



Howard Hersh

LESS IS MORE: MAKING THE CASE FOR MINIMALISM

Online Viewing Room: May 20 - July 22, 2021

Curatorial Reflections

This is a partial retrospective of the last decade in Howard Hersh's long artistic career that marks a turning point and the genesis of a prolific phase bursting with creativity, boundless energy, and inventiveness. This exhibition takes place during COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, a crisis that has awakened a renewed interest in Minimalism and the realization that less is more. This realization reverberates throughout our daily life and the economy. Through a narrow lens **Less is More: The Case of Minimalism** examines Howard Hersh's personal philosophy of No Separation and Minimalism. No Separation is his guiding principle that informs his life and art to simply say: "it's all connected!"

Minimalism is understood as an extreme form of abstract art developed in the USA during the 1960s consisting of artworks composed of simple geometric structures, squares and rectangles. With minimalism, no attempt is made to represent an outside reality. The viewer is only required to respond to what is in front of them as revealed in the medium or form. Hersh fits neatly with the leading minimalist artists as Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt to name just a few.

Hersh's flirtation with this radical form of art is undisputed. Each of his series shows a progression and a dynamic that manifests itself in infinite possibilities of growth and expansion. **Axis Mundi, Skin Deep, Roundabout** and **Migration** capture this essence. His minimalist visual language includes drawing lines, constructing grids, creating symmetrical and asymmetrical forms, cubes and modules ripe with endless permutations. Of note are the limited color palette and the use of a scraping technique, which removes layers and leaves markings as in a road map.

The **Axis Mundi** marks the first series transitioning from encaustic paintings to three-dimensional paintings laid out on grids. It includes mostly square canvases that vary in scale and form and draw the eye towards the lines crossing the canvas. The lines cross in all directions, opening a world of infinite possibilities. Symbolically, it depicts the center of the world where heaven (sky) and earth meet. In this series, one can make the case that conceptual + minimal go hand-in-hand.

In his paintings, Hersh makes good use of color limiting his choices to primary and secondary colors. It evokes one of Wassily Kandinsky's Bauhaus theories that sets in motion beliefs that art can provoke emotional, psychological and physical responses. Kandinsky observed that **yellow** has the ability to disturb, while **blue** creates an awakening of spirituality and spiritual awareness.



In **Skin Deep**, minimalism is a way to cut through the illusion of separation by “peeling back the layers” and revealing the essence of things. This is not to say that Hersh is eliminating complexity and diversity. His essence is inclusive and contains all that is. Similarly, Frank Stella, a minimalist painter, said of his early paintings, ‘What you see is that you see.’

Hersh is wrestling with a fundamental inquiry into the nature of painting and questions the notion that paintings exist as pictures of something -- illusions --while sculptures exist on their own, as objects. By reaching under the skin to reveal bare bones or the structure of his three-dimensional paintings, minimalist principles are at play. Hersh comes close to Ellsworth Kelly’s belief that paintings are not about expressing emotion, creating concepts, or telling a story with art. He directs our attention to the form and strips them of any reference to portraying objects. What Hersh offers us are, in his words, “structural objects”.

In **Roundabout**, Hersh extends his minimalism from the Skin Deep series by uniting art and crafts to build his 3D-structures. This is definitely a holdover from the Bauhaus School of Design. He infuses the **Roundabout** with a minimum of three colors to define space and achieve the mystery and magic of perception. Josef Albers’ theory of color relativity is tested revealing transformation based on the surrounding colors.

In **Migration**, the minimalist approach acquires a new look as Hersh crafts cubes, building modules and placing the structures on the floor. He limits his palette just to black and white. This preference directs the viewer’s attention to form, texture, mark making, and symbolic meaning. The use of black alone is visually striking, elegant and radiates sophistication. It performs an interactive function as well.

The title **Migration** simply implies movement from one medium to another as from painting to sculpture. The word also implies movement of people from one location to another. These days it provokes vigorous and contentious debates about policy. The debates are definitely warranted.

At this juncture, it’s fitting that we remember Marcel Duchamp’s argument that both the artist and the viewer are necessary for the completion of a work of art. Duchamp posited that the creation of art begins with the artist—often working in isolation in the studio—and is not completed until it is placed out in the world and viewed by others.

The entire exhibition is a bridge that connects Hersh with the early minimalists of the sixties. In **Making the Case for Minimalism**, Hersh’s visual language expands from 3-D painted structures on walls to cubes and modules that end up on the floor. Throughout, the imposed limit on his visual language and tools aim to remove all excess and becomes both transparent and revealing. The elimination of excess is a subtle call to resist consumerism and make a stunning statement of the post Covid-19 era. The past year has demonstrated a reliance on less and highlighted how we are all globally connected. There is merit and urgency in continuing this conversation about the meaning of less is more. Hersh leaves us with a bonus of an arresting aesthetic that he can call his own.