

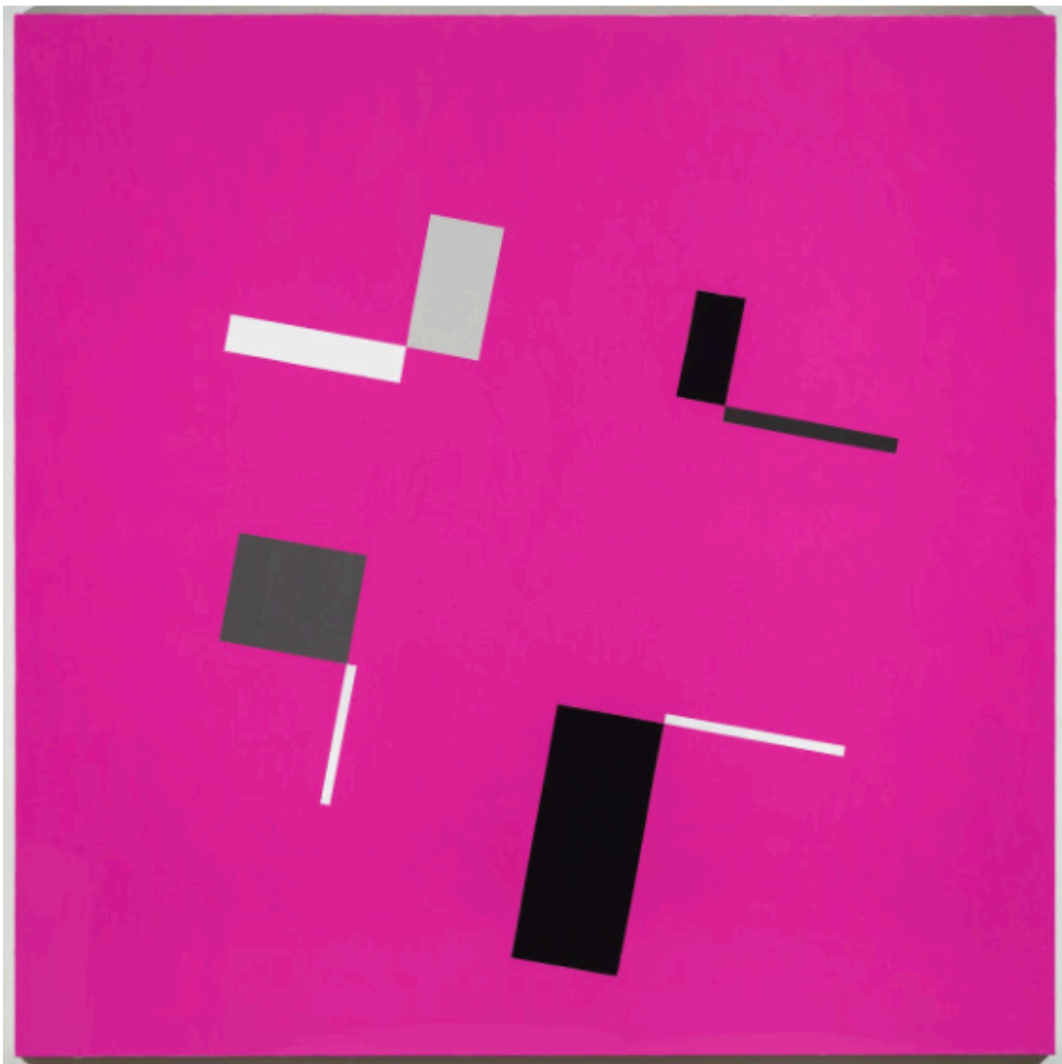
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HYPERALLERGIC

David Diao's Long Search for Painting's Many Identities



by John Yau
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David Diao, "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts describing a square-magenta (2021), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 inches (all images courtesy Postmasters)

One key to understanding Diao's art is that he has long worked with a reductive geometric vocabulary, while always pushing back against any of postmodernism's reductive narratives.

