



Ronald Davis  
Is Not Doing What You're Seeing

NYCHAUS



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Ronald Davis

Lemon Yellow

Dodecagon Series (PTG 0082)

1969

Moulded Polyester Resin and  
Fiberglass

50.5 x 132 inches

(128.3 x 335.3 cm)



Ronald Davis

BackUp

Dodecagon Series

1969

Moulded Polyester Resin and  
Fiberglass

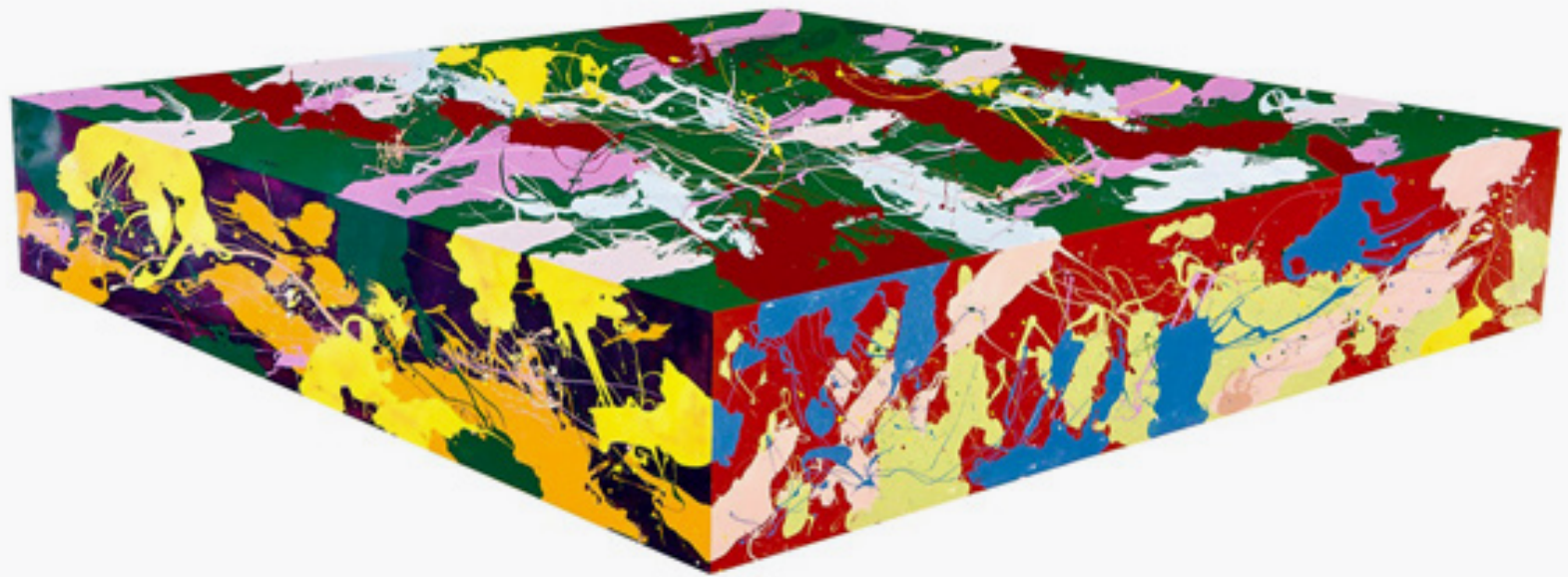
60 1/2 x 136 inches

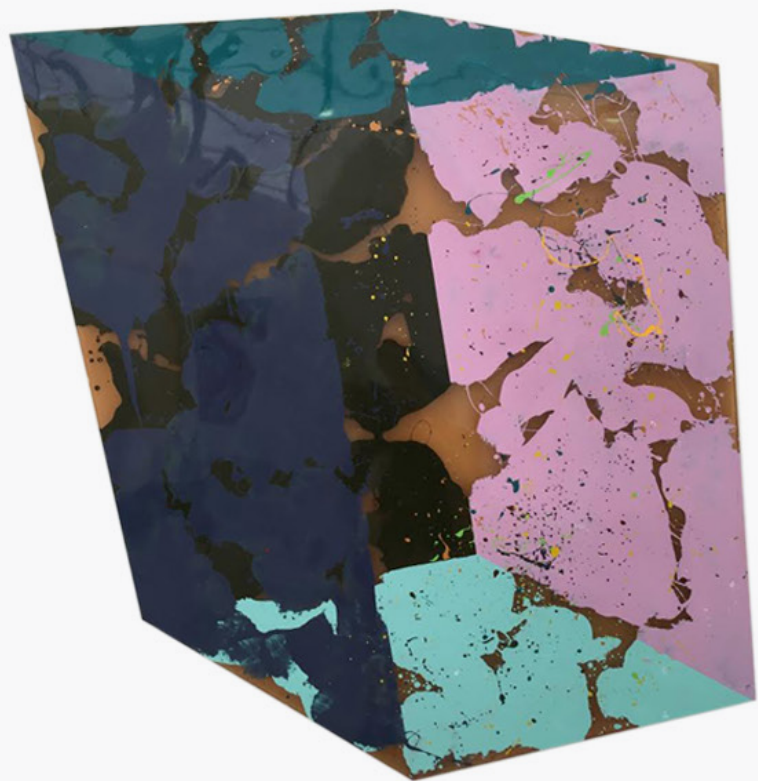
(153.7 x 345.4 cm)

