Placing Harvey Quaytman

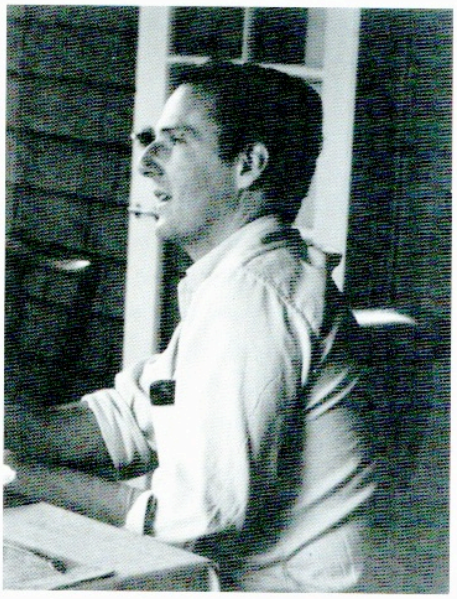
Dore Ashton

1 Harvey Quaytman, New York, 1964.

2 Harvey Quaytman in his studio, Cambridge, MA, 1963.

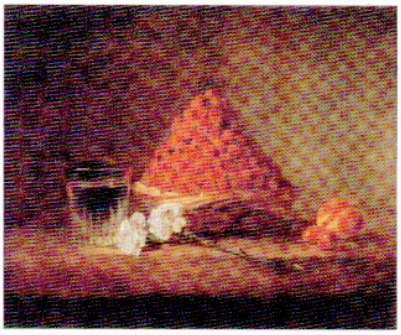
Early in our friendship Harvey Quaytman made me a gift of his cherished copy of Artur Schnabel's *My Life and Music*. Years later, he titled a painting after the pianist's book. Quaytman's tread, as a visual artist, was always tempered by his inner ear, alert to intervals played out in time and space. While Quaytman was a highly literate painter, well acquainted with all the arts and their history, I believe he felt the deepest affinities with what his idol Schnabel called the 'direct musician,' who is a gardener, while the indirect musician is a botanist. During a question period after the lectures that make up his book, Schnabel was asked what the ideal should be for a person performing music, and 'if it all comes from within a person.' Without hesitation he responded: 'Love has to be the starting point–love of music. It is one of my firmest convictions, that love always produces some knowledge, while knowledge only rarely produces something similar to love.'

Sometimes, embedded in a title, Quaytman's affinities for the other arts appear, as when he titled a painting *Warsaw Thirds* (no. 57) in 1986. Since a third is a musical interval, I took this painting to be a tribute to Chopin, the celebrated Polish pianist, and a hint of Quaytman's thoughts transposed into a painting. In a different key is the title *Quince Days*, a painting of 1979. Fellow travellers would recognize immediately Wallace Stevens' poem *Peter Quince at the Clavier*, especially as Quaytman's visual construction hints at the strings of a piano. As Stevens says: 'Just as my fingers on these keys/Make music, so the selfsame sounds/On my spirit make music, too.'



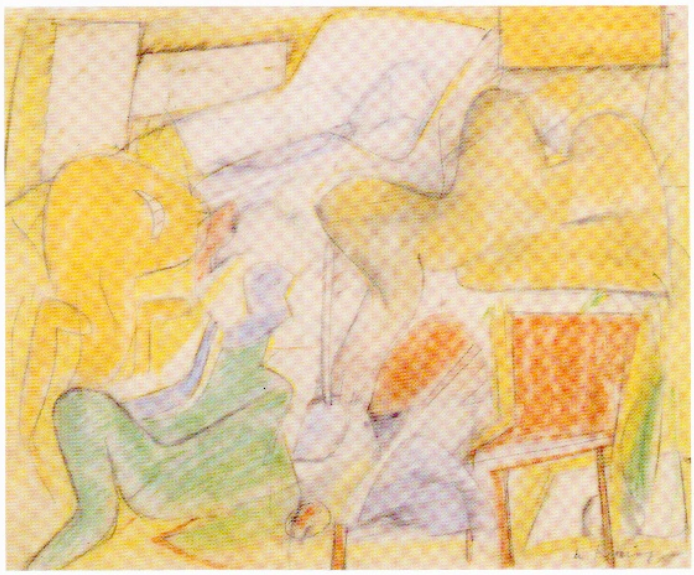
It was, I think, from his spirit that Quaytman drew the notes that punctuated the various phases in his career as a painter, phases that he developed over his working life like movements in a symphony. From the earliest essays to his last works–works wrought with a kind of Blakean fearful symmetry–Quaytman's oeuvre reflects a musical sensibility. In this he has a kinship with another modern artist, Paul Klee, who was an accomplished pianist. When Klee wrote his whimsical lecture notations for art students, his vocabulary often reflected his immersion in piano music.

For instance, his distinction between the 'dividual' and the 'individual' is set out in periodic intervals much like those in a musical scale. Quaytman was never far away from musical analogy, particularly when inventing colours, which he knew intuitively act upon our sensibilities. As Marcia Tucker, who admired Quaytman's work, wrote: 'Color, like music, can be apprehended without recourse to ideas. We experience color without having to understand it, partly because by its very nature–its complexity, mystery, variety and adaptability–color touches vision, perception and emotion, which are basic and available to everyone with eyes.'[1]



I recall, somewhat mistily, talking with Quaytman about the painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, whom he admired. I can well understand Quaytman's lingering with Chardin, whom Diderot–that distinguished advocate for the imagination–considered a great magician. Diderot quoted Chardin–'Does one paint with colors? With what then? With feelings.'–and adds: 'One understands nothing of this magic.'

In Chardin's day, the artist had to be something of a chemist. The palette was made of essences of plants, powdered stones, oxidized substances, metallic limestone and whatever else might be found to capture the tones of nature. An artist ground and mixed and tested within oil and turpentine. So did Quaytman's inventions (his rust paintings) derive from his love of exploring matter itself and the ways in which he, the magician, could exploit it. Perhaps he bore in mind what Chardin had told a student: 'You seek, you scrape, you rub, you glaze, and when you have got hold of something that pleases, the picture is finished.'[2]



3 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Basket of Wild Strawberries*, c.1760. Private collection.

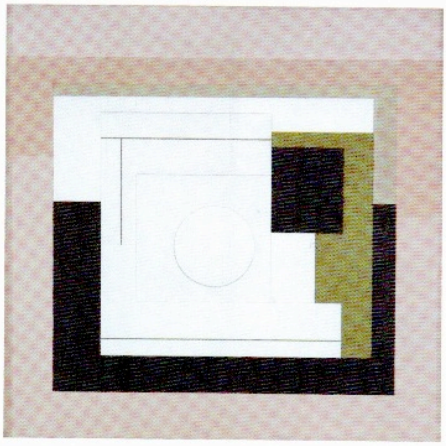
4 Willem de Kooning, *Still Life*, 1945. Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA.

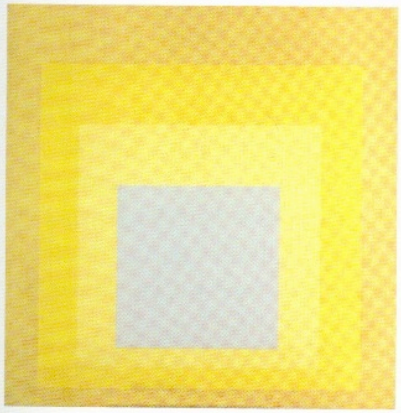
5 Ben Nicholson, *1944–5 (painted relief)*, 1944–5. The Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney.

6 Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square: with Rays*, 1959. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Late in his career–on the last day of 1986–Quaytman offered a statement for an exhibition at the Nielsen Gallery in Boston. In it there are dim echoes of his verbal playfulness, always present in his titles. He was, after all, an admirer of James Joyce, as we can hear in such titles as *Mauverick* (1964, no. 3) or *Second Cupola Capella* (1969, no. 9). In the statement, Quaytman's humor weaves in and out, with glimpses of its origins in Jewish culture, as when he cites Ned Rifkind speaking of his work as 'hopeful, opulent and stark', and remarks that the word 'stark' has 'a similar word base to the German/Yiddish *schtarke*'. But perhaps the most telling hint in the statement occurs in the very last line, in which he commands his reader: 'Listen to Shönberg's *Verklarte Nacht* just once.'