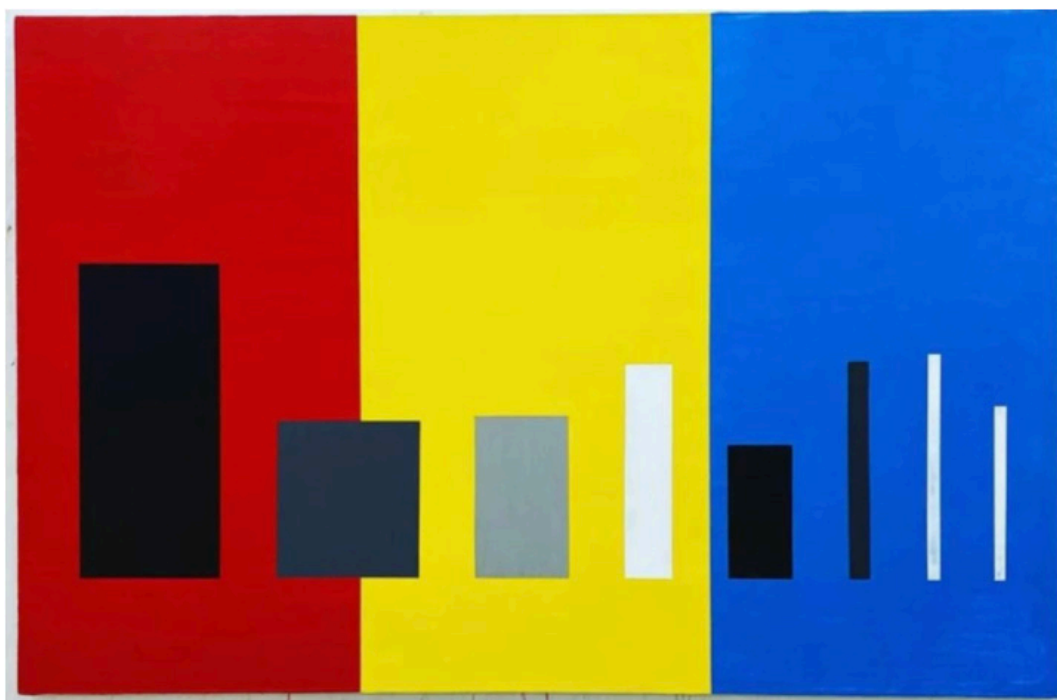
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In honor of David Diao's art practice I thought I should check the databases of four New York museums to see if any have his work in their collection. After all, he is in his late 70s, has been exhibiting in New York since 1969, and was included in the 1973 and 2014 Whitney Biennial. I learned that Diao has one painting dating from 1969 in the Whitney Museum of American Art and none in the Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, or Metropolitan Museum of Art. It seems that the institutions that house many of the works and artists he has responded to have not embraced his ongoing critique of Western abstraction's multiple legacies.

Diao's invisibility reminded me that, shortly after I moved to New York in 1975 and on into the late 1980s, I would often be called "David" when I was in Soho looking at art. Once, the dealer Leo Castelli walked past me on West Broadway and said "Hello David," in that formal way he had. Even people who knew me would have lapses and call me "David" and then look sheepishly away and hurry on. Concerned as I was about finding my own identity, I wonder if those incidents made me reluctant to write about Diao's work.



David Diao, "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts on red, yellow, blue" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 45 x 65 inches

Critics who have championed Diao's career, which began with his first solo show at Paula Cooper in 1969, tend to emphasize that his trajectory can neither be characterized nor encapsulated, at least in terms of style or subject matter. While

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this is true, such thinking fails to address that Diao has been investigating painting's identities since the outset of his career, often with a critique of the prevailing orthodoxy (i.e., Clement Greenberg and Donald Judd in the late 1960s and '70s) as an integral component. Diao's interest in the identity of the thing he investigates, along with his resistance to those imperialist attitudes that characterized American mid-century art criticism, testifies to his recognition that he is an outsider by virtue of being born in Chengdu, China, in 1943, and emigrating from Hong Kong to the United States in 1955 to live with his father (as his mother and two younger siblings were unable to leave China). Sometimes this sense of being an outsider was overt in his art; other times it was subtle.

Diao combines a unique set of traits among artists engaged with geometric abstraction; he is conceptual, doubtful, funny, autobiographical, racially conscious, terse, biting, coldly satirical, interested in sensuous yet matter-of-fact surfaces, willing to expose his process, contradictory, and resistant to developing a signature style as an aesthetic commodity. I believe the reasons for this resistance are inextricable from his awareness that he would always be regarded as a non-native.

In a 1963 interview with Gene Swenson, Andy Warhol said: "Somebody said my life has dominated me. [...] I liked that idea." This is how Hal Foster understood Warhol's Remark in *Pop* (2005): "If you can't beat it, join it; more, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; you might reveal its enforced automatism through your own excessive example." Foster's observation works if you are a white male artist, but you cannot join something that won't have you.

The art world has never quite known what to do with Diao's exposures, and — as he knows and has addressed with deadpan wit — his career is one that has bumped repeatedly into a glass ceiling. He is a conceptual painter whose interest in dates and history, among much else, defines a territory that borders that of the decade-older artist On Kawara (1932-2014) and the nearly two-decade younger Byron Kim (born 1961). It seems to me that Diao has been the least understood of this group of notional painters. This might be partially because he has pursued many separate and overlapping strands related to history, race, biography, pop culture, language, art history and its exclusionary beliefs, just to name the most obvious.

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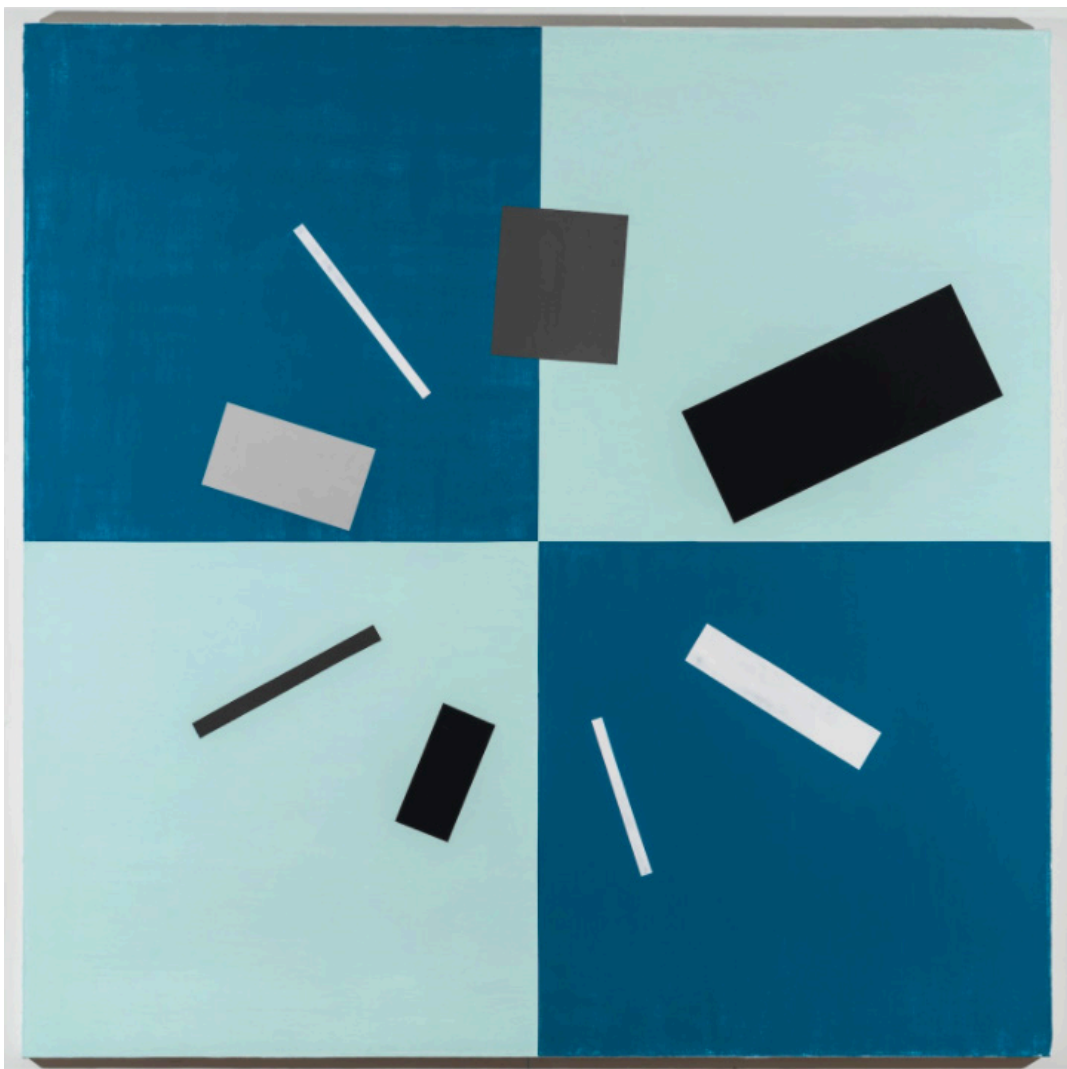
David Diao, "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts forming a circle, Green" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 83 x 84 inches

