

## Leo Amino *The Visible and the Invisible*

July 6–31, 2020  
537 West 20th Street, New York

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Leo Amino, *Untitled*, 1956. © The Estate of Leo Amino

David Zwirner is pleased to present *The Visible and the Invisible*, an exhibition of work by the Japanese American sculptor Leo Amino (1911–1989) curated by Genji Amino, director of the Leo Amino Estate. On view at the 537 West 20th Street location in New York, the exhibition will feature a range of the artist's work from the 1940s to the 1980s, including previously unseen sculptures and works on paper from the artist's estate.

Born in Taiwan under the auspices of Japanese colonial rule and educated in Tokyo, Amino immigrated to the United States as a young man in 1929. During the second Sino-Japanese and World Wars, Amino became disillusioned with both Japanese and American nationalist traditions, seeing the provincialism and conformity they encouraged as anathema to the spirit of modernity. Amino shared a resolutely anti-conformist and anti-traditionalist philosophy with the exiles and refugees of the Bauhaus. Like fellow experimentalists of his generation Josef Albers and Ad Reinhardt, Amino was initially recognized by the cooperative Artists' Gallery, where he received his first solo exhibition in 1940. After several one-man shows in New York, Amino was invited by Albers to join the faculty of Black Mountain College in the summer of 1946, two years after the college's integration, where he taught alongside the Alberses, Jacob Lawrence, and Walter Gropius, and informed the education of students Ruth Asawa, Kenneth Noland, and Harry Seidler, among others. The college's experimental approach to media, embodied in Anni Albers's notion of "work with material," spoke to Amino's vision for a modern sculpture in which aesthetic and technical experiments were inseparable. He is one of three faculty of color to teach at Black Mountain during the history of the Summer Arts Sessions.

The first artist in the United States to utilize plastics as a principal material, Amino pioneered this medium more than two decades before its widespread use by other American artists, making him the successor to the Plexiglas experimentations of Bauhaus and constructivist artists Naum Gabo and László Moholy-Nagy. The artist's experiments emerged from dissatisfaction with his attempts to incorporate color into traditional sculptural media, anticipating the concerns of minimalist artists that would not gain widespread attention until the 1960s. Amino dedicated the second half of his career exclusively to these ideas, producing a series of "refractive" compositions with light, color, and transparency. His innovative practice is increasingly recognized alongside that of Japanese

American artists Asawa and Isamu Noguchi as contributing to the establishment of a unique subset of modern sculpture. As writer and critic John Yau notes, “[These] three wonderful sculptors of Japanese descent in the US during the 1950s and ‘60s... were exploring forms that were independent of minimalism and other sanctioned stylistic movements.”<sup>1</sup>

Taking its title from phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s eponymous 1964 book, *The Visible and the Invisible* will feature work from throughout Amino’s career, including sculptures made in synthetic resin, acrylic, wood, and wire. The works illustrate how Amino investigated transparency and the dynamics of perception, articulating space, light, and color through geometric and biomorphic sculptural form. The selection of “refractionals” on view speak to Amino’s unorthodox “minimalism,” which he understood not in terms of aesthetic polemic but in relation to his readings in phenomenology. As part of a practice of “phenomenological reduction,” a stripping away of received scientific and psychological assumptions, Amino deployed transparency in order to pose the question of the interdependency of subject and object through an optics of encounter, interpenetration, and absorption. In 1969 Vito Acconci described the uncanny experience of looking through Amino’s sculptures: “The over-all form looks solid, holding the viewer away from it, while the inside is elusive and tempts the viewer in. Seen from one direction, there is an agglomeration of color, while, seen from another, the color almost disappears; the viewer enters it unconsciously.”<sup>2</sup>

The first major exhibition devoted to Amino in more than thirty years, *The Visible and Invisible* will present his advanced artistic forms to a new generation of artists, collectors, scholars, and visitors.

Leo Amino’s work first reached a larger audience at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. After World War II he was one of the most exhibited sculptors at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s *Annuals*, the precursor to the *Whitney Biennial*, appearing in all but two iterations of the sculpture annual from 1947 through 1962. After Isamu Noguchi, Amino is the most represented artist of color in the history of the annuals for sculpture. He was featured in the major museum exhibitions of the period dedicated to contemporary sculpture, including *Carvers-Modelers-Welders* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1950), and *American Sculpture* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1951). Amino was one of six sculptors included in the Whitney’s landmark exhibition *The New Decade: 35 American Painters and Sculptors* (1955), which helped establish the significance and legacy of abstract expressionism in painting and sculpture. In 1952 Josef Albers recommended Amino for a position at Cooper Union, where he then taught for twenty-five years, introducing artists such as Jack Whitten to sculptural concerns.

Amino’s refractionals debuted at *Plastics*, an exhibition at the artist Dan Graham’s John Daniels Gallery in 1965. His work has been featured in numerous major group exhibitions at notable museums—including *A Plastic Presence*, The Jewish Museum, New York, 1970 (traveled to the Milwaukee Art Center and the San Francisco Museum of Art); *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 2001 (traveled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville; San Diego Museum of Art; and Phoenix Art Museum); *Black Mountain College: Una aventura americana*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2003; and *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2015–2016 (traveled to Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2016; and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, 2016–2017).

A solo exhibition, *Polymorphic Sculpture: Leo Amino’s Experiments in Three Dimensions*, is on view at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, through April 12, 2020. *Leo Amino*, a major exhibition of Amino’s work, will be featured at the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, Asheville, North Carolina, in September 2020 and will be co-curated by Jessamyn Fiore and Genji Amino.

In addition, Amino's works are featured in the collections of notable museums and public institutions, including Asheville Art Museum, North Carolina; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Newark Museum, New Jersey; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick; among others.

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<sup>1</sup> John Yau, "Discovering an Unknown Sculptor, 30 Years after His Death," *hyperallergic.com* (May 12, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Vito Acconci, "Leo Amino," *ARTnews* (May 1970), p. 20.