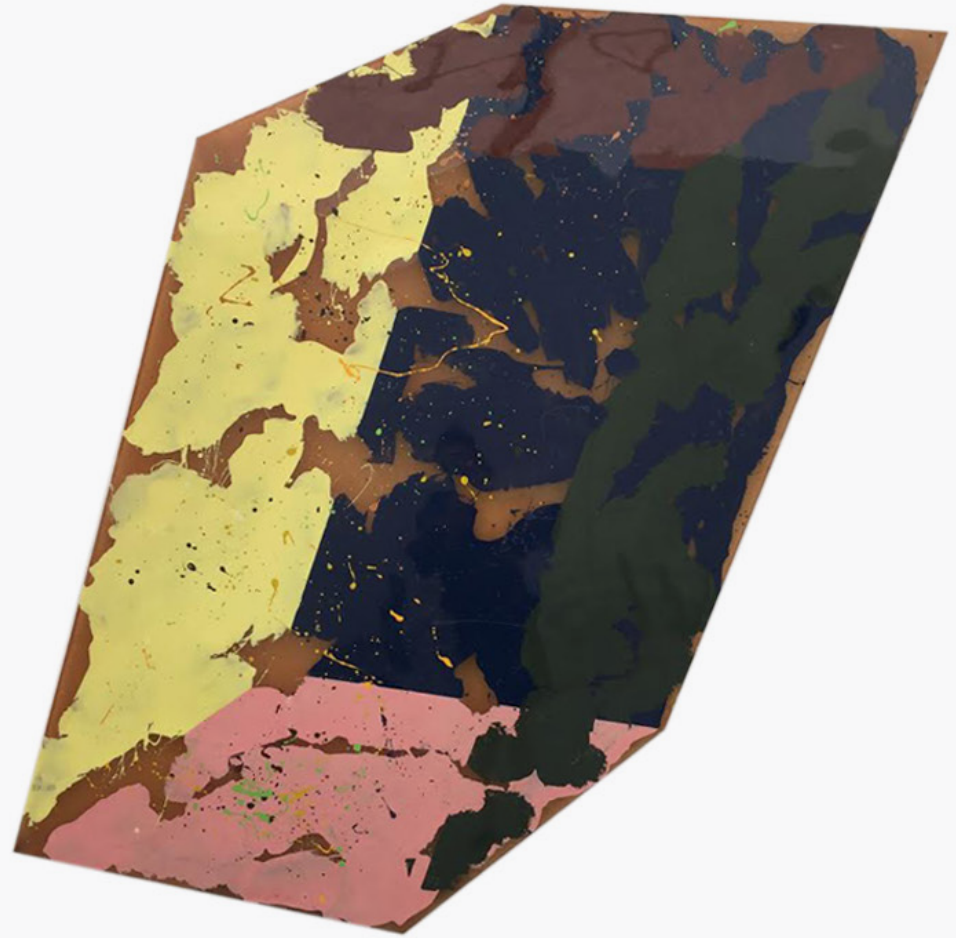
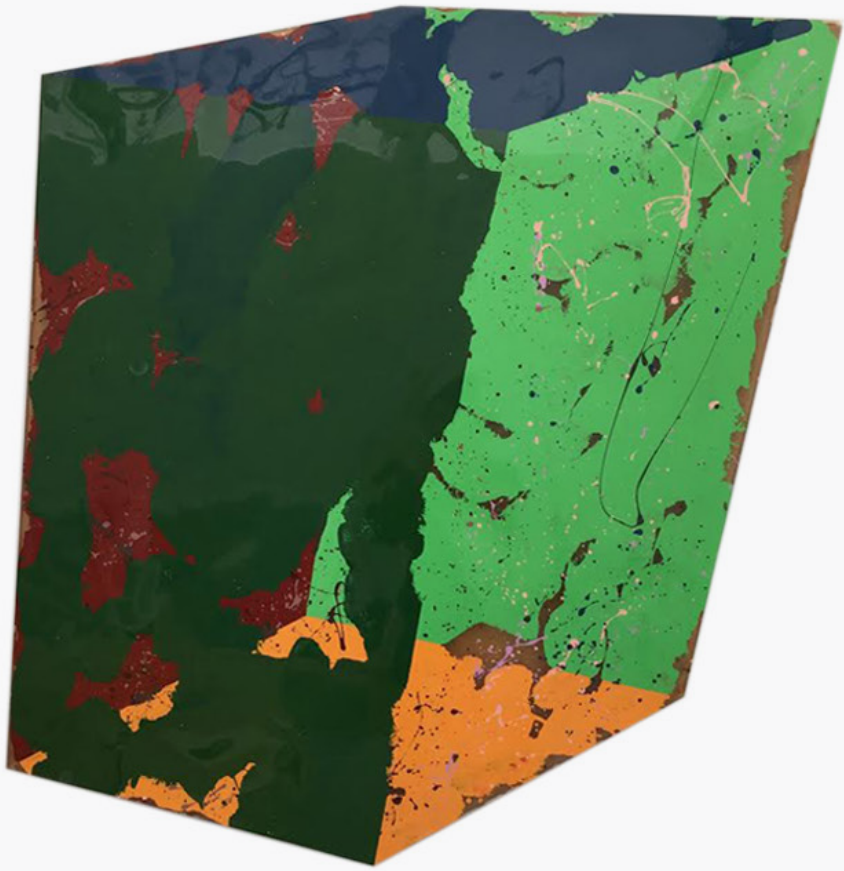


