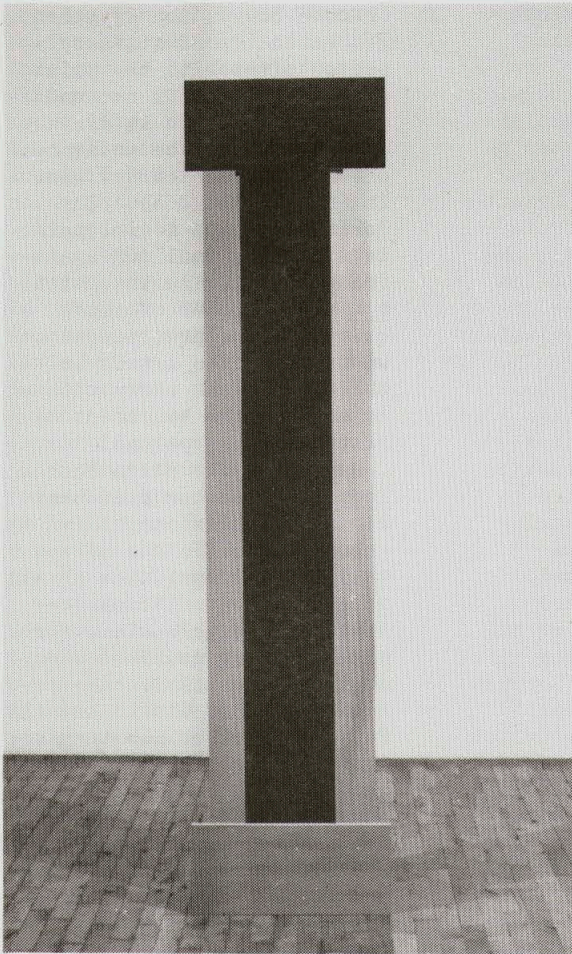


Untitled, 1978

Photograph: Geoffrey Clements



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Leaving to one side for the moment specific consideration of the visual delight, intellectual provocation and overall aesthetic merit of the four Ellen Phelan works exhibited here, we can move to examine some of the resonances they create. And this is a proper — indeed, even desired — move, for no work of art of any value fails to provide us such an opportunity.

As I watch these pieces — observe them, go away from them, then return to them to confirm or deny my visual and sensed memory of them — they raise for me intriguing questions about the definition of painting and sculpture.

What is "painting," exactly? It used to be safe to say that painting was a two dimensional representation (or symbol) of a three dimensional situation — which made it different from "sculpture," which was a three dimensional representation (or symbol?) of a (necessarily?) three dimensional situation.

Once painting started to become three dimensional, however, (nobody calls Schwitters' heavy, early collages sculpture) and ceased merely to represent, but began to become the thing it represented (or was a symbol of), and once painting, in the same period, flattened itself into an examination of the virtues of literal two dimensionality (in the interest of metaphor rather than symbol — Braque, Malevitch,) the borderline between painting and sculpture — which, too, was undergoing redefinition (Vantongerloo, for example; Boccioni) — became uncertain.

I bring all this up only to ask a couple of questions of those of you seeing this ex-

hibit. For example: of the four Phelan pieces (note the word pieces) before you, which are sculpture and which are painting? The three dimensional, standing pieces are heavily painted, for example — can be said to be three dimensional paintings, can as easily be said to be sculpture; while the painted wall pieces (intensely three dimensional in their effect) are what — bas relief? painting?

Painted sculpture — the Chinese clays, the Egyptian, Minoan and Greek statuary we see so often with the paint gone (alas!) — is not under discussion here. It is clearly (or, to be accurate, often quite unclearly) what it is — painted sculpture. Nor does trompe l'oeil painting fool us, fool our eye — indeed, it is its intention not to. Neither of these questions the preconceptions we bring to the art forms — the calipers we carry with us to measure the limits of our aesthetic perceptions.

But work like Ellen Phelan's does question our preconceptions, which is one of its values, which is one of the truly useful qualities of all excellent art. (No one believed trees were blue, for example — or could be seen as blue — until Cezanne reminded us that Giotto and the Persian painters saw them so, thereby altering the focus of our own mind's eye. And the journey of the poem, from Keats through Hopkins, Cummings and Olson, say, has certainly damaged our preconception of "the poem," has shown us that poetry is a more generous concept than many had thought, has many rooms in its mansion, too.)

