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Michael Heizer

The Once
and Future
Monuments

The Monacelli Press

eight-by-nine-foot abstract canvases painted with acrylics, works that German art critic Germano Celant reported as being “elliptical and curvate forms covered with patterns and colored strips.” One of the reasons Heizer changed his work so radically may reside in the fact that many of the artists associated with and teaching at SFAI had likewise undergone rapid evolutions in their styles. David Park suffered his relatively quick transition from Abstract Expressionism to figurative work over the period of about a year, and Richard Diebenkorn likewise moved abruptly out of figurative painting and into the geometric landscapes for which he became famous. Artists had (and still have) a habit of reacting against the currently dominant style in order to satisfy their curiosity and creative needs, as well as to open up new economic niches.

Another and perhaps more important role model was the transition of Charles Ross (also in 1965) from working as an early Minimalist sculptor in series of geometric forms, to investigating the use of prisms and the light of the spectrum. Ross, born in 1937, had moved from Penn State to the University of California Berkeley when twenty years old to study physics and mathematics, and although he completed his undergraduate degree in math, he had already started taking sculpture classes. He earned his Master’s in Art in 1962, learning how to weld randomly dropped metal pieces into sculptures, and making assemblages out of materials scavenged from the Berkeley shoreline. But he was also very interested in crystals—an overtly physical manifestation of mathematics—and working with stacks of colored acrylic plastic. Over Thanksgiving weekend of 1965 he had a vivid and detailed dream about building a prismatic sculpture. The vision and even the engineering specifics stayed in his head all day. Within a week he had sketched out an engineering plan, bought materials, and hauled his previous work to the dump—shades of David Park!²

Ross had his studio on the fourth floor of one of San Francisco’s first artist’s loft buildings, 40 Gough Street, which is where this conversion took place. The artist who occupied the third floor studio beneath was his friend Michael Heizer, who witnessed the abrupt shift. Ross called his transition a sort of artistic death, which Heizer acknowledged in a fictional 1968 obituary for Ross. Heizer wrote, “His achievement through death is common to art. . . . Aesthetic death occurs

2. In an essay in *Charles Ross: The Substance of Light*, Klaus Ottmann points out the fascination with crystals shared by many minimalist artists of the time, and in an interview in the same book, conducted by Loïc Malle, Ross mentions that Smithson, Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim were all overtly interested in crystalline structures.

frequently in the art dialogue and the artist's life." He might as well have been writing about himself.³

Ross had been a frequent visitor to New York during the early 1960s, and in 1966 he moved there permanently, the same year that Heizer and another Bay Area artist who would become important in Land Art, Dennis Oppenheim (1938–2011), also relocated there. Heizer continued to work on the geometric paintings he had started in San Francisco, and soon extrapolated those into what he titled "displacement paintings," works that had no meaning or content other than logic. One of the early abstract paintings was *Arsenobolic*, a large, 80-by-120-inch lacquer on masonite work that was juried into the 85th Annual Exhibition of the SFAI, held at the San Francisco Museum of Art in October–November, 1966. It was the first work of Heizer's to be exhibited in a museum.⁴

Heizer supported himself in New York through a variety of odd jobs—wiring buildings, catching rats, and painting industrial warehouses. In his studio he was now rolling onto canvas PVA (polyvinyl acetate), which among its other uses is a primer for drywall. As he worked he became more and more reductive in palette, limiting himself to black and white on raw canvas. He was living with the model Sharon Keays and her daughter Sidney Renee Matisse Villa, whose father was Sharon's previous boyfriend Carlos Villa, a painter who had graduated from SFAI in 1963, and who had also moved to New York. (Heizer would marry Sharon in Carson City, Nevada, in November 1966). Heizer was also making paintings to support his family, and like David Park, who used ordinary house paints, he was using what he could afford and what was at hand.⁵

Germano Celant quotes Heizer describing the "displacement paintings": "Whatever the subject matter is, is what has been displaced from the perimeter. . . . There are no aesthetics involved. They do not compete with anything anyone has done." It's difficult not to think of Frank Stella's famous pronouncement from a 1964 interview when describing his geometric striped paintings: "Only what can be seen there is there . . . What you see is what you see." It was a quote Stella would repeat in various

3. The Heizer "Obituary" also appears in *Charles Ross: The Substance of Light* (pp. 325–26).

4. Heizer's painting is listed in the catalogue for the 85th Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Institute (curated by Michel Tapié), but no image is reproduced.

5. Michael Heizer speaks very rarely of his ex-wife Sharon Keays. Carlos Villa briefly refers to Sharon leaving him for Heizer in his 1995 interview at the Smithsonian Archive of American Art. The record of her marriage to Heizer is held in the Marriage Bureau records of Carson City, Nevada, for November 10, 1966.