

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Space in Two Dimensions: Jiro Takamatsu and his Contemporaries

Alex Bacon

For the 2021 edition of Frieze Masters, Stephen Friedman Gallery brings together a group of historical works from the 1970s through the 1990s, centred around Japanese artist Jiro Takamatsu in relation to several of his contemporaries. Positioning examples of his practice from this period alongside works by Richard Diebenkorn, Agnes Martin and Anne Truitt, the presentation highlights their shared exploration of two-dimensional space across a range of media, including painting, works on paper and sculpture. As evident in the examples from Takamatsu's practice featured in the exhibition, these artists favour muted, often monochromatic palettes and geometric forms, which together establish a spatial play across one or more flat planes.

This play ranges from the coloured bands in Takamatsu's sparse paintings, which hug the edges of the canvas to seemingly bend and warp space, to the subtlety of Truitt's quietly shifting, closely calibrated tones. In his paintings as well as his works on paper Takamatsu leans towards neutral grey or off-white grounds that set off his engagement with colour. In *Space in Two Dimensions No.1042* (1982), for example, Takamatsu activates the entirety of the canvas by using banks of diagonals to establish a tension with the pictorial rectangle, which is reaffirmed by a vertical line on the left of the composition and one that mirrors it on the right, which is nearly buried under layers of paint. Pushing these forms towards the boundaries of the canvas causes the monochromatic centre to gently flex forward while the diagonals torque in response. The kind of subtle optical illusion caused by such play along the edges of a composition is also found in Truitt's contemporaneous painting *Snow Sea* (1981). There, the juxtaposition of a navy field with a sharply undulating teal band along the bottom of her rectangular canvas draws the viewer's eye along the painting's linear extension, giving it a sense of speed modulated by the peaks and valleys of the teal shape, cooled somewhat by the work's dominant dark tone.

These works by Takamatsu and Truitt are indicative of their engagement with the flatness of the two-dimensional plane, whether of the singular surface of a painting, or the oscillation of multiple planes in space in the sculptural work of both artists. In *No.702* (1976), Takamatsu engages with the legacy of Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzalez's tradition of constructed sculpture, extended by David Smith in the 1950s and Anthony Caro in the 1960s. Takamatsu makes his contribution to this lineage by reducing the complex aggregates of planes seen in Smith and Caro into a single undulation of patinated iron that arches through an assemblage of tubular, linear and roughly hewn forms. They frame a central space that is related to the functioning of the edge-bound forms in his two-dimensional work of the period.

Agnes Martin and Richard Diebenkorn set up a different relationship to space from those seen in Takamatsu and Truitt's works, though all are connected by a shared attention to a soft, painterly handling of even the most monochromatic passages. Martin and Diebenkorn deploy a pliant rendering of geometric forms, especially of the grid, dissolving the surface of the canvas or sheet of paper and beckoning the viewer into a shimmering pictorial field. In Martin's slow burning *Untitled* (1961) a peach-hued plane is, upon close examination, differentiated by a delicate black ink grid, punctuated by spots of white ink. What at first seems to be a singular field becomes infinitely multiplied as one gets lost in the numerous details that Martin has packed into 21 square centimetres.

Diebenkorn begins from an opposite approach of compositional complexity. His *Untitled* (c. 1988-1992) uses stacked forms, made up of thin layers of gouache, to establish a dense field of varied colours, dominated by earthy tones. He utilizes the unconventional grid as an armature of sorts to organize what otherwise might be an excessively diverse assortment of movements. This structure allows him to treat each segment as almost its own work. We find, for example, elements that contain their own linear squiggles or different painterly treatments of colour and gesture. The result is, not unlike Martin's more pared-down compositions, a jewel-like agglomeration that is easy to get lost in, also here confounding expectations we might have because of its small scale.

Taken together, this selection of works allows the viewer to assess a range of formal possibilities that arise from the kinds of graphic pairings of form and colour in Takamatsu's work. These range from the subtle optical effects present in the edge-hugging compositions of Takamatsu and Truitt (including her sculptures, which in a way can be understood as all surface, all edge) to the quiet unfolding of Martin's gridded fields, and the dense complexity of Diebenkorn's agglomerates of stacked segments.

What sets Takamatsu apart most from these American peers is the diversity of his practice overall, which reaches beyond painting, sculpture and works on paper to include conceptually inflected photography and performance. We cannot help but detect an analytical aspect to his breaking down of line and colour into discrete units in the way each is presented side-by-side in works from the series *Space in Two Dimensions* (1981), and the suggestion of meta-critical approach in the photography of photographs and sculpture that present the effects of gravity on materials. In short, Takamatsu set out on a unique trajectory by combining the sensuous attention to form and

Stephen Friedman Gallery

facture found in the contemporaneous work of American artists like Truitt, Martin and Diebenkorn with a rigorous conceptual analysis that, in an American context, was seen as inimical. In the process he shows us how geographical distance from supposed art centres can sometimes open up new opportunities by breaking down locally held dogmas.

Alex Bacon

Alex Bacon is an art historian based in New York City who regularly writes criticism and organizes exhibitions of both contemporary and historical art. Until recently he was a Curatorial Associate at the Princeton University Art Museum.