Ronald Davis  
Complements  
1969  
Resin and Fiberglass  
50 x 140 inches  
(127 x 355.6 cm)









Ronald Davis

Four and Twenty (Quadych)

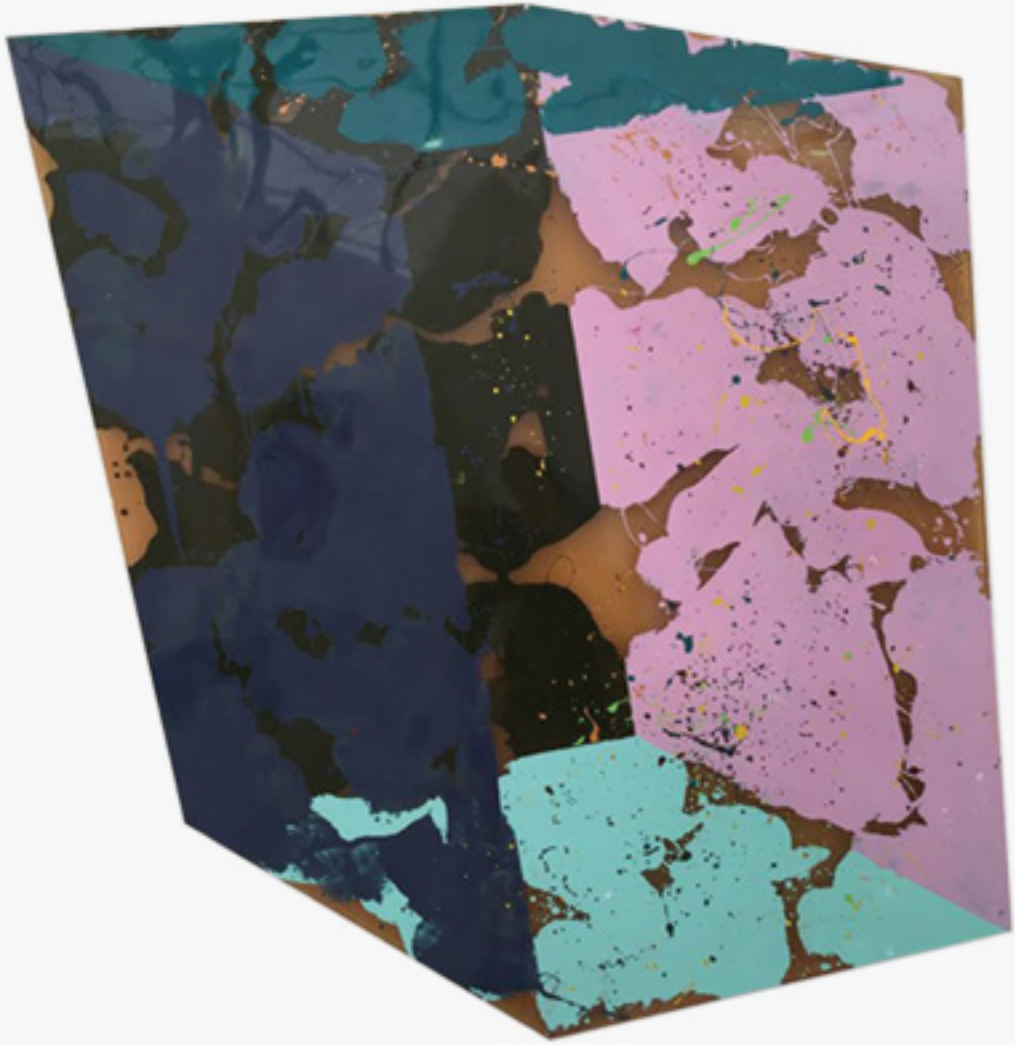
Part 1

1970

Polyester Resin and Fiberglass

80 x 250 inches

(203.2 x 635 cm)



Ronald Davis

Four and Twenty (Quadych)

Part 2

1970

Polyester Resin and Fiberglass

80 x 250 inches

(203.2 x 635 cm)



Ronald Davis

Four and Twenty (Quadych)

