

Thinking Outside Judd's Boxes: His Legacy Still Shapes Artists

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Reflections on the maxi-influence of the Minimalist Donald Judd — master of Marfa, maker of furniture and stacker of units. He continues to inspire “a generation yearning for more physicality.”



Donald Judd at his exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1970.
Credit...Donald Judd Art, Judd Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Whitechapel Gallery Archive; Richard Einzig

Influence can be a tricky topic. Sometimes artists are reluctant to cite those that have shaped their aesthetic, lest they seem unoriginal or easily swayed.

But the work of Donald Judd has seeped into the creative culture more deeply than most, from Instagram hipsters to any artist who makes a sculpture with right angles.

“His influence extends far beyond those following him in a direct line,” said Ann Temkin, the chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art and the lead organizer of the Judd retrospective opening to the public March 1 (and to members now).

"For much of art history, sculpture was secondary to painting, and the radicality of Judd and his colleagues in the '60s was to change that around, and reframe the possibility for what an artist could do," Ms. Temkin said.

Judd was a painter early in his career, but moved to the three-dimensional work — his boxes and stacked-unit installations — that would make him a famous Minimalist, a term he never embraced. He designed plywood furniture, wrote criticism and worked on dozens of architectural projects. On Spring Street in SoHo and then on a sprawling scale in Marfa, Texas — formerly private spaces, now part of the Judd Foundation — he created precisely arranged environments for living, working and displaying art.

We asked five noted makers to reflect on Judd, the person and the artist, as inspiration. The conversations have been edited and condensed.

David Adjaye

The British architect designed the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, and also designs furniture.



The architect David Adjaye and, below, a bench he designed from his "Monoforms" series (2007)..Credit..Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



via Ed Reeve

He's definitely one of the figures to think about in terms of working at multiple scales. He's right up there with Alvar Aalto, Oscar Niemeyer, Mies van der Rohe and Louis Kahn. Judd is an inspirational character, but his furniture was about universal, pure form, and I focus on mutations and hybridity [in works like the 2007 "Monoforms" bench].

He's very American: For me postwar America is about the way in which the industrial world is kind of reproduced in art. Look at Judd's material palette, it's everything to do with the industrial age. It's about aircraft technology and building science. But he turns them into sacred elements: plywood, aluminum, Plexiglas.

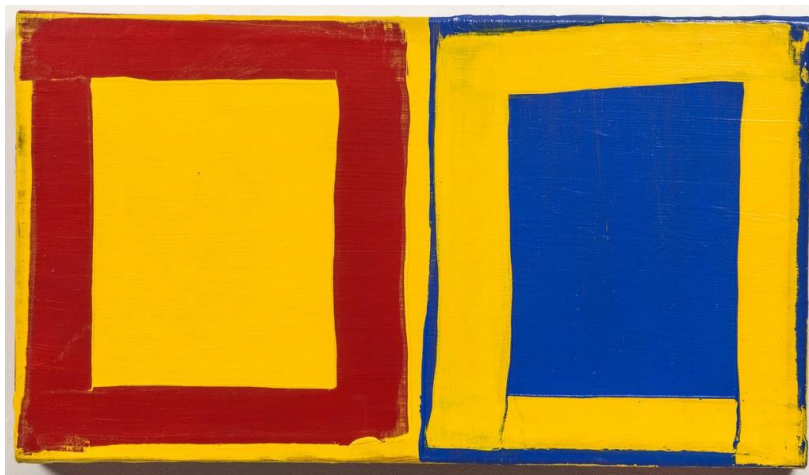
There's the sense that he was not doing things for the market, nor for fans. You do it because you can go back to it 30 years later and still love it. So it forces a kind of honesty in one's work. He had this bigger idea of himself, one that proved true.

Mary Heilmann

A painter best known for her color-filled abstract canvases.



Mary Heilmann, whose work, like "Little Three for Two: Red, Yellow, Blue," below, has been influenced by Donald Judd. Credit...Michael Halsband



Mary Heilmann, 303 Gallery and Hauser & Wirth; Thomas Müller

I love talking about Don Judd. He's one of my heroes. I love the way he used color, and how it carried on his whole life. That's an important part of my thinking and my work. When I started out, that kind of formal style didn't have color in it. I moved toward color in the '70s, like the primary colors in "Little Three for Two: Red, Yellow, Blue" [1976]. Judd was serious with color and not at all decorative, but there was an understorey of a seductive idea.

One thing I really liked about Judd was that his work related to domestic hardware. I saw a show in Pasadena in 1971 with rectangular things sticking out of the wall. They looked like shelves.

Marfa is intimate, even though it's also grand. It has this kind of domestic style to it even though it's really big. The same for Spring Street. It's a home, but it's kind of tight and formal in a provocative way. He always refused to make the plywood chair backs more comfortable — to me that was significant and provocative, and not necessarily in a negative way. He was totally against negotiating.

I saw him give a talk once. The main thing I remember about him was he was — kind of antagonistic. I thought it was really great that he was a critic, too. He was both tough and seductive in his way. I was always sort of like that, too.

Frank Stella

The artist, a peer of Judd's, began his career with hard-edge geometric paintings and moved to three-dimensional work, as Judd did.



