



MARIO NAVES

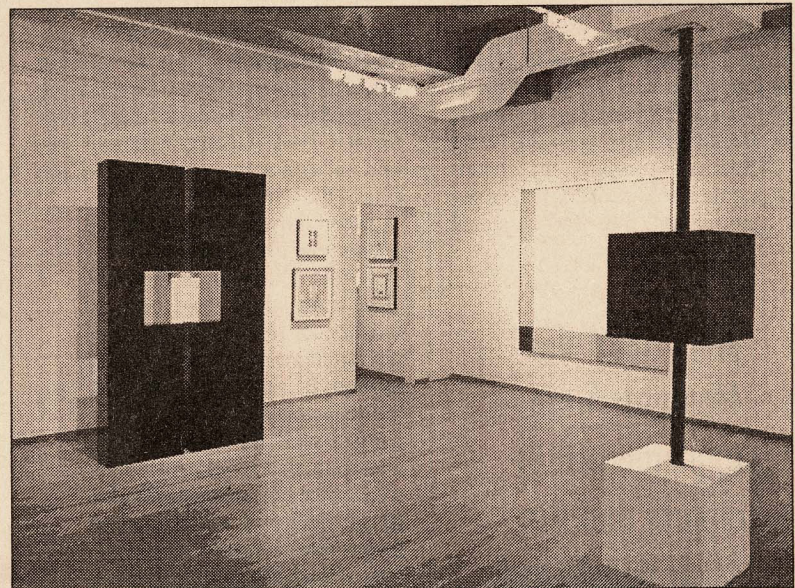
Less Is More: Diller Thrived On Limitations of Painting

What on earth prompted the painter Burgoyne Diller (1906-1965), whose work is the subject of an exhibition at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, to take up sculpture? Diller, an American follower of Mondrian, was incapable of treating an aesthetic decision lightly; the move to make sculpture came, no doubt, after prolonged consideration. Maybe an explanation can be found in whatever papers are held by his estate. Because let me tell you: It isn't present at Rosenfeld. Diller's austere brand of geometric abstraction, with its taut eccentricities of interval, space and form, is rendered squat and cartoonish when transferred to wood and formica. The sculptures look like oversized building blocks, a kind of neo-plasticist Lego. Failing to inhabit, enliven or, for that matter, recognize actual space, they're dead on arrival and as dated as the hula hoop. Given their inertia, it makes perfect sense that the sculptures have been hailed as the bridge between Modernism and Minimalism. But, really, such a legacy is too awful a burden for such a good artist—or, I should reiterate, such a good *painter*.

Diller thrived only within the invented space of painting. The limitations specific to the medium—in particular, the parameters of the canvas' surface area—are indispensable to the vigor of his art. He took a few elements (the square, the rectangle and the stripe) and a restricted palette (the primaries, black and white and a range of washed-out grays) and did a lot with them. *First Theme* (1962), with its emphatic vertical format, and the magisterial *First Theme* (1959-60) are typi-

cal: The relationships between forms and format have been magnetized, animated in a manner that is low-key yet thoroughly impassioned. The result is an equilibrium too headstrong to be dubbed classical; nonetheless, the paintings achieve a steadfast rightness. Diller's art is too self-effacing, too caught up in the exigencies of the studio, to earn a prominent place in our museums. That makes an exhibition like this one all the more valuable.

Burgoyne Diller: The 1960s; Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings is at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, until May 8.



Burgoyne Diller's sculpture doesn't live up to his painting.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY