

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## A Playful Take on Modernism's Austerities

by [Patrick Neal](#) on September 12, 2012



Left: Christian Maychack, "Floater (DF2)" (2012) (Courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery)

Right: Kenneth Noland, "Heat" (1958) (Courtesy of kennethnoland.com)

As a painting major in Albany, New York during the late 1980s, it was easy to sprint a few blocks from the art department over to the [Nelson Rockefeller Art Collection](#) to grab some inspiration from museum-quality works. Housed in the Empire State Plaza's underground Concourse gallery, this sprawling bunker of generic hard-edged abstract painting and minimal sculpture was regarded by students and faculty alike as something of an embarrassment of riches, the last vestiges of overblown Greenbergian dictates on advanced art. Nostalgia for the Concourse came to mind while taking in [Christian Maychack's](#) latest exhibit at [Jeff Bailey](#), being that so much of his work, to my eye, playfully sends up or gently skewers high modernism.

A press release for the show references [Frank Stella's](#) famous remark, "What you see is what you see," a quip that signaled the demise of illusion and metaphor. During the 1960s and going forward, formal relationships would be external, informed by the concrete examples of math and industry, to the extent that the shape and depth of a painting's support was an active component of

its content. Looking back, it can become a bit maddening to read the essays in “[Art and Objecthood](#),” a critical tome on high formalism, as the art historian [Michael Fried](#) expostulates over and over again on the recipes for perfect formal purity.



Left: Christian Maychack, “Righted (CF29)” (2012) (Courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery)

Right: Christian Maychack, “Corners (CF28)” (2012) (Courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery)

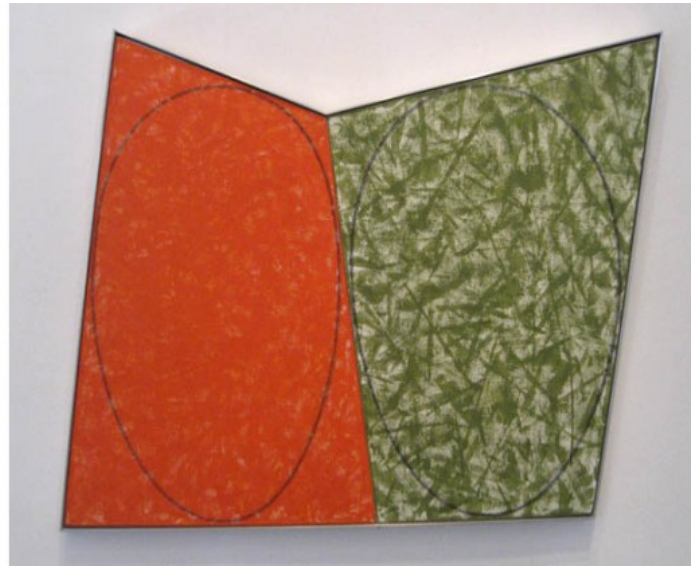
Maychack, who could be labeled a sculptor, has largely created flat wall works, with the exception of a few freestanding sculptures in the center of the gallery. And, much as color field painting and minimal sculpture cross referenced their respective intrinsic vocabularies, Maychack’s work is also a little bit of both. The title of the exhibit, *FLATS*, can be taken as a play on flat surface or 3-D support (as in theatrical scenery flats), and Maychack has come up with ingenious ways of creating paintings with his sculpture materials.

After kneading and squishing blobs of colored clay epoxy onto his supports, he then presses and flattens out one side of the mound. Seen from the front, these flat surfaces resemble vintage formica countertops decorated in psychedelic patterns reminiscent of cracked ice. Likewise, wooden dowels, shims, and actual tree rings serve as supports. Their surfaces remain visible, becoming integral to the work as drawn lines, latticed grids, and background textures. To fully appreciate the work, you need to consider both the finely attenuated front sides as well as the raw and revealing backsides.

The free-standing floor sculpture “Floater” has a brilliant, pthalo-blue-and-grey composition with a bull’s-eye running through its center. The color spools and stains much like [Kenneth Noland’s](#) fiery concentric circles. Looking closer, the pooled color in Maychack’s piece materializes by way of a hollowed-out log enlarged with clay. Maychack lets nature take its course, allowing the clay to seep into and stratify around the natural ring formation.



[Open](#)



Left: Christian Maychack, “Bent Oval (CF30)” (2012) (Courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery)

Right: Robert Mangold, “Study for Red Ellipse Green Ellipse” (1987) (Courtesy of [Arts Observer](#))

Maychack crafts his pieces with a variety of thick and thin pieces of wood that act as edifice. These slats, which appear lifted, flat, and sometimes bowed from the wall, perform as unwitting Constructivist drawings. Ellipses show up throughout the show, seen intersecting the edge of a frame or floating as splotches of clay that could be color field-style sponges or stains. It’s possible to see a wall work like “Bent Oval (CF30)” as coming at [Robert Mangold’s](#) geometric elisions (seen above) through the back door.

Nowadays, a skepticism of formal beauty is received wisdom and the favored landscape to draw subject matter from for art includes both the sacred and profane. We are in a boundary-less state in which nothing is off limits. Contemporary sculptors interested in working with physical materials, as Maychack is, often take as their source material the recesses and underpinnings of architectural space, whether it is the moldings of a room (see [Francis Cape](#)), the sprayed girders of an underpass ([Karlis Rekevics](#)), or the negative spaces in and about actual objects ([Rachel Whiteread](#)). Maychack’s work, which shares a bit of this industrial drive, doesn’t deny beauty; rather, it draws on our pluralistic time, taking stock of both where sculpture has been and where it is going.

*Christian Maychack’s FLATS continues until October 6 at [Jeff Bailey Gallery](#) (625 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).*

Tagged as: [Christian Maychack](#), [Jeff Bailey Gallery](#), [modernism](#)

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