

Out of the Box

You hear these stories and wonder at their mythic pattern: a significant body of work by a painter is discovered when a wall is knocked down during construction or renovation. A group of terrific Ron Bladen paintings was brought to light in just such a manner and Jay de Feo's epic single painting, "The Rose," was famously released from behind a wall at the San Francisco Art Institute, where it had languished invisibly for 20 years. The mordant among us would find it hard to put Poe's *The Black Cat* and *The Telltale Heart* out of mind. Something walled up could get released as a confession. The story of the emergence of a long out of sight/out of mind group of small paintings by Cris Gianakos follows a similar trajectory. In the week before America's catastrophic election, Gianakos' Swedish gallerist, Stefan Andersson was visiting and staying with the artist in his New York loft. They noticed that Gianakos' kitchen cabinets were beginning to detach from the wall. Andersson set about trying to reattach them and in emptying them he pulled out an especially heavy box that held 30 small paintings that Gianakos had long lost track of. The box had not been opened for 20 years and the paintings themselves dated from the 70s.

The paintings are pristinely preserved, 8x8 inch/20x20 cm exercises in 1970s romance with the concrete, so to speak. As befits one of our most significant post Minimalist sculptors, Gianakos' paintings from this period are in part a catalogue of materials and their affects. Here is a list the artist sent to me in preparation for these remarks; "gesso, acrylic paint, oil paint, gel medium, copper screen, wood, nails, Sculpt Metal, plaster-saturated cotton gauze, graphite on canvas wrapped around plywood." He goes on to add more talking points and shortly comes back to materials, "The allure of banal industrial materials such as a hex-head galvanized bolt being transformed into an integral component of art or wire screen transformed into a texture." Gianakos is writing prose poetry here as surely as Smithson was in his travelogues to Passaic and the Great Salt Lake. And as lovely as his material taxonomy is, it's what he does with it that counts.

The paintings are "colorless" grisailles in the manner of Picasso's Cubist collages and thus fall out of the Modernist logic trajectory that insisted that painting's end point was a field of color. Gianakos' paintings instead might be considered a painterly iteration of bricolage, except there is color of a sort. It's the color of a certain indoor weather, a time of night, library archive rooms, where the olive/umber of linen is a mood, as are the dull silver grey of Sculpt Metal, copper's warmth and the white of plaster. Each painting can be seen a single unit of a larger grid. They each do something different but are joined into a larger unit by their shared diagrammatic and tactile scale. Gianakos' sculpture, particularly his great indoor and outdoor "ramps" were always connected to painting in the manner in which they supported a planar face. And the give and take between painting, sculpture and the world of dance was never more open than it was during the time these paintings were made, when the Task Movement coming out of the Judson Theater was teaching artists that actions were content. This heretofore unexhibited body of work enriches and complicates Gianakos' already secure achievement, and suggests open possibilities for both reexamining the period from whence they come and going forward in abstraction.

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