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Art in America

Charles Hinman

By: Lilly Wei
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Charles Hinman: *Leaning Twist*, 2010, canvas, wood and paint, 86 by 52 by 15 inches; at Marc Straus.

New York-based 80-year-old artist Charles Hinman debuted in New York in a group show at the blue-chip midtown Sidney Janis gallery in 1964. His latest show is a solo on the Lower East Side, a survey of his practice over the last two years, with many (perhaps too many) works hung too closely together, given their phenomenological nature.

That said, the striking, hard-edged, three-dimensional canvases—somewhere between painting and sculpture—hold their own, acting as reflectors of color, prisms of sorts, although made solely of canvas, wood and paint. These works are teasers, playing with hue, light, shape, with what's actually there and what's merely optical illusion. Some are shaped like a sandwich of two rectangular planes separated by an interval of space; others—such as *Topaz* and *Fire Opal* (both 2010)—are polygonal, evoking faceted gems many times enlarged.

The rectangular works—the "Eclipse" series—each have a pure white front panel, their reverse sides a high-voltage, mostly hidden monochromatic hue. The rear canvas is another single, vivid color, often a primary. Three of the smaller works, all from 2010—*Primary Eclipse (Blue)*, *Primary Eclipse (Yellow)* and *Primary Eclipse (Red)*—form a triptych, the anterior canvases angled away from the accompanying back panels in different ways to offer variously exposed expanses of color.

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In the more complex constructs, an extra color-Hinman normally uses three-often appears on one of the additional faces. The hues light up the wall reflectively as if the work were plugged in, bouncing onto or off its internal surfaces. The effect recalls James Turrell and other Light and Space artists, all grand illusionists in their way.

Leaning Twist (2010), a high point of the show, features an angled, narrow, rectangular white plane bisected by a triangular section in a green so pale (and beautiful) that the work's formal identity is difficult to pin down. Is the green pyramid a shadow? Is the white plane slightly bent? Or is the surface flat and simply an irregular geometric shape? As with all of Hinman's works, perceptions change with the vantage point of the viewer.

Hung on its own wall upstairs, *Dyad* (2012), the largest work in the show, dominated the room. More than 8½ feet tall, the piece is all white, architectonic and as full of shape-shifting, spatially deceptive feints as an unfolded Japanese screen. Throughout the day, the natural radiance from a skylight dematerialized first one plane then another into pure glow—at least temporarily.

With Hinman, what you see might be what you see, but it will be more than what you see at first. He requires time from his viewers, maybe because when he began his artistic career, there seemed to be more of it. You should give it to him; it will be time well spent.