

The Highlights - Peter Young at PS1

Peter Young, #2, 1966

Many artists who came of age post-Abstract Expressionism experienced separation anxiety, searching for some light outside the pedagogical shadows of their predecessors. Pressured to redefine the process of painting, some artists deemphasized materiality in favor of the idea or concept. Others favored materials over systems to determine the form of their work. This fretfulness spawned an incestuous outbreak, propelling a systemic and drifting course of conceptual modulations. Tracing back over the folds is a labyrinthine endeavor, and many artists have been lost along these footpaths to nowhere. Thankfully, PS1 (and David Reed's and Katy Siegel's recent exhibition *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975*) has brought one such artist back to New York after an over 35 year hiatus.

Peter Young, #10, 1967

Tighten your saddle; that first gallop through Peter Young's survey (1963-1977) at PS1 is about as congruent and linear as the first fifteen minutes of an acid trip. But this turbulence is the show's mainstay, and the initial pass through is not pretty. Young, like many artists working during this era, seemed to struggle with a reality where two or more independent elements were battling along side one another. His work seems to leap from psychedelic patterning to the rigid 'What you see is what you get' propositions of Minimalism and Process art. The first six years expand and contract rapidly, charting a profound personal upheaval into the struggles of being an artist during a pluralist era. While many of his contemporaries appeared comfortable (even solipsistic) with their systematic approaches, Young seems truly confused and self-conscious about how to paint something differently.

The survey softens Young's Minimalist motifs to seem far less severe than his peers'. While the frankness of his titling and his visual ordering do take on the typical systematic approaches of this period, his work feels less insular and academic. Collectively they are more like ruminations and personal explorations into whether art can be a convincing translator of language, history, and consciousness. Young's dot paintings, #2 and #3 (both from 1967), literally shine back at you with reflecting light from the gallery windows. These are the most understated and visually complex of all the paintings in the show. A hard painted perimeter holds the canvas firmly off the wall, and a stark topographical view trembles with each move through the gallery. These are truly hallucinatory and

contemplative works about the instability, dormancy, and excitability of paint. There is no common ground or single point of view in these works - they are truly limitless.

Peter Young, #5, 1968

The second half of the exhibition represents a clear rupture in Young's personal values and studio practice. During the 1970s he traveled throughout Arizona, Utah, Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, and Morocco. The works produced during this time illustrate a transitory and deeply personal connection to these environments. However, his interest in the cultural, spiritual, and geographical settings took him too far into ornamentation and craft. His bead paintings are a range of muted fluorescents and pastels, mimicking the topographical rainbow of the southwestern landscape while referencing the cultural costuming of these ancient cultures. Cumulatively these works seem more mature and sustaining, but there is less personal risk. Disconnected from the demands of the art market, Young was left to make work without the same intellectual (and monetary) demands.

Refreshingly, the curating of this survey presents both a remarkable collection of work and a meditation on the difficulty of being an artist. Throughout the sixties Young seemed pressured and confused by the New York art scene, restlessly transforming his approach to making paintings. Fearing that he would become a market commodity Young turned down the opportunity to show regularly with Leo Castelli and cut all ties with his dealers in New York. In 1969, at the height of the pluralist era, Young left New York. It is difficult to know how Young's sheltering from the city benefited his work and whether becoming a martyr will have more impact historically than the work itself. But this was the first survey show I have seen that was not fashioned on heroism, but rather the unromantic and often stifling realities of being a young struggling artist.