p.93). Judd admired Noland's innovations in painting, but ultimately the visual push-and-pull of his brightly stained canvases and the motifs of circles and lines to plane did not go far enough in Judd's conception of a wholly autonomous artwork. He felt pushed towards the radical next step in the modernist conceptualization of space, in which the art object would fully embody its most intrinsic qualities.

Judd's typically oblong, modular constructions are most often discussed for their spatial, almost architectural qualities – they both embody and define space, with projections and apertures or transparent materials that highlight and reveal their structure. They are self-contained objects, but were often produced to operate in relation to their surroundings. Indeed, Judd increasingly favored permanent installations of his work, leading him to develop the *gesamtkunstwerk* environs of his compounds in Marfa, Texas. Yet with his painter's background, Judd always weighted color as equal and inseparable to the spatial aspects of his work. He even considered color to be an important aspect of the raw materials he used, such as plywood, steel, and concrete. Plexiglass and anodized aluminum proved an ideal solution for Judd, as their infinite array of colors were integral to their materiality, thereby maintaining an honesty and authenticity he felt could not be matched with applied paint. Such materials enabled Judd to explore how color is perceived in different environmental conditions and what happens when hues are juxtaposed with each other – particularly in the polychromatic aluminum works he produced later in life.

Despite their rigid geometry and industrial fabrication, Judd's objects were still arrived at through creative intuition, particularly his choice of colors. They are fundamentally sensuous and are egalitarian in their appeal to every beholder's visual and bodily sensations. This enlivening of the senses is matched by Noland's decisive compositions and jazz-inflected

# MIGNONI

color improvisations. Indeed, the works of both painter and sculptor can claim to have a grounding effect on the viewer, for their insistence on the perception of color and form, untethered to external referents, engages the mind and body in the actuality of the present moment. Both men created works of great beauty through an extraordinary economy of means and were united in their belief in the unequivocal power of pure abstraction.