Quaytman appreciated writers who made sense of nonsense. One of his favorites was Erik Satie, who, in his *Memoirs of An Amnesiac* of 1912, wrote about his composition for four hands on the piano, *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear*: 'One sees that not only musical ideas presided on the creation of these works.' Quaytman's keyboard, then, had complicated origins and was, as he once told me, basically 'enharmonic.'





In 1964–the year Quaytman settled in New York–the university-educated artist Allan Kaprow published a widely remarked article in *Art News* with the challenging title, 'Should the Artist be a Man of the World?'[3] Obviously, he thought so, and he endeavoured to characterize the world of his generation (he was five years older than Quaytman) in these words: 'The men and women of today's generation matured during and directly after WWII, rather than during the Depression. They are almost all college-educated, and are frequently married, with children. Many of them teach or have taught. On the street they are indistinguishable from the middle-class from which they come and towards whose mores–practicality, security and self-advancement–they tend to generate.'

Kaprow definitely exaggerated. The life that Harvey Quaytman carpentered during those early years in New York was hardly characterized by such bourgeois decorum, though up to a point, Quaytman did conform to Kaprow's characterization of artists of the 1960s. He was a graduate, in 1959, of both Tufts University and the Boston Museum School. He won a fellowship upon graduation which took him and his bride, Susan Howe, and their newborn infant, Rebecca, to London, where Quaytman had his first one-man show at the small AIA Gallery. In addition to his important experiences in British museums, he encountered the city itself.

London was undergoing considerable artistic upheaval, some of it in response to a travelling exhibition called 'The New American Painting', which circulated to eight European countries, including Great Britain, in 1958–59. Quaytman saw in London the impact of New York School painters, most evidently Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. In some of his earliest painting extant, Quaytman can be seen manipulating rectangular shapes as did Gorky, and working with the loose brushing of de Kooning. At the same time, he was looking closely at British abstract painters, particularly, I suspect, Ben Nicholson. By the time he settled in New York in 1964, he had assimilated aspects of the British abstract tradition, and evolved a choice of shapes that remained in his painting vocabulary: hourglass, pendulum and hammock-like swing.

During the 1960s, New York became an irresistible beacon for aspiring young American artists. The Second World War had cut off America from Europe, resulting in two important changes in New York. The first involved dozens of established European modernist visual artists taking shelter from the war and fraternizing with American counterparts. American painters and sculptors met for the first time legendary artists from Paris, such as Fernand Léger and André Masson. The second change concerned the art market, which for modern art was now concentrated in the United States, with New York City at its heart. By the 1960s, when Quaytman arrived, it was the largest in the world. Paris never recovered.

7 Harvey Quaytman, New York City, late 1960s. Courtesy Frances Barth.

8 Harvey Quaytman's loft, New York City, mid-1960s. Courtesy Frances Barth.

9 New York artists, early 1970s (left to right, back to front): Doug Ohlson, Murray Reich, Kes Zapkus, Don Lewallen, Jake Berthot, Alan Cote, Kaare Rafoss, Frances Barth, Bill Alpert, Stuart Shedletsky, Harvey Quaytman. Courtesy Frances Barth.

By the time Quaytman settled on the Bowery in 1966, things had radically changed from the scenes that Jean Dubuffet had immortalized in his series of *Bowery Bum* paintings from 1951–52. In the early 1950s there had been only around 30 respectable art galleries in New York. By the 1960s there were more than 300, which between them staged some 4,000 exhibitions a year. Young artists such as Quaytman had every reason to hope that they would make their mark in a city so full of opportunity–or if not to gain success in the marketplace, at least to be available if called.

