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Building Models: The Shape of Painting

By Alfred Mac Adam



David Row, *Phantom*, 2022. Oil on linen, 52 × 89 inches. Courtesy the artist and Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Saul Ostrow, who curated this wonderful show, has single handedly vindicated the concept of connoisseurship, a term generally held in contempt. But connoisseurship, we should remember, entails discernment, taste, and long experience with myriad forms of art. Ostrow enacts all these ideas, so the ensemble he has created could well be taken as an exercise in the art of selection.

Building Models: The Shape of Painting

The Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation

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And selection implies control, discipline, the ability not only to choose the right artists but also to pick the right work from the oeuvre of artists whose production was only limited by mortality. There are ten pieces in this show, all major works capable of standing on their own in terms both of size and importance to command our attention. Ostrow's Faustian dilemma, then, was not only to identify the artists and the works that best embodied his guiding aesthetic but also to articulate a kind of unity in his anthology, a way to make the works complement one another without any single piece drowning out the rest. He succeeds brilliantly.

Size and restraint, usually conflictive notions, are the first ideas Ostrow brings under control. Of course, nothing brings space and nature under control better than geometry, not *just* within the work but the geometry *of* the work, the emergence of the shaped canvas. As Ostrow puts it in the catalogue essay he wrote for the exhibition:

The Shape of Painting addresses the multifaceted ways artists have engaged with the physical presence of painting to foster a dynamic interplay between viewer and artwork. Each work presented embodies a distinct approach and strategic intent; indexically, they do not represent a comprehensive list of such approaches, as this exhibition is not intended to be encyclopedic. Nor are the works included meant to be iconic; each is instead a prime example of a particular strategy. They serve as models for how painters, without abandoning the frontality of abstract painting, have shaped supports to reorder the viewers' assumptions about what they recognize as abstraction.



Ron Gorchov, *Spice of Life II*, 2017. Oil on linen, 71 ½ × 102 × 14 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation. Photo: Jason Wyche.

We might demur about the idea that these paintings are not iconic when we turn to the first work visitors encounter, Ron Gorchov's *Spice of Life II* (2017), a monumental oil on linen, 71 by 102 by 14 inches. Pushing away from the wall, Gorchov's saddle-shaped canvas is rendered with two red marks, inverted parentheses reminiscent of E.E. Cummings's typographical tricks: here they exclude the world, forcing the viewer to understand that it is not the reality of the world that matters here but the reality created by the work of art.

The sculptural quality in Gorchov's work becomes collage in Ruth Root's 2025 untitled work, which combines fabric, plexiglas, enamel paint, and spray paint. Also imposing in size (99 by 52 inches), Root's work demands we deal with a frozen geyser of color bars exploding in front of a mass of geometric forms gathered on a green field. The point is tension between fixed order and dynamic propulsion, a work that simultaneously moves and remains still. The sense of frozen motion persists in Joanna Pousette-Dart's *3 Part Variation #2 (3 reds)* (2015–16). Pousette-Dart's acrylic on canvas (68 by 4 by 86 inches) simulates collage by its subtle layering of shapes to suggest depths, figures floating in a space of their own.

On the gallery's second floor, the works derive their power from the tension between geometric rigidity and explosive energy. Joe Overstreet's untitled work (1982) is an acrylic on canvas in an abstract expressionist style—splotches of paint seemingly slammed against a blue field—but abbreviating that field are wooden rods, like the poles of a teepee, that cut off the traditional rectangular field and contain the wild painted gestures within two complementary triangles. The tension is palpable in this work, just as it is in Russell Maltz's *S.P./ACCU-FLO* (2013), which the exhibition catalogue describes as comprising Flashe Fluo vinyl on four plywood plates suspended from a steel bracket, and measuring 71 by 61 by 7 inches in its entirety. As usual, Maltz works with material he could have stumbled upon then assembled like a mass of playing cards casually piled on top of one another and painted in magenta and yellow. Art for Maltz is simultaneously a finding and a recombining, but this collage seems about to explode.



Installation view: *Building Models: The Shape of Painting*, the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, New York, 2025–26. Courtesy the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation. Photo: Jason Wyche.

An almost neoclassical calm prevails in David Row's *Phantom* (2022), oil on panel, 52 by 89 inches. The appeal here is something we could call the mind's eye because Row, like Gorchov, has created a world of his own, rather like Plato's realm of the forms, where we see things in their essence. The primal gesture toward form, geometry, shapes the canvas, while significant vectors—yellow lines that flit over the gray surface—suggest deviations and insecurities. A fitting capstone to this show of monumental works crammed with monumental ideas.

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