

# Maximal Result, Minimal Means

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*Washington*

Anne Truitt, the American abstractionist who died five years ago at age 83, is usually placed under the umbrella of Minimalism—an art movement her sculptures are credited with jump-starting in 1961. But the label narrows the distinctiveness of her achievement. Truitt was an abstract painter and sculptor; but mainly—working with slender, painted, squared wood columns, through which she gave mass and airy volume to color—she was a painter working in three dimensions. Her gifts are brought vividly to life in "Anne Truitt: Perception and Reflection," the first full retrospective of the artist, at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Unlike the machine-tooled feel of most Minimalist art, Truitt's work is unafraid of being warm and handmade; of being metaphoric, contemplative and evocative of nature. Her painted sculptures were originally inspired by Barnett Newman's abstract paintings. But Truitt's art has as much in common with the complex, muscular geometries of Piet Mondrian, Ellsworth Kelly and the Russian Constructivists as it does with Newman's stripes or the pared-down forms of Agnes Martin and Donald Judd. Although abstract and spare, Truitt's sculptures do not shy away from being human in scale; nor do they mind flirting with the decorative, the monumental or the elegiac.

Still, Truitt's sculptures can be elusive. At the conclusion of the Hirshhorn's retrospective is a short film about the artist. Visitors would do well to start there before heading to the beginning of the loosely chronological show. The film, "Anne Truitt: Working" (2009), made by Jem Cohen, comprises a montage of images: We see jars of paint, autumnal leaves, and wind rippling the surface of a pond, as well as Truitt making sculpture in her Washington and Yaddo studios. But the heart of the film is its soundtrack—the snippets of Truitt's wise and emphatic voice espousing the tenets of her studio practice.

Truitt—part chef, part shaman—talks about making art, and especially fine-tuning color, in language that veers between the mystical and the matter-of-fact. Among the qualities she demands from her colors are that they "zoom into being," "lift," "sing," "vibrate" and "float across" form. "Color," Truitt says, "is a question of amount . . . of a little bit of this and a medium amount of this." When color is "right," she says, "it becomes flesh . . . human. . . emotion . . . it becomes alive." She observes that the idea of having enough color, "is like having enough mashed potatoes—you need enough.

Truitt was trained as a therapist at Bryn Mawr College and, later, as an artist at Washington's Institute of Contemporary Art. Born in Baltimore and reared in Easton, Md., she spent most of her life in Washington with her husband, journalist James Truitt. Before the Minimalist sculpture of 1961 (where the Hirshhorn show begins), her art consisted of figurative sculptures that Truitt, in 2002, described as "very ugly and very primitive" and categorically dismissed: "They had nothing to do with art . . . they had to do with self-expression."

Nothing that could be dismissed as mere "self-expression" is in the Hirshhorn's elegant gathering of more than 85 sculptures, paintings and drawings. But I still wish the show, organized by Kristen Hileman, had included formative works from the 1950s. The exhibition begins with the beautifully spare, abstract sculpture "First" (1961), which initially appears to be merely a fragment of a white picket fence. Truitt alights at the Hirshhorn without her messy beginnings—which makes this not a proper retrospective per se.

Immediately, the show moves into the dark and foreboding, black, gray, white, red and violet abstract sculptures from 1962. They stand alone on the floor and suggest tombstones, totems, barriers, obelisks and sentries. "Hardcastle," a narrow black wall over 8 feet tall, supported by electric-red struts, is one of the largest works in the show. The sculpture, which alludes to a man run over by a train, is an abstract distillation of monument, rise and support, as startling as a draped casket.

Truitt, building layer upon layer, hand-painted each sculpture. Visible wood grain, brushstrokes and translucent glazes add ripples, vibration and movement to her sculptures' surfaces. In many of these earlier works, wide or narrow colored stripes cascade like flowing water from sculpture to plinth. Surfaces shift from glossy to matte to chalky; and edges and incised lines, enlivened by reflected light, sparkle like electric current.

The Hirshhorn's Truitt drawings and paintings include "Piths," (2002-04) dense tar-black paintings that simultaneously resemble pelts, animal footprints and frayed, woven floor mats. But her greatest works are the signature sculptures that she made from the mid-1960s up until her death, in 2004. A master of color, Truitt can get her columnar wood sculptures to blush and breathe; to feel translucent, scented and lit from within. Shifting color ever so slightly in weight and hue, her striped forms feel alive.

At the Hirshhorn, many of Truitt's sculptures are gorgeously, harmoniously grouped. They feel like classical columns in search of roof and pediment; and they move us, from sculpture to sculpture, as if from season to season or parent to child. "A Wall for Apricots" (1968), in baby blue, chartreuse and taxi-cab yellow, expands and compresses in equal measure. The mostly robin's-egg blue of "Landfall" (1970) freshens like a floral breeze. "Elixir" (1997) and "View" (1999), in chilly, Easter-egg pinks, greens, yellows, violets and blues, feel like homage to spring. The brushy, crimson stripe circling "Nicea" (1977) flutters like an eyelash, opens like a fresh wound.

As simply stated as stacks of building blocks, Truitt's best sculptures are unassuming yet dead-on. They do not feel like painted forms but, rather, like living presences. And they reverberate like color notes sounding against one another. Their power lies in their economy; and in their full embrace of the beauty and metaphoric richness of color—maximal results achieved through minimal means, not Minimalism.