Part 3

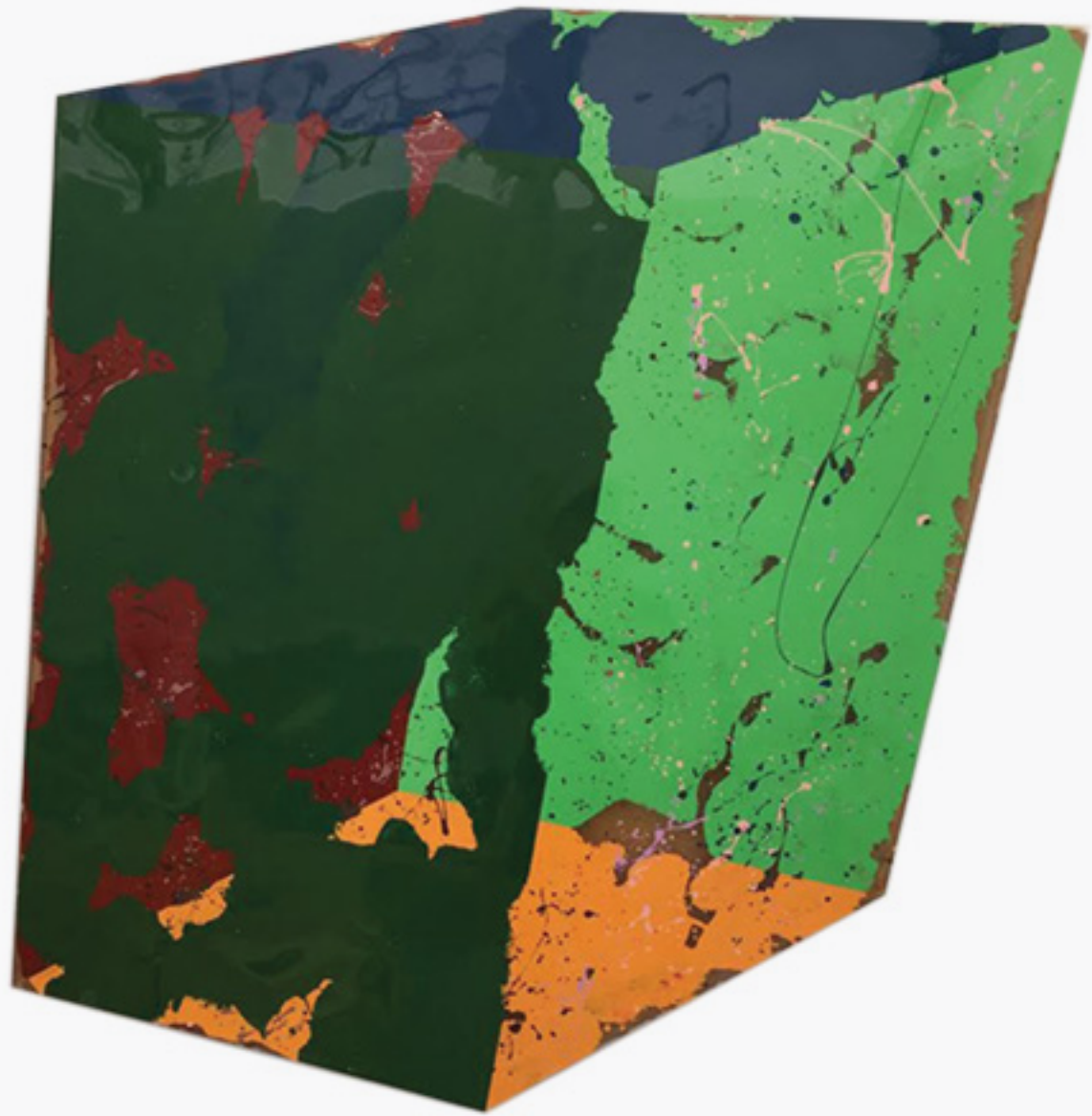
1970

Polyester Resin and Fiberglass

80 x 250 inches

(203.2 x 635 cm)





Ronald Davis

Four and Twenty (Quadych)

