

## Field Anthropologist: The Sculptures of Richard Nonas

by Erik La Prade

Richard Nonas at Fergus McCaffrey

September 10 to October 25, 2014

514 West 26th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, 212-988-2200



Works by Richard Nonas including *Hunk*, 2008, foreground, and *Steel Drawing, 5 Plates: One Red, One Yellow*, 1983. Courtesy of Fergus McCaffrey

The recent show of Richard Nonas was the first in Fergus McCaffrey Gallery's new space in Chelsea. On entering this former printing plant you had to pause and survey the cavernous room to orient yourself to the large array of thirty-three works displayed on the ground floor. But the show was comprised of groupings of works and not as disparate as it may originally have appeared.

The white, renovated walls of the building's interior contrast with the dark, rough, unpolished surfaces of the sculpture. Despite the difference in scale, Nonas is as engaging an artist as his better-known contemporary, Richard Serra. Both artists' styles were partly influenced by the scope of the large, Soho industrial spaces in which they exhibited during the early 1970s, a feeling recalled by this exhibition.

Nonas was also influenced by a ten-year experience as a field anthropologist. In his own words, he wants us to "doubt" our judgment when trying to decide if his sculptures are ritualized art objects or emblematic artifacts.

*Skid* (2014), composed of nine steel, T-shaped pieces spread across the floor was the first work encountered. There is no way to avoid seeing it when you first entered the gallery. The whole piece divided the floor, trailing off to the right into a rear gallery. It's like walking in a field and coming across a fence or trail markers indicating a direction you should take.



Richard Nonas, *Skid (New-Word Chaser Series)*, 2014. Steel, 9 parts, each 20 x 20 x 12 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Fergus McCaffrey

It lead the eye to *Deadfall* (1975), a gunmetal dark, steel floor work, shaped like a piece of pie and positioned near a corner of the gallery. *Deadfall* and two, smaller oxidized square pieces created an intimate corner. Nearby, amidst a group of three wall pieces, was a wooden ladder with steps cut into it reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column".

The second floor was smaller than the first and the 16 works displayed there seemed more evenly spaced. A group of five red, yellow, and gray steel plates (*Steel Drawing*, 1988), leaned against the East wall. To the left hung four steel pieces shaped like a fist, ready to strike (*Fist Series*, 2014).

Nonas's minimal sculptures have a totemic quality. These ritualized objects have a physical reality and a cultural dimension. As an anthologist, Nonas collected and unearthed pieces, and then attempted to fit them together into a narrative. In his sculpture, minimal aspects of physical and cultural reality are also held together through or with an interaction of these parts of the world. Nonas has written that his sculpture "exists, and is placed in a world whose strongest reality is cultural ambiguity and paradox – continual and necessary shifts in meaning". Nonas's minimal sculpture denies us a sense of clarity because it frustrates our attempts to explain it.

The small works in Nonas's show invites comparison with Joel Shapiro's early sculpture. In the late sixties and early seventies, both artists made process-oriented sculpture that reconfigured the space it occupied. And there is a human scale in both men's sculpture. But the physical world of Shapiro's early works invites a debate over forms and meanings. The rough, unevenness of Nonas's works offers us a metaphor for the physicality of a world that exists with or without us. In this respect, Nonas's works can be described as urban earthworks.

Although a number of works in this show feel incomplete, they present us with questions. Why do we collect objects? What motivates us to pick up something we might find in the street, in a field, or on an archaeological dig and keep it? Through Nonas has taken us on an anthropological tour of artifacts, his work does not offer us definite answers and therein lies its strength.



Installation shot with works from the *First series*, 2014 by Richard Nonas  
Courtesy of Fergus McCaffrey