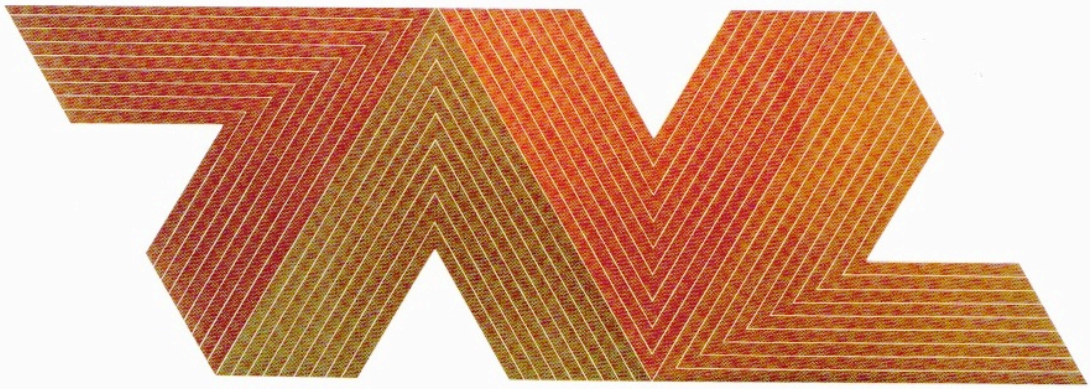
Quaytman would quickly make the acquaintance of others who, like him, managed to survive doing odd jobs such as helping to restore old lofts for other artists or painting the walls of middle-class apartments. People in his age group tended to settle downtown on the East Side and would encounter each other in the streets and bars. One of Quaytman's first buddies was the painter Jake Berthot, who remembers frequent sorties to the Essex Street market and lunches at Moishe's, the last of the famed Depression years delicatessens.

(Interestingly, while Quaytman relished the cuisine at Moishe's, he was never eager to look into his heritage. His family came from Lodz, in Poland, a background from which he had distanced himself resolutely at an early age.) Quaytman would frequently meet up with his peers at a bar-restaurant called Fanelli's, in Soho. Doug Ohlson, Richard van Buren, the neo-Dadaist Fluxus artist Joe Jones, and Ron Gorchov were among the regulars.

Gorchov recalls Quaytman during the mid-1980s as being particularly knowledgeable in many areas and possessing a great sense of humor, but also remembers him as highly competitive. Many of Quaytman's band of acquaintances in the 1960s were equally ambitious artists and came from radically different backgrounds. Doug Ohlson, for instance, had been raised on a farm in northwest Iowa, where his Swedish grandfather had settled in the nineteenth century. Jake Berthot was the son of a provincial lady barber. Richard Smith, born in Hertfordshire, was in and out of New York from the early 1960s, and around 1963 began to experiment with shaped canvases brought out from the wall with thick stretchers. Perhaps Quaytman picked up from Smith the techniques for constructing shaped canvases by steaming the wood.

Some of Quaytman's friends were, like him, associated with the Park Place Gallery, in which Mark di Suvero, Alan Cote and David Novros were fellow exhibitors, and where the gallerist Paula Cooper got her start. Brice Marden, another Park Place artist, shared Quaytman's curiosity about the history of art materials; introduced to the encaustic technique by Quaytman, Marden began using beeswax mixed in his oils in the mid-1960s and, also like Quaytman, experimented with rabbit skin glue and gesso. Quaytman's indefatigable interest in painting materials led to a friendship with Leonard Bocour, who with Sam Golden had developed Magna, an acrylic resin paint, in the late 1940s. Magna quickly invaded painters' studios in the 1960s, used by artists such as Barnett Newman. Other new painting buddies included resident British artists such as Sean Scully and John Walker, who were working in the 1970s on markedly thick stretchers, a practice Quaytman would make his own.

The milieu in which Quaytman and his friends operated experienced an enormous amplification of what was rather cavalierly called the 'art world.' This, of course, was abetted by professional publicity about the so-called 'art market.' The art of packaging–a distinctly American practice–was deftly applied to various strands of painterly traditions as the decade wore on, strands that eventually came to be labelled 'minimalist.' Art writers such as Gregory Battcock tried to summarize the attitudes of artists of the 1960s, pointing to their rejection of the Existentialist views of so-called Abstract Expressionists. Battcock admired the writing of the young art critic Barbara Rose, who published an article in the October 1965 issue of *Art in America* with the title 'A B C Art,' in which, as he emphasizes,[4] she wrote: 'One might as easily construe the new, reserved impersonality and self-effacing anonymity as a reaction against the self-indulgence of an unbridled subjectivity, as much as one might see it in terms of a formal reaction to the excesses of painterliness.'

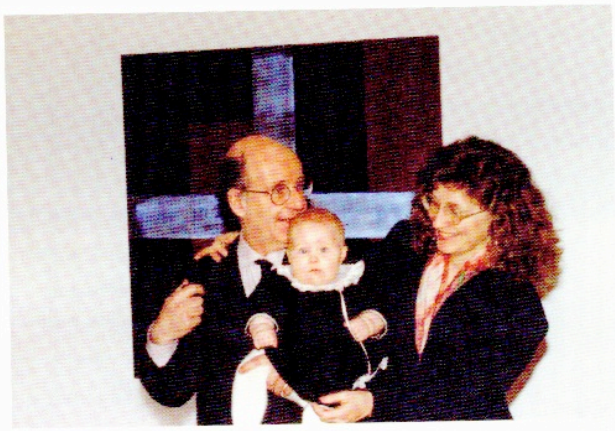


Other writers were less engaged with formal innovations and scented an uneasiness beneath the blatant prosperity. The turbulence brewing in both Europe and the United States during the mid-1960s eventually erupted in 1968, when thousands of young, rebellious students attacked the premises and the fabric of modern capitalism and, above all, its interminable engagement in war. No one, not even the most hedonistic artist, could wholly avoid the turbulence of the late 1960s. As Alfred Kazin noted, 'Nothing was more common in the Sixties than the radical apocalypse served up in girlie magazines to businessmen who were still more satisfied with their 'rewards' than not, but liked a suggestion of something politically wicked, as they liked in the centerfold the flash of pubic hair...' Above all, 'Publicity ruled. Publicity was the public.'[5]

10 Harvey Quaytman and Frances Barth, Mexico, early 1970s. Courtesy Frances Barth.

11 Frank Stella, *Empress of India*, 1965. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

What Quaytman encountered on his return from England in 1963 was a burgeoning interest in what the British critic Lawrence Alloway would label 'systematic' painting. Alloway, who claimed to have invented the term Hard-Edge painting in 1960, defined it in opposition to geometric art: 'The cone, cylinder, and sphere of Cézanne fame have persisted in much twentieth-century painting. Even where these forms are not purely represented, abstract artists have tended toward a compilation of separable elements. Form has been treated as discrete entities, whereas forms are few in hard-edge and the surface immaculate...'[6]



Alloway had in mind the work of the young Frank Stella, who had burst upon the scene in a signal exhibition called 'Sixteen Americans' at The Museum of Modern Art organized by Dorothy Miller and Alfred Barr, which opened in December 1959. Stella's so-called 'shaped paintings,' with their notched angles and internal symmetries, drew a broad range of responses, and no young painter, including Quaytman, could have avoided references to the deep stretchers Stella used to establish his paintings' independence from the wall. Stella's notched paintings in aluminum paint were further celebrated in two exhibitions in 1963–The Jewish Museum's 'Toward a New Abstraction' and The Museum of Modern Art's 'Americans 1963.' Stella himself soon declared: 'My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object.'[7]

In the early 1960s there was also a revival of interest in the work of Josef Albers, whose long series of colored squares, *Homage to the Square*, he had commenced in the late 1950s. Another rising star in the new art scene was Ellsworth Kelly, whom Battcock believed threw 'new light on various ideas in modern aesthetics... including shape as form, color as shape, primacy of literal over depicted shape, illusion in art, image and theatricality and system of art.'[8] Perhaps most notably, there were exhibitions of Ad Reinhardt's conclusive works, the almost imperceptible black paintings that, as Rosalind Krauss pointed out, 'exhale the not-quite-colors of a kind of after-image of a Greek cross...'[9]

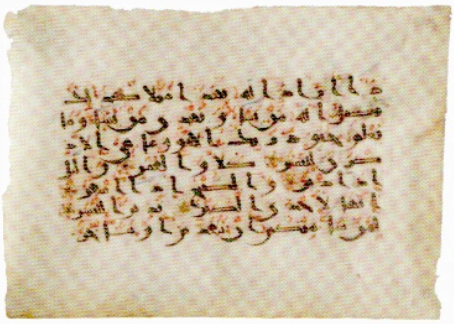
In 1964, Clement Greenberg called attention to what he would term 'post-painterly abstraction,' using the term as the title of an exhibition staged at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that year. Unquestionably, Quaytman was responsive to Greenberg's observations, since most painters in his circle were eager to be mentioned in his reviews. If Greenberg said there was something called post-painterly abstraction, they meant to be among its practitioners, and Quaytman was no exception. Yet his works always displayed an independence that made it feel difficult for commentators to 'place' him.

In addition to these various new creative developments in New York in the 1960s, Quaytman had his own inner resources–an entirely personal range of references and unusual interests that became part of his work and practice. He loved classical music, Samuel Beckett and the plays of Harold Pinter. To those art historians who feel obliged to label him, Quaytman is impossible: a baroque classicist. He was deeply interested in tradition. Like everyone else in his artistic milieu, he had read T. S. Eliot's 1932 essay, 'Tradition and Individual Talent,' in which the poet wrote: 'The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.' Perhaps even more compelling for Quaytman, Eliot included a line of ancient Greek in Part III of the essay, which, translated, means 'the mind is perhaps rather divine and unfeeling.'[10] Perhaps Quaytman felt the unfeeling. Certain overwhelming impulses probably led to his assertion of his materials, and his submission to unexpected deviations from what appeared to be rational decisions. The subtle displacements of linear thoughts in his late works support such an assumption.

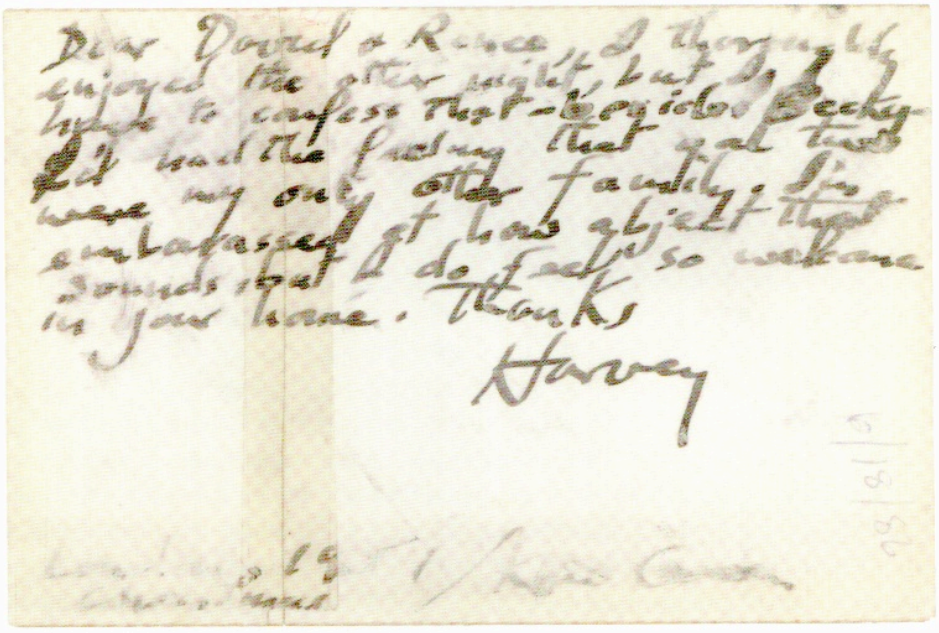
12 Harvey Quaytman, Margaret Moorman and their daughter Emma, 1990.

