

Art in America

Review: Suzanne Blank Redstone

By Gwen Allen

December 16, 2016



Suzanne Blank Redstone: *Portal 1*, 1967, acrylic on masonite, 44½ by 66 inches; at Jessica Silverman

Suzanne Blank Redstone's exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery highlighted her early, formative explorations of abstraction. The presentation featured ten acrylic paintings (nine on masonite and one on canvas) from the artist's "Portals" series (1966–69), as well as a selection of drawn studies for the works. In this series, Redstone used primary colors and lines at forty-five- and ninety-degree angles to construct architectonic compositions whose forms often make use of axonometric projection—a system of representation (famously employed by El Lissitzky in his "Prouns") in which orthogonal lines are parallel to one another instead of converging at a vanishing point, creating images that are divorced from the spectator's point of view and that appear, by turns, to recede and to protrude forward. Redstone's compositions suggest both interior spaces and openings onto something beyond.

Now in her seventies, Redstone, who is from Long Island and has lived and worked in Devon, England, since 1974, is just beginning to receive critical attention; this was her first solo show in the United States. She produced the "Portals" while living in New York and Philadelphia shortly after receiving her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Included in the exhibition was the 1967 work *After Piero Della Francesca Painting—The Flagellation of Christ*, whose composition is based on that of the fifteenth-century masterpiece, which she saw in Italy while spending her senior year in Rome as part of RISD's senior honors program. Piero's painting, which relies on traditional linear perspective to render a space that is at once logically impossible, since its light sources suggest two different temporal registers, and highly realistic, provides a clue to the spatial and semantic instability that likewise informs Redstone's "Portals." Her images "play games with our eye muscles," as François Bucher said of Josef Albers's earlier experiments with geometric illusion, collected in the artist's book *Despite Straight Lines*, which influenced Redstone's series.

Yet while Albers's modernist drawings are spare and pristine, offering simple and generic, if dynamic, Möbius strip-like shapes and objects, Redstone's "Portals" are idiosyncratic and complex. Intentional "mistakes" and inconsistencies disrupt her illusions: a transparent grid becomes solid and opaque in *Portal 8* (1968); lines do not quite meet up at a corner in *Portal 1* (1967), transforming what could be one side of a three-dimensional volume into a free-floating facade. Her use of color deviates from the modernist palette, as she tweaks the value and saturation of primary hues to create pastel yellows and pinks, and deep shades of oxblood and midnight blue. She further distinguishes her brand of formalism by nodding to Surrealism with Magritte-like clouded skies in *Yellow Filter: Diptych* (1966) and *Portal 3* (1967), infusing otherwise nonobjective works with narrative and metaphor.

In a brochure essay for the show, Jenni Sorokin suggests that Redstone's belated recognition fits a pattern common to women artists. But if the gender politics of the art world have affected the reception of Redstone's work, her identity and lived experience as a woman have also surely shaped its production. Helen Molesworth provides a compelling framework for such an interpretation in her catalogue essay for "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," the touring survey that originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 2007. Though she does not discuss Redstone per se, Molesworth points to the "ambivalence" with which a number of female painters of Redstone's generation, including Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, and Joan Snyder, have appropriated modernist techniques and tropes that have been historically and culturally coded as masculine. Like the artists Molesworth discusses, Redstone simultaneously deploys the formal devices of modernist abstraction and distances herself from them, reinscribing them with a difference that does not necessarily or simplistically equate with gender, but does lend originality to this particular body of work.