

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW



Art in America

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FEB '09 \$5.00

AFFILIATIONS

SPACE EXPLORERS

Vibrantly colored geometries and 3-D "drawings in space" characterize the pioneering abstractions of the Park Place Group.

BY FRANCES COLPITT

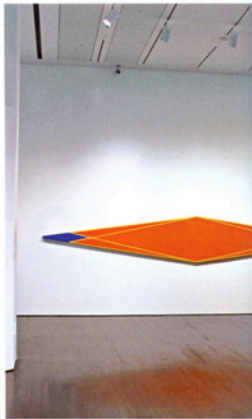
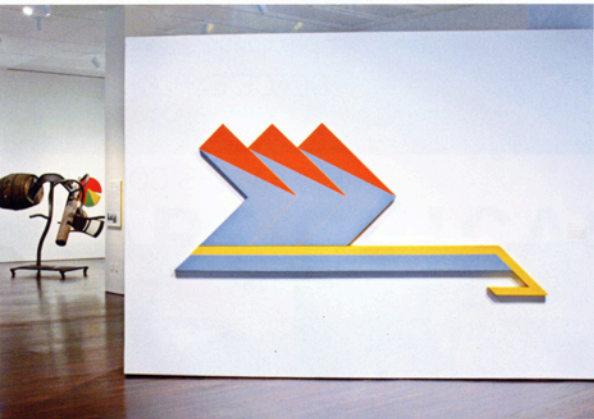


SHARING AN ARTISTIC sensibility attuned to mysticism, mathematics, kineticism and the exploration of the fourth dimension, the 10 artists affiliated with New York's Park Place cooperative gallery between 1963 and 1967 are known for their geometric gymnastics in compositions of primary or highly saturated colors. The abstract paintings and sculptures produced early in their careers by the group, whose members included Mark di Suvero, Robert Grosvenor, Edwin Ruda and David Novros, feature grids, acute angles and isometric cubes, all rendered with mechanical precision. "Reimagining Space: The Park Place Group in 1960s New York," recently on view at Austin's Blanton Museum of

Art, argued for nothing less than a revisionist history of late modernist abstraction as it proposed a place in recent art history for its overlooked artists. Although it occupied only one large gallery with temporary dividers, the exhibition, curated by University of Texas professor Linda Dalrymple Henderson, included about a dozen major sculptures, 15 large paintings and several working drawings. Also on view was an array of fascinating ephemera, such as posters, a geodesic lampshade and button-pins with jazzy graphics, designed by Park Place artists.

Originally located on the top floor of a building at 79 Park Place, the downtown gallery was founded by graduates of the California School of

View of the exhibition "Reimagining Space: The Park Place Group in 1960s New York," showing (foreground) Mark di Suvero's *Stuyvesantseye*, 1965; (far right, on pedestal) Tony Magar's untitled junk sculpture, 1962; (on wall, center) Dean Fleming's *Snap Roll*, 1965. All photos this article Rick Hall, courtesy the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin.



WORKS BY THE 10 ARTISTS AFFILIATED WITH THE COOPERATIVE GALLERY FEATURE GRIDS, ACUTE ANGLES AND ISOMETRIC CUBES, ALL RENDERED WITH MECHANICAL PRECISION.

Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) Peter Forakis, Leo Valledor, Dean Fleming, Forrest Myers and Tamara Melcher, the only woman in the initial group. Di Suvero, Grosvenor, Ruda and Anthony Magar were also early members. Novros joined in 1966, bringing the membership to five painters and five sculptors. In return for a work by each artist annually, patrons Virginia Dwan (the Los Angeles dealer was in the process of relocating to New York at the time), Patrick Lannan and Vera List supported Park Place's operations. John Gibson, followed by Paula Cooper, both of whom later became influential dealers, directed the gallery, which moved to West Broadway in 1965 before closing its doors for good in 1967. During these years, buoyed by

Pop and Minimal art, the commercial gallery scene and its collector base grew exponentially; in contrast, the explicitly anticommercial Park Place was envisioned as a laboratory for creative experimentation, becoming a prototype for alternative spaces of the 1970s.

In a central paradigm for the show, Henderson smartly paired di Suvero's *The "A" Train* (1965-67) with Novros's *2:16* (1965) to recall their two-person exhibition at Park Place in 1966. Novros's marine-blue, approximately 10-by-10-foot diptych consists of two irregularly shaped panels, rather like tapered rectangles with zigzagging short sides. Hung off-plumb, one panel points down and to the right; its mirror image, abutting the vertical panel at a narrow edge, thrusts

upward at a slight angle. Di Suvero's sculpture likewise includes two parts. Suspended from the ceiling are two wooden beams and part of an old ladder; below, the gallery floor supports two additional posts of weathered wood and several yellow-painted I beams, angled in the opposite direction from the top section.



Installation of Park Place posters, invitations and other ephemera.



Far left, Leo Valledor's *Sleedo*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 128 inches.

Center, Forrest Myers's *Zigarat and W and WWW* (foreground), 1966, with (on wall, left to right) Edwin Ruda's *Reo Reo* and *Blake's Eye II*, both 1966.

Above, Valledor's *The Calm* (left), 1966; (foreground) di Suvero's *The "A" Train*, 1965-67; (directly behind sculpture) David Novros's *2:16*, 1965, and (on wall, center) 4.24, 1965.

Despite di Suvero's poetic embrace of urban detritus, which ties his work to the esthetics of junk sculpture, and Novros's crisp forms and flat spray-painted surfaces, the unexpected angles and delicate balances they employ contribute to the works' shared sense of dramatic tension.

Di Suvero's interest in Einstein's

theory of relativity as well as his admiration for the rapid, thrusting gestures of Franz Kline's paintings (evidenced here in a di Suvero collage from the early 1960s) provided the key to Park Place's ideology. With the exception of Novros, the members explored space-time issues through the incorporation of real or illusionistic space

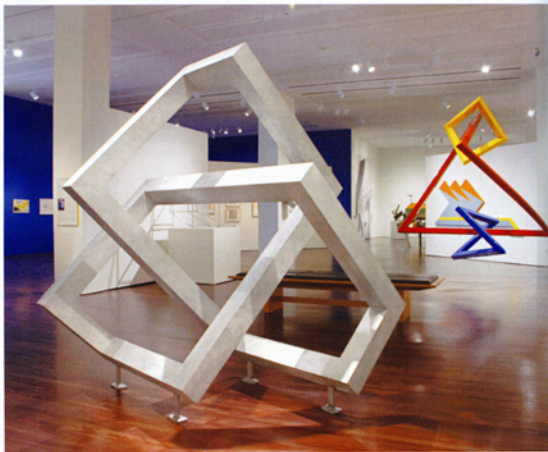


A DISREGARD FOR CONFORMITY AND TRADITION, AS WELL AS FOR THE REFINED INERTIA OF MINIMAL ART, SET THE GROUP APART. THEIR OPTIMISTIC EMBRACE OF THE FUTURE WAS IN SOME RESPECTS PART OF A QUINTESSENTIAL 1960S VISION.

and movement. The exhibition tracked Magar's evolution from junk sculpture, in a di Suvero-esque untitled 1962 work, to the welded geometric "drawings" in space popular with a number of Park Place sculptors. Made from red-painted sheet steel, Magar's 25-inch-tall *Cardinal IV* (1966) is a folded parallelogram balanced on two angular points. Then known as "space lattices," such openwork sculptures were also represented by Forakis's *Magic Box* (1966) and *Hyper-Cube* (1967), three-dimensional versions of isometric cubes in metal.

Myers's spectacular *Zigzag and W and WWW* (1966) is emblematic of attempts to capture space-time in sculpture. Suspended from the ceiling, an approximately 6-foot torqued square, constructed from square aluminum tubing and painted red, is interlocked with two smaller triangles, one yellow and one blue, their bases bent at 45-degree angles to suggest pyramids. An open maze of twisted, regular geometric shapes, the work offers a visualization of the fourth dimension, while encouraging the viewer's actual movement in space and time.

Ruda's interest in peripheral vision, as Henderson explains in the catalogue, stems from driving through the vast landscape of West Texas in the late 1950s. Stretching perceptual and optical abilities to the limit, his *Reo Reo* (1966) is a 20-foot-long horizontally oriented diamond shape. Orange, with smaller blue diamond shapes on its right and left tips, the attenuated canvas imposes a wall-eyed viewing experience. Fleming and Melcher shared an early interest in optical effects, both deploying grids interrupted by clusters of diagonal divisions, which create seemingly warped picture planes. Their more contemplative paintings include larger shapes that produce flips and reversals of advancing and receding spaces. At the center of Melcher's untitled work of 1965, a green triangle bounded by red, purple and black shapes perceptually pulls forward and then snaps back. Creating a similar elastic optical effect, Fleming centers a white parallelogram on dark



grounds to create a "Necker Reversal," in which the parallelogram can be seen to recede or advance.

Less assimilable to Op art experiments of the early 1960s, Valledor's shaped canvases are more reminiscent of Frank Stella's contemporaneous work (Henderson, however, does not chart Stella's influence in her otherwise thorough catalogue essay). But *Skeedo* (1965) is so quirky and radically shaped that it seems without precedent and is nearly impossible to describe. A single canvas, stretched on a frame to present a series of rectangular modules set at 45-degree angles, its aerodynamic form suggests a cross between a jet and a goose in flight. A disregard for conformity and tradition, as well as for the refined inertia of Minimal art, set the Park Place Group apart. Their optimistic embrace of the future was in some respects part of a quintessential 1960s vision. Thanks to this exhibition, however, their works may not be forever anchored to that decade. ○

Foreground, Myers's *Lazers Daze*, 1965, aluminum, 94 by 72 by 60 inches.

"Reimagining Space: The Park Place Gallery Group in 1960s New York" was on view at the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Sept. 28, 2008-Jan. 18, 2009.

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