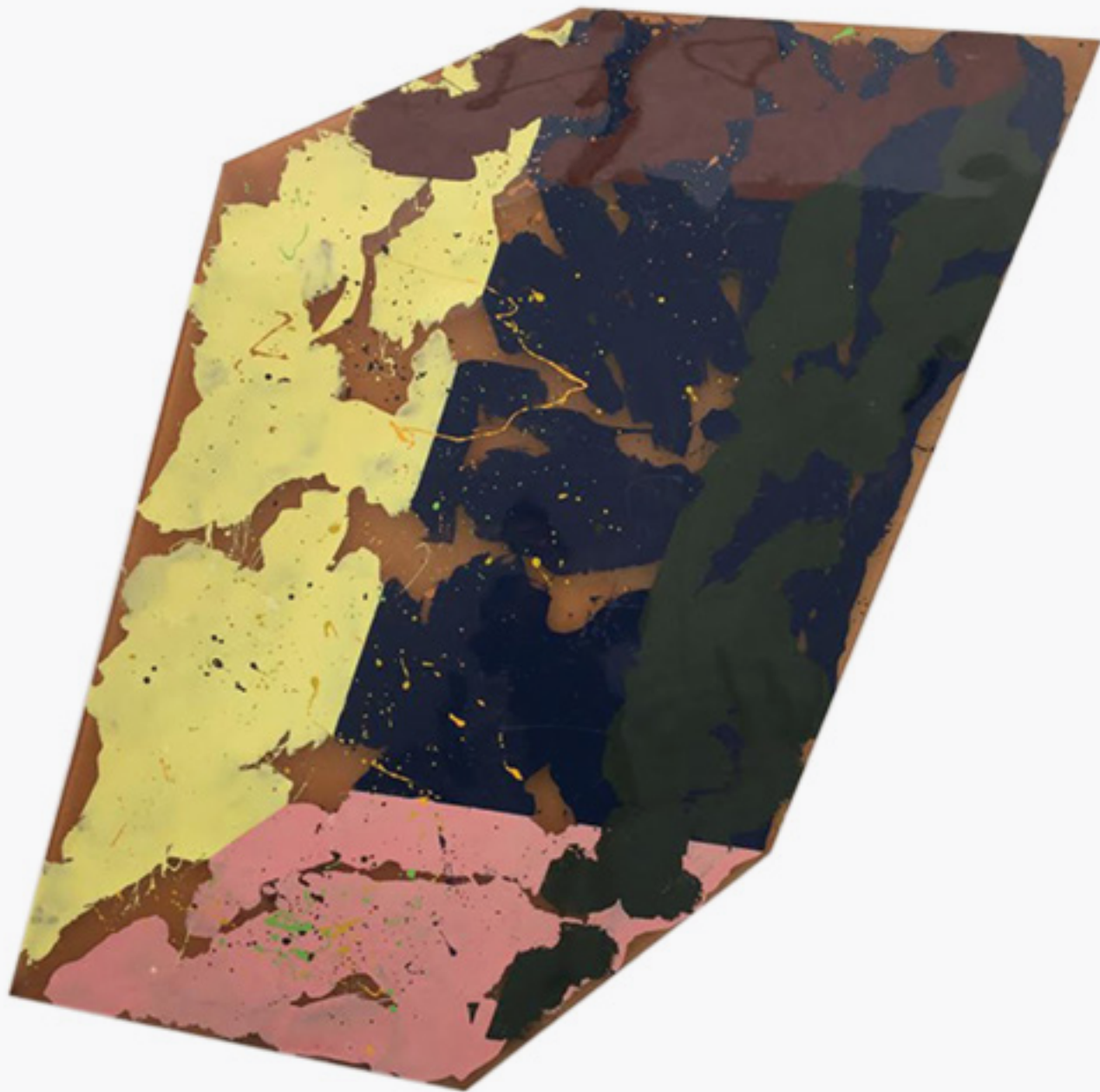
Part 4

1970

Polyester Resin and Fiberglass

80 x 250 inches

(203.2 x 635 cm)



Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion  
Michael Fried



Originally published in Artforum, April 1967

Ron Davis is a young California artist whose new paintings, recently shown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, are among the most significant produced anywhere during the past few years, and place him, along with Stella and Bannard, at the forefront of his generation. In at least two respects Davis' work is characteristically Californian: it makes impressive use of new materials—specifically, plastic backed with fiberglass—and it exploits an untrammelled illusionism. But these previously had yielded nothing more than extraordinarily attractive objects, such as Larry Bell's coated glass boxes, or ravishing, ostensibly pictorial effects, as in Robert Irwin's recent work. (In the first instance illusion is rendered literal, while in the second it dissolves literalness entirely.) Whereas Davis' new work achieves an unequivocal identity as painting. That this is so is a matter of conviction. One recognizes Davis' new work as painting: in my case, with amazement—and, at first, distrust, even resentment—that what I was experiencing as paintings were, after all, made of plastic. Not that Davis' paintings are what they are in spite of being made of plastic or presenting a compelling illusion of a solid object in strong perspective. On the contrary, it is precisely Davis' refusal to settle for anything but ambitious painting that, one feels, has compelled him to use both new materials and two-point perspective. What incites amazement is that that ambition could be realized in this way—that, for example, after a lapse of at least a century, rigorous perspective could again be come a medium of painting. Davis' paintings are, I suggest, the most extreme response so far to the situation described in my essay *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings*.<sup>1</sup> Roughly,

1 — *ARTFORUM*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Nov. 1966.

Davis has used perspective illusion—the illusion that the painting as a whole is a solid object seen in two-point perspective from above—to relieve the pressure under which, within that situation, the shape of the support (or literal shape) has come to find itself. The limits of Davis' new paintings present themselves as the edges of a three-dimensional entity rather than of a flat surface; and in fact it is virtually impossible to grasp the literal shape of paintings like *Six-Ninths Blue* and *Six-Ninths Red* just by looking at them. (One is forced, so to speak, to trace their limits and then see what one has.) As a result, the question of whether or not the literal shapes of Davis' new paintings hold, or stamp themselves out, or compel conviction a burning question within the situation referred to—simply does not arise. More precisely, it does not arise as long as the illusion of three dimensionality remains compelling: if, in a given painting, for whatever reason; the illusion is felt to be in jeopardy, that painting's ability to hold as shape is rendered questionable as well. (Something of the kind may happen in *Two-Ninths Grey*, in which the projected object is not, to my mind, sufficiently comprehensible. What, for example, is the precise relation of the two gray blocks to the larger red slab on which they seem to sit? In general, Davis can not afford much ambiguity or indeterminacy, both of which compromise his paintings' apparent objecthood.)

A great deal, then, depends upon the power of the illusion; and it was, I believe, in order to achieve that power that Davis gave up working in paint on canvas and began to explore the possibility of making his new paintings in plastic. In any case, the fact that in his new paintings color is not applied to the surface in any way, but instead seems physically to lie somewhere behind it, makes the illusion of objecthood infinitely more compelling than would otherwise be the case. In this respect Davis' new paintings represent not only an inspired resuscitation of, but a deep break with, traditional illusionism: in the latter paint on the surface of the canvas creates the illusion of objects in space; while in Davis' paintings whatever makes the illusion is not, it seems, situated on, or at, the surface at all. (The illusion of objecthood is intensified still more by the way in which the colored plastic—in which Davis has also mixed mirror flake, aluminum powder, bronze powder and pearl essence—not merely represents but imi-

tates the materiality of solid things.) Conversely, the surface of these paintings is experienced in unique isolation from the illusion. It has been prized loose from the rest of the painting—as though what hangs on the wall is the surface alone. In Davis’ new paintings a detached surface coexists with a detached illusion. (In this respect his paintings are the opposite of Olitski’s, in which there is “an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture’s surface.”<sup>2</sup>) Indeed, the detached surface coincides with the detached illusion: which is why the question of whether or not the shape of that surface holds or stamps itself out does not arise. Davis deliberately—and, I think, profoundly—heightens one’s sense of the mutual independence of surface and illusion by rather sharply beveling the edges of his paintings from behind. This means that even when the beholder is not standing directly in front of a given painting, no support of any kind can be seen. The surface is felt to be exactly that, a surface, and nothing more. It is not, one might say, the surface of anything—except, of course, of a painting.