In his current exhibition, *David Diao: Berlin Chair in Pieces*, at Postmasters Gallery (January 29-March 12, 2022), Diao's ostensible subject is the "Berlin" chair, designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1923 and built and painted by Gerard Van de Groenekan. The Berlin Chair, made of eight solid oak panels cut to a specific size, with each board lacquered in black, gray, or white, is the first asymmetrical piece of furniture that Rietveld designed. A copy of the chair is suspended from the gallery ceiling.

The first work that I encountered in this exhibition of 13 paintings was "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts on red, yellow, blue" (2021). Against a ground divided into three equal areas of red, yellow, and blue, Diao has overlaid the eight separate parts, each painted monochromatically in black, gray, and white, and aligned vertically like a

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column in a chart. What comes across first is the pleasure of the painting. Its surface is a tight, palpable skin of acrylic that has been laid down in layers by a palette knife. This combination of tactility, sensuality, and the non-gestural is also true of Rietveld's chairs, as well as Barnett Newman's collectively titled series of large paintings, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, in which he worked asymmetrically for the first time, and paintings made by Brice Marden in the 1970s that referred to Newman. In fact, one of the many pleasures of "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts on red, yellow, blue" is its combination of European and American sources, suggesting they are not as separate as many have claimed.



David Diao, "Rietveld drives BMW" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

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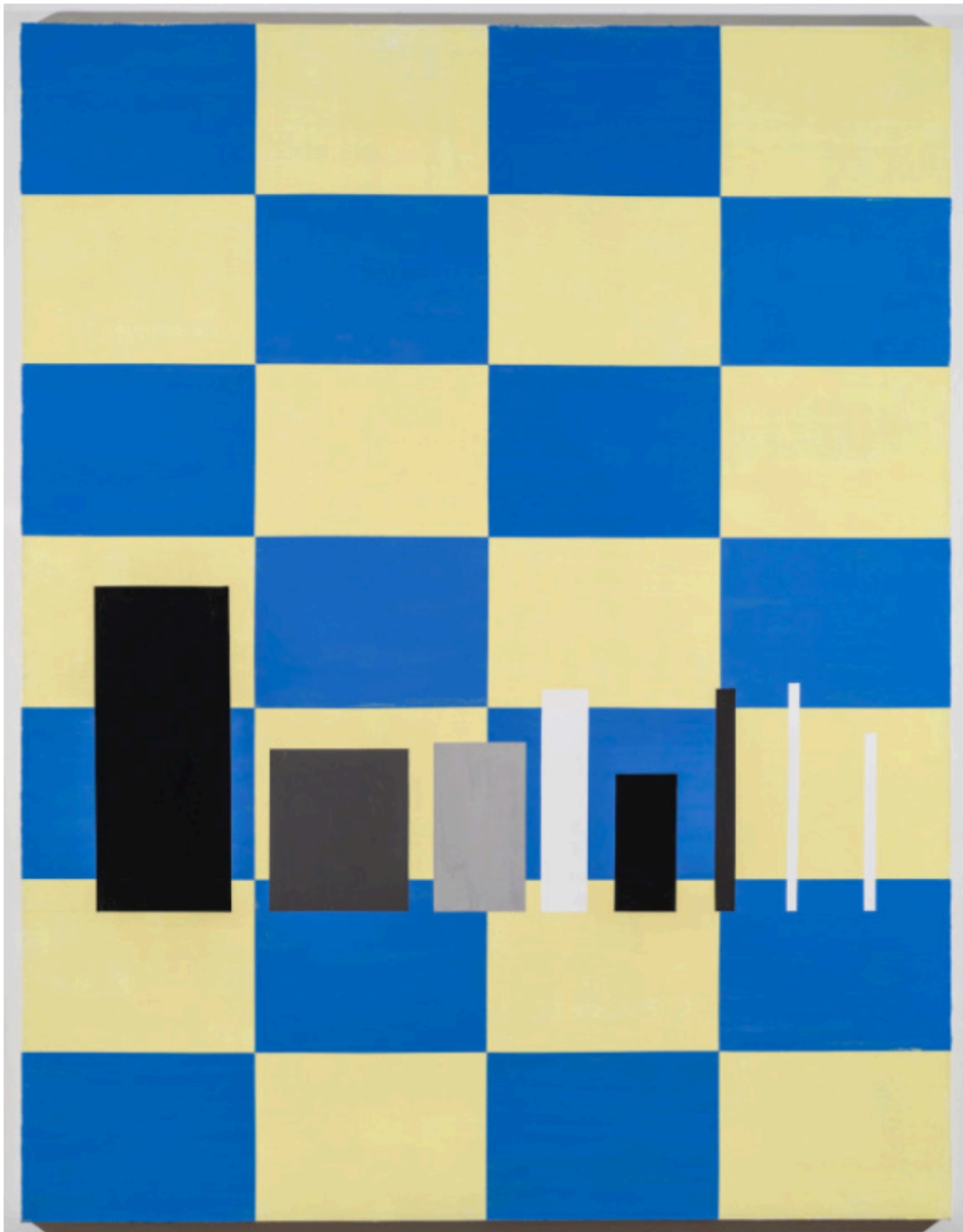
One key to understanding Diao's art is that he has long worked with a reductive geometric vocabulary, while always pushing back against any of postmodernism's reductive narratives, denying subjectivity. Diao is engaged with what Marcel Duchamp called the retinal, even as he is committed to embracing the intellectual and "[putting] painting once again at the service of the mind." This is how Duchamp put it in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney: "There was no thought of anything beyond the physical side of painting. No notion of freedom was taught. No philosophical outlook was introduced."

What finally distinguishes Diao from other conceptual artists is that he never claimed to be literal or purely objective. Like an ill-behaved guest, he muddied the situation wherever he went, particularly by repeatedly implicating himself in his art, which contradicts as well as critiques conceptual art's claim to objectivity.

The beauty of this exhibition is how much Diao does and evokes with a limited vocabulary of eight proscribed, rectangular, black, gray, and white shapes arranged against abstract grounds that go from monochrome to checkerboard. In "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts forming a circle, Green" (2021), his placement of the varied rectangles invites viewers to see the circumference of the circle in their mind's eye. This interplay between the visible and invisible is not a territory associated with geometric abstraction or conceptual painting.

In "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts describing a square-magenta" (2021), he goes a step further by arranging the eight bands in four kitty-corner pairings to describe the edges of a square, causing our attention to oscillate between the bands and the space they enclose. That inventive playfulness with limited means is one of the things that sets Diao apart from other artists engaging with modernism's utopian, purist legacy, particularly since he does not anchor his works to a supporting narrative. The other compelling thing about these paintings is the seamless merging of sensual surfaces with rich color, such as magenta. After Diao is satisfied with the ground, he draws in pencil where the bands will go and then fills in the color, using a palette knife to apply paint and tape to keep the edges straight. When he peels off the tape, one can still see the pencil lines, bringing to mind Harold Rosenberg's description of an "Action Painting": "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

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David Diao, "Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts in Katsura 2-blue and yellow" (2021), acrylic on canvas, 77 x 60 inches

This I think is Diao's real achievement. For all their seeming simplicity and visual pleasure, there is a lot to unpack in these paintings. Once you start unpacking them, you never know where you might end up. Take Rietveld's unassembled, uncomfortable, asymmetrical chair, for example. Did Diao pick it only because of its geometric vocabulary? Or was it also, as I began to think, a sign that the art world's institutions have never invited him inside?