Frank Stella at home. Behind him is Hans Hofmann's "Bacchanale" (1946).Credit...The Renate, Hans & Maria Hofmann Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Christopher Gregory for The New York Times



Mr. Stella's "Nasielk III" (1972), made of synthetic polymer paint and felt on corrugated cardboard, shows Judd's influence.Credit...Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Museum of Modern Art

For artists, life from 1958 to 1968 was openings, hanging out in Chinese restaurants and bars. We all saw each other — it was a small group. People made a big deal about Judd's severity, and how hard-core he was, but he was pretty well integrated into the group.

I liked his art a lot and I bought it, or exchanged for it. One was a beautiful small piece with a baking pan on a black ground ["Untitled" (1961)] that I lost to my first wife [Barbara Rose], but it had a happy ending: It ended up at MoMA. [It is in the Judd show].

I'd say he was an indirect influence. Don's work was always sticking to the point, and not overly embellished. He was able to present his idea in a straightforward way, which is what I tried to do at the time — and still do.

Things changed for me with my "Polish Village" series, in terms of moving to three-dimensions. [These paneled works, with their interlocking constructions, evoke the timber synagogues lost in World War II.] I had an idea I was going to build a painting. And I am still doing that, building something and then painting it.

Judd's work is geometric, it's "minimal" — I guess you have to call it something — but it's still unique. That's what artists are supposed to be doing: expressing themselves as best they can.

Annabelle Selldorf

An architect who works on many art world projects, including the David Zwirner gallery and the expansion of the Frick Collection, she is on the board of the Chinati Foundation, the Marfa museum founded by Judd that opened in 1986.



The architect Annabelle Selldorf.Credit...Brigitte Lacombe



Selldorf Architects designed the David Zwirner Gallery on West 20th Street in Manhattan. Made from exposed concrete, the façade is rough and refined.Credit...Jason Schmidt

As a teenager in Germany, I didn't think about architecture, at least consciously, but I understood Minimalism. It's from having experienced the postwar era, which builds on destruction. The Cologne that I grew up in was rebuilt almost completely, and it was tabula rasa.

But I don't think I really understood Judd until I went to Marfa, in the early 2000s. It's mind-altering. I don't think that he was an architect. But he worked with architecture — he pushed that boundary, but he did it entirely from an artist's perspective. I don't think furniture was furniture per se for Judd. It was interacting with space.

But the architect Judd-worshippers who go to Marfa and think that if they look at a work of his, they can then turn that into a box-shaped building that has a door in it? That makes me crazy.

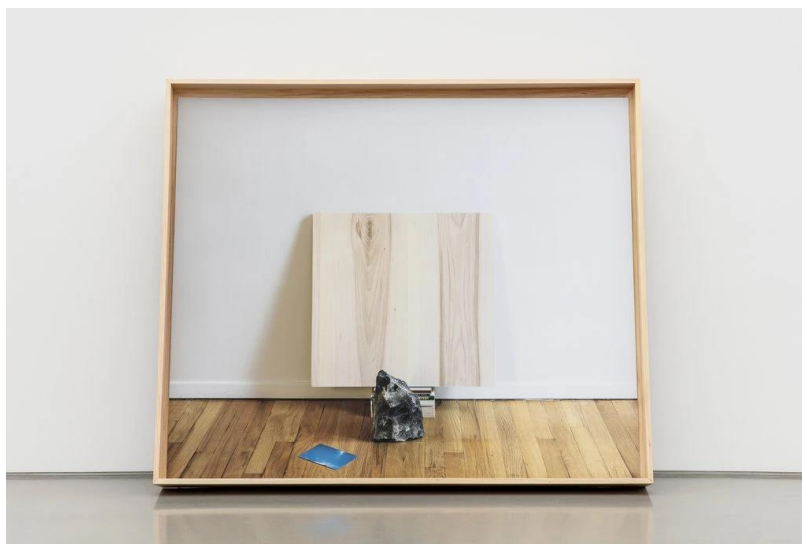
I'm on the Chinati board, and we are dedicated to preserving and celebrating the work of Donald Judd. In my mind, does that mean hero worship? No, that means understanding and letting yourself be inspired by that work without mythicizing it. It's not a law or a textbook.

Leslie Hewitt

An artist who works with sculpture, photography and other media.



Leslie Hewitt photographed the objects in "Untitled (Double Entendre)," below, and used a frame similar to the wood shown. Credit...Leslie Hewitt and Perrotin; Guillaume Ziccarelli



Leslie Hewitt and Perrotin; Guillaume Ziccarelli

I think Judd's influence comes from his commitment to the autonomy of the art object. And I wouldn't isolate Judd; I think of Adrian Piper and Sol LeWitt, and Eva Hesse. The generation was influential more so than a single person. But I was born in 1977: We can't keep making Judd's work! That was his.

My work "Untitled (Double Entendre)" [2019] is a series of objects — a piece of glass, a piece of wood, a stack of books — but I photograph them. The use of photography is a distancing tool. But then I turn the whole thing back into an object with the frame being similar to the wood pictured.

In terms of the battle for attention, artists are now grappling with screens. Screens flatten everything out, and everything is mediated through the image now. Having Judd at MoMA, I'm sure it's going to have an impact on a generation that is yearning for more physicality.