Another of the values of Ellen Phelan's work is its "beauty" — its lyrical sto-

icism, its nonreferential way of announcing "here I am," its way of being both intensely of the present and time-less simultaneously.

(I am a little leery of words like "beautiful, moving, lovely," etcetera, in describing artists' work. Another sculptor recently showed me a new piece, a sizable curving slide of lead and concrete; I said, "It's beautiful!" [which, in context, it was; it was also many other good things.] The sculptor reacted as though I had thrown an insult; painters and sculptors are no different from writers — we all wish to be appreciated not only for our accomplishments, but to that accomplishment according to our own definitions.)

My reaction to art is always a "gut" one — no matter how more often I seem to be drawn to the "cool," the non-representational, the objectified than I am to the loud, the gestural, the "urgent." A gut reaction is useful, is a teaching tool, only when it is an emotional response informed by the intellect, and it is precisely this combined reaction that Ellen Phelan's pieces encourage.

I suggest you walk around the two standing pieces and imagine walking around the two wall pieces. I think you will find that they both reveal surprises that a static examination will not afford. I think you will be absorbed, for example, by the flat surfaces emerging from the three dimensional pieces, and the implied, invisible areas so important to the wall pieces. They extend into one another's domain, and create a new, enlarged mindscape.

I have not discussed Ellen Phelan's intentions with her; indeed, she may be concerned with effects and reasonings

opposite to my responses (thereby rendering them unattached theory.) It will be instructive to me, and maybe even fun, to hear her reactions to my reactions. And even if she is appalled by my conclusions, she cannot be altogether unhappy that her work is provocative, and happens to be not only art, but about art, as well.

Edward Albee, Guest Curator
New York City
February 1979

Ellen Phelan was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1943. She attended Wayne State University where she received a BFA in 1968, an MA in 1970 and an MFA in 1971. She has taught at Wayne State University, Farleigh Dickinson University and Michigan State University. Currently Phelan is a guest instructor at the California Institute of the Arts. She lives in New York City and has exhibited frequently at the Paula Cooper Gallery.

Works in MATRIX:

Untitled (single cross piece: blue, grey, green and salmon), 1978, birch plywood, gesso and oil, 84" x 20" x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York City.

Untitled (double cross piece: brown, dark blue, mustard brown, turquoise and rose), 1978, birch plywood, gesso and oil, 84" x 20" x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York City.

Untitled (small green cross), 1978, oil on canvas, 75 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 1 3/4", Lent by Joel Shapiro, New York City.

Untitled (four part cross), 1978-79, oil paint and dry pigment on four plywood panels, 37" x 37" x 1/4". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:
Willis Gallery, Detroit '70, '71, '74; Artists' Space, New York City '75; Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, MI '77, '79.

Selected group exhibitions:
Detroit Institute of Arts, 58th Exhibition for Michigan Artists '70; Grand Rapids Art Museum, Michigan Focus/Works on Paper '74; Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Critics' Selection From Detroit '72; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC '75, '76, '77, '78; Fine Arts Building, NYC, Painting '76; Willard Gallery, NYC, Abstract Images '76; Academie der Kunste,

West Berlin, Soho '76; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC, Ellen Phelan/Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe '77; Kansas City Art Institute, MO, Spectrum '77 Painting ↔ Sculpture '77; N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, New York '77; Hallwalls, Buffalo, New Abstract Objects '77; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Drawings '78; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC, Art is for the Spirit '78.

Selected bibliography by Phelan:

"A Conversation Between Two Sculptors," Jackie Winsor/Sculpture, The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati '76, p. 7+.

Selected bibliography about Phelan:

Schwartz, Barbara. "Ellen Phelan at Artists Space Gallery," Craft Horizons, vol. 36 no. 2 (April '76), p. 18.

Shapiro, Lindsay Stamm. "Ellen Phelan at Paula Cooper," Craft Horizons, vol. 37 no. 2 (April '77), p. 53.

Wooster, Ann-Sargent. "Ellen Phelan (Paula Cooper)," Art News, vol. 76 no. 4 (April '77), p. 129.

Lubell, Ellen. "Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe/Ellen Phelan," Arts Magazine, vol. 51 no. 8 (April '77), p. 36-37.