Art in America

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Richard Nonas

NEW YORK,
at Fergus McCaffrey

by Courtney Fiske

View of Richard Nonas's exhibition, showing *Deadfall*, 1975, in foreground; at Fergus McCaffre

Richard Nonas treats space as a material: a medium, like plaster or plywood, to be orchestrated rather than simply occupied. "It's the way the piece feels that counts—the way it changes that chunk of space you're both in, thickens it and makes it vibrate—like nouns slipping into verbs," he wrote in an undated notebook entry, published on the occasion of a 1985 solo exhibition. Art, he elsewhere explained, should maintain a "distance from language," resisting "devolution" to the status of theory or illustration, by communicating meaning through its "physical presence" alone. Specific and irreducible, each work was to be a blunt insertion into the viewer's surrounds.

Nonas's concern with space was honed by his experience of the American Southwest, where he embedded with Native Americans as an anthropologist in the early 1960s. Settling in downtown Manhattan in 1970, he quickly became involved with 112 Greene Street, an artist-run gallery traversed by such figures as Gordon Matta-Clark, Richard Serra and Trisha Brown. Like 112 Greene, which countered the white-cube aesthetic of uptown galleries, Nonas's materials oppose the slick plastics and shiny metals favored by some members of Minimalism's first wave. His work partakes in the sensuousness not of the high-tech but of the organic: the furrows of unfinished wood, the flush of gently rusted steel.

Nonas's latest show comprised over 50 works, spanning 1970 to 2014. Its temporal reach elicited a retrospective logic, with the attendant expectation of a mappable formal progression. Yet the material and morphological consistency of the work on view disallowed narrativization, collapsing the present onto four decades past. Each piece disposes solid geometries—cubes, polygons, etc.—in arrangements that dispense with the pedestal. Placed on the floor, buttressed by a wall, or set in the seam between the two, they claim coextensiveness with the viewer. Dense and compact, most lack a particular orientation and a sense of enclosed space. All are committed to a self-evidence of form and facture meant to thwart analysis.

Skid (New-Word Chaser Series), 2014, condenses these concerns. The work encompasses nine evenly spaced steel units that extend diagonally from the gallery's door to its backmost room. Each unit consists of two upright slabs that meet in a "T." The piece reads as a variant on Nonas's 1970 *Blocks of Wood (Light to Dark, Dark to Light)*, 17 wooden blocks aligned on the bias and exhibited in 112 Greene's inaugural show (though not on view here). Both works make visual common sense in that they cleave to the Minimalist logic of "one thing after another." The continuities between the two instance the peculiar achronology of Nonas's art, which adopts strategies (seriality, sited-ness and so forth) only to endlessly rehearse them, as if stuck in a loop. Figured by Nonas, the field of Minimalism becomes an enclosure, self-contained and strangely timeless.

Striking, too, is the work's scale, which is often emphatically small, reminiscent of an early Richard Tuttle or Joel Shapiro. Heightening our awareness of their spatial setting while rarely commanding much space, Nonas's sculptures thematize their own contingency. *Deadfall* (1975) finds two midsize steel triangles stacked on the floor. Cut from a single square, then slightly trimmed, their subtle

misalignments enact the dialectic of "almost clarity" and "not quite confusion" that Nonas, in his words, hoped to achieve. If, in 2014, his rhetoric of presence rings somewhat hollow, it's because sculpture has moved so far beyond the utopian project inherent to Minimalism's initial years: its promise of a sensory fullness that our mediated landscape seems to foreclose.