Moreover, Davis’ surface is some thing new in painting: not because it is shiny and reflects light—that was also true of the varnished surfaces of the Old Masters—but because what one experiences as surface in these paintings is that reflectance and nothing more. The precise degree of reflectance is important. If the painting is too shiny the surface is emphasized at the expense of the illusion; and this in turn under mines the independence of both. At the same time, Davis’ paintings make transparency important as never before: not because their surfaces are experienced as transparent—one does not, I want to say, look through so much as past them<sup>3</sup>—but because the layers of colored plastic behind their surfaces vary in opacity. The relation between the surface and the rest of a transparent object is different from that between the surface and the rest of an opaque one: roughly, in the former case it is as though the beholder can see all of the object, not just the portion that his eyesight touches. In Davis’ new work this difference becomes important to painting for the first time, by making possible, or greatly strengthening, the relation between surface and illusion that I have tried to describe.

2 — Clement Greenberg, in the catalog to the United States Pavilion in the 1966 Venice Biennial.

3 — Not the way one looks past an object so much as the way one looks past a reflection.

4 — In the catalog essay to Olitski's forthcoming exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery.

Finally, I want at least to touch on the character of the illusionism in these paintings. Despite its dependence on the rigorous application of two-point perspective, it, too, is new in painting. Roughly, the illusion is of something one takes to be a square slab (some portions of which have been removed), turned so that one of its corners points in the general direction of the beholder, and seen from above. What seems to me of special interest is this: the illusion is such that one simply assumes that the projected slab is horizontal, as though Laying on the ground; but this means that looking down at it could be managed only from a position considerably above both the slab itself and the imaginary ground-plane it seems to define. Moreover, the beholder is not only suspended above the slab; he is simultaneously tilted toward it—otherwise he would not be in a position to look down at the slab at all. In Davis' new paintings the illusion of objecthood does not excavate the wall so much as it dissolves the ground under one's feet: as though experiencing the surface and the illusion independently of one another were the result of standing in radically different physical relations to them. Davis' illusionism addresses itself not just to eyesight but to a sense that might be called one of directionality. There have been strong intimations of such a development in recent painting, notably that of Noland and Olitski; in fact, I recently claimed of Olitski's spray paintings that what is appealed to is not our ability in locating objects (or failing to) but in orienting ourselves (or failing to).<sup>4</sup> This seems to me dramatically true of Davis' new paintings as well.

The possibilities which Davis has been able to realize in his first plastic paintings still seem to me scarcely imaginable. The possibilities which they open up belong to the future of painting.







Ronald Davis was born in Los Angeles in 1937, and snatched away to Cheyenne, Wyoming for a high plains youth that failed to prepare him for the local cotillion. After high school, Davis worked at sheet metal for two years and attended the University of Wyoming. Then, finally, inspired by Jackson Pollock's Wyoming roots he caught the art virus and set off in the direction of being a great artist. He studied at the San Francisco Art Institute. He received a Whitney Fellowship and a National Endowment grant. In 1965, he moved back to Los Angeles and discovered his one true mentor, the legendary dealer, Nicolas Wilder.

In 1967 (*fig. 1*) and 1968, Davis had his first exhibitions in New York, first at Tibor de Nagy and then at Leo Castelli. Out of these exhibitions he sold paintings to the Museum of Modern Art, The Tate Gallery, London, the Los Angeles County Museum, The San Francisco Museum of Art, The Chicago Museum of Art. He was included in Documenta '68 in Kassel, and in the US pavilion of the Venice Biennial in '72. This, for a young painter at that time, was considered a good start, and Davis' artworks remained in vogue for another twenty years.

Even so, there is a good chance that you don't know Ronald Davis' artworks, and, if you don't, you should. The wheel is coming round again. From 1964 to 1975, Davis painted his *Dodecagons*, the greatest series of abstract objects made in the United States in the twentieth century. These twelve-sided pieces of resin, polyester and fiberglass made Davis rich and famous, as they should have, but Davis liked the adulation less than he thought he would. It was all big hats, scarves, and handmade boots and he will explain to you today that not only



*fig. 1* — Artforum, April 1967



fig. 2 — Bill Al Bengston

was he born to be an artist, he was born to be a starving artist because there is a hands-on discipline—an intense quality of attention—that works best at the edge of catastrophe.

Also, Davis didn't like blue chip work habits: You had to work in the summer. You built ten objects for an East coast show. You built ten more for a West coast show. Twenty years of this frazzles the mind, since in the rush from one to ten one misses a lot of exits. The objects stayed steady since Davis don't do no junk. So he retired anyway, moved to Taos, built a village of hogans and set about refining and upgrading what he'd done. The reasons for Davis' defection are legion. The first time I asked him why he moved, he said it was to get away from Frank Gehry and a clingy girl friend, although the reasons have changed over the years.

The Gehry-Davis kerfuffle began when Davis asked Frank to build him a studio in Malibu based on the footprint of a shaped, Davis artwork. It was done and Gehry was declared the putto of postmodernism, and the studio was so full of architects proclaiming Frank's genius, that Davis couldn't get much work done. Davis' contribution to the studio underwent slow erasure, because architecture needed a hero more than art did. The artist began manifesting anxiety symptoms. He wanted a studio for himself. He was miffed by symposiums about his studio to which he wasn't invited. His first studio, colonized by architects. No big woops, but Davis was a Wyoming boy. Today, hoganed in Taos, Davis is still working steadily. He studies representational techniques, argues with his neighbors. He rarely mentions that "Frank Gehry's post-modern masterpiece" was in fact Ronald Davis' "primo minimalism intacto"—an difficult object on a plain at the Bu.

Having told you this story here, there is an additional point to be made. Los Angeles then isn't Los Angeles now. The Los Angeles art world now is just about perfect. It is not ideal, because, in an ideal art world, price and value harmonize—this according to Leo Castelli. Even so, any thing you want from anywhere is readily available. Consultants, critics, market advisors, authenticators and art-whisperers sprinkle the sidewalks like beach sand. Billions of dollars that might have been spent on art, have been invested in huge warehouses to display art that has just gone out of fashion, further reinforcing the idea of Los Angeles

as a provincial city. Art is bought by rich collectors who can afford it but can't be bothered with taking care of it. The artists today all have BFA's and loftier honors, like tenure. Nearly everyone has an income and many have benefits.

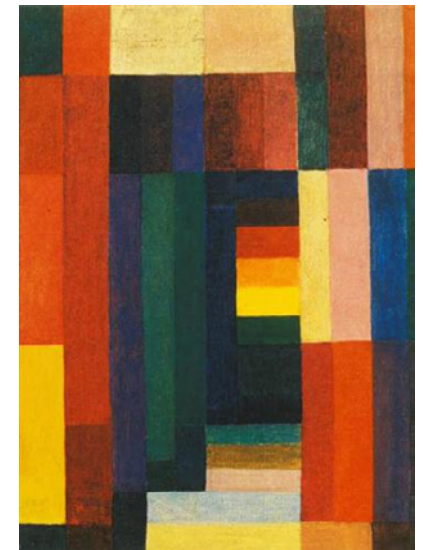
Fifty years ago, Los Angeles was Timbuktu with surf, big signs, and canyons with naked avatars. The artists in that alien wasteland knew two things; they weren't in New York and they weren't even sure they were artists. They all had fallback positions: they might masquerade as architects, gigolos, waiters, motorcycle racers, surfers, fashion models, pornographers, couturiers, movie actors, chefs, and extras. Ed Ruscha and Billy Al Bengston (*fig. 2*) had a graphics store with invoices and business cards. Many claimed to be musicians and many were, so you had to convince them that they were artists because art, for them, art was this singular, magical, mundane thing that saved your life.

As many noted at the time, when compared to the New York art, Los Angeles art felt empty and still does—and this is not a fault. It meant you weren't looking closely enough or at the right thing. New York art, however sleek, felt cluttered with ideas, positions, narratives, commentary, and cleverly positioned invitations for discourse—an early painting by Frank Stella (*fig. 3*) still feels like a corral with too many cows. As a result, the bulk of my early writing consists of reading New York art through Western eyes. I always missed the Heideggerian subtext and I finally decided that I should have been missing it. My New York friends, after all, were trying to get *in*, you know. All my California friends were trying to get *out*—out of Freud, Marx, Heidegger, and La Pleiade over by the Whitney. Out seemed the right way to me.

Ronald Davis was on his way out from jump. In an art world that was rapidly turning grissaille, Davis was a colorist who preferred Itten (*fig. 4*) to Albers. (No Mexico in Albers). In a discourse of paintings that were willfully flat to the eye, Davis proudly produced muscular fields of illusion that infected colors with subtle nuance. In a discourse that was gradually embracing “time-based-art,” Davis lines were not drawn as time is. They did not bear the inference of narrative. The lines were “snap-lined”—dead still with a steady penumbra of shadow on either side. Even his “abstract expressionist” explosions are more blob than gesture, going in



*fig. 3* — Frank Stella



*fig. 4* — Johannes Itten



fig 5— Sam Francis

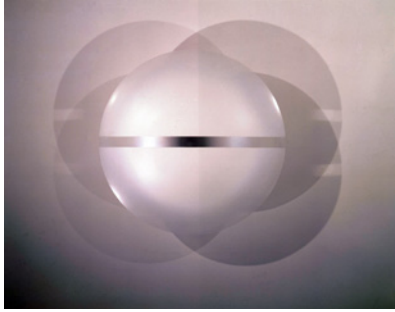


fig 7— Robert Irwin



fig 6— Richard Diebenkorn

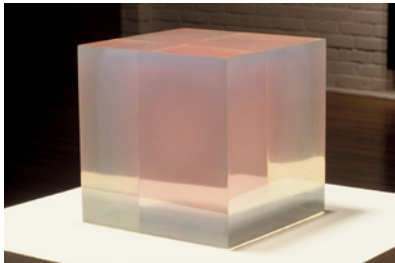


fig 8— Peter Alexander

every direction at once. In a civilization of canvas and color mixers, Ronald was a chemist—an alchemist of epoxy, resins, digital magic, and fiberglass.

He was alone among his peers like Sam Francis (*fig 5*) and Richard Diebenkorn (*fig 6*) in his avant technology, alone among the artists he inspired, like Robert Irwin (*fig 7*) and Peter Alexander (*fig 8*), in his shameful complexity. He owed a debt to Kelly (*fig 9*) and Stella but that was paid in full. Lynda Benglis (*fig 10*) owed a debt to Davis, but that is almost too obvious to mention, because all that they had done was disappearing—to be replaced by text and xeroxed photographs and what could be further from a Dodecagon that that.

My point here, as Davis will tell you, is that Ronald Davis is not really making paintings, not properly, no more than Robert Irwin's scrimms are paintings. Davis is making objects positioned on the wall as Donald Judds are positioned on the floor (and the wall, too). So today, in retrospect, it's easy to see that the shaped object on the wall, enliven that whole wall; the snap-lines that seem to stop at the edge of the wall enlivens that wall, as well, and out of this vertical minimalism on the wall, minimalism grew. Object-makers from Kelly to Stella to Davis are the bastard fathers of that idiom. The fact that this fact has never been argued before, I attribute to the fact that east coast critics are looking at and looking for the wrong things. They are looking for pictures and composition. They should be looking at feigned illusion and flat-lined opticality.

Here are two simple California examples: Ed Ruscha has a drawing entitled "SHE SURE KNOW HER DEVOTIONALS". It's more a feigned quote than drawing but New York critics think semantics. They want to know who "she" is? Who is responsible for the intensive "sure?" They are looking for semantics. Ruscha is looking at phonetics. What are three formulations of the "shh" phoneme in English: *She. Sure. -toinals*. Academics look at Davis "Five Twelfths" and see garden furniture. Davis sees a complex field for illusory of opticality frozen flat because you're supposed to see what's there.

All this is more a guess than an argument, of course, so, many times, I think, Davis, in his bitchy, contrarian mode just see things backward. He will take Jackson Pollock's bottom-to-top practice of layering color and turn it around. He

will begin a with the geometric pizza pan, paint and pour opaque color blobs into their places, than add translucent overlapping resins, then pull the pizza from the tray and see what it looks like. It looks like a Pollock painted backwards but who in the hell ever thought of that? Ronald Davis did.

Part of my point here is nobody “loves” a Davis, a Stella or Bridget Riley (*fig. 11*). They present us with a complex invitational form of dirty dancing and not everyone is up to this category of response. The paintings are as sexy as they are aggressive and exciting. Even so, they still propose that we see them as they are, flat and still, so one pushes pack against the chromatic distortions to achieve some sort of ground zero, if only for a moment. I am not, however, proposing some art-historical teleology in which images move from concave to flat to convex. I am simply proposing that artists go where the energy is, if that is their predisposition.

I saw Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* flat and still one time. I fought my way back through all that fettuccine to the frozen thing. I saw what Pollock had painted. It was magnificent and a great place to start with Pollock. Most viewers these days just presume that Pollock is portraying a “dance,” and leave them behind about one quarter realized. The idea than lines have direction is still one percent calculus and 99 percent gris-gris.

My point here is that with Davis, Stella or Riley we stop the image on the wall. The idea is not to seduce but to render something complex plain. All of these works have nuanced answers that exploit their sixteen foot horizontal width—a size that guarantees a one-picture wall, an architectural footprint, like the one Davis’s conjured up for Frank Gehry to build.

*Mid-century Gothic*  
etc.

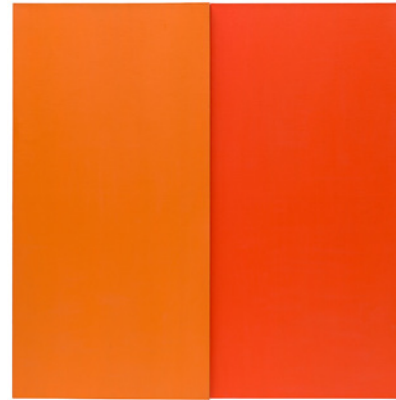


fig. 9 — Ellsworth Kelly



fig. 10 — Lynda Benglis

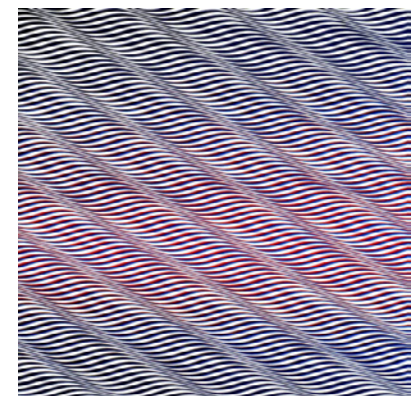


fig. 11 — Bridget Riley





Ronald Davis decelerates from 60 to 0 in a fraction of a second, in a mixture of action, and then an equally potent stillness as pigment splatter is frozen in resin.

Davis' Dodecagon Series embodies his perfect incongruous approach to art making. He employs action painting encased in the "shaped" structures of linear perspective.

There are few things that make Davis more angry than being discussed in the context of his LA contemporaries, The Finish Fetishists; not because he doesn't love and respect their work, but because his use of resin is not embraced for its atmospheric conjuring, but a more temporal purpose: a prehistoric bird frozen in amber in mid-flight.

That's not to say that the impossibly slick surfaces aren't pure sex, imbued with shameful temptation to lick their surface.

Art history is sheathed in these works; all you need to