13 Harvey Quaytman, East Hampton, NY, c.1991. Courtesy Renee McKee.

14 Harvey Quaytman and his daughter Rebecca, 2000. Courtesy Margaret Moorman.



Just one of the many intellectual incursions on his inner life was his keen interest in the 19th-century artist John Martin–a visionary city planner and popular creator of dioramas. Most of the rest of us had never heard of John Martin, but Quaytman was a relentless intellectual scavenger. Martin harked back to Blake and was familiar with the phrase 'fearful symmetry.' Much of Quaytman's energy was spent on challenging such symmetry: as he said towards the end of his life, in 1997, 'My whole enterprise is against static.' Thus when he came, at the end of his artistic practice, to a perfectly square format, his almost imperceptible unorthodox alignments were made to challenge tradition, a stance he undertook with immense subtlety. (His extensive readings of Delacroix may well have nourished these undertakings, since Delacroix more than once remarked on the unsatisfactory effects of total symmetry.)



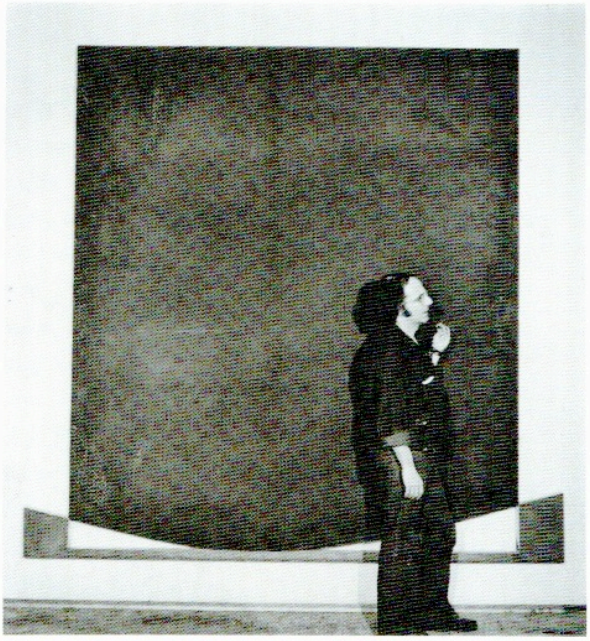
From around 1967, Quaytman began his experiments with shaped canvases. In the commentaries of the period, there were increasing references to something called 'objecthood.' As clumsy as the term was, it conveyed something of the ambition of the young artists embarking on public adventures during the 1960s. Since the idea of painterly illusion was being challenged by such painters as Stella and Kelly, there had to be something to cover the new criteria for painting, and 'objecthood' served well enough. In a statement of around 1970, Quaytman wrote: 'These forms are my way of making space for a color to be in. An outrigger on a canoe isn't there for decoration. It is there because the water's rough.'[11]

15 Arabic calligraphy in the collection of Harvey Quaytman. Courtesy Margaret Moorman.

16 'Dear David & Renee, I thoroughly enjoyed the other night, but I have to confess that – besides Becky – I'd had the feeling that you two were my only other family. I'm embarrassed at how abject that sounds, but I do feel so welcome in your home. Thanks – Harvey.' June 1986.

17 Harvey Quaytman, early 1970s. Courtesy Frances Barth.

His personal habits were distinctive. He was deeply interested in Islamic patterning and once, around 1975, called my attention to a page he had found displaying elegant Kufic writing. He always wrote with a flat-nibbed calligraphy pen, even for casual notes to friends, a practice that reflected his deep attraction to the observations of ancient geometers, and their definition of geometry as 'permanent relations in space.'



Quaytman's late suggestions, on otherwise geometric forms, of something impermanent, and his teasing hints of unorthodox manipulations of the basic geometric forms, bring into play once again a certain mischievous streak–considerably sobered, but still there. He was interested in heraldry, and on more than one occasion he made escutcheon-like drawings even as he was, at the end, utilizing a perfectly square format. He hadn't forgotten his interest in ancient Babylon, and his pleasure in suggesting Kufic letters. But at the end, his greatest interest was in what, for want of a more accurate term, I will call creative restraint: a deeply knowledgeable discipline that, by apparently imposing limitations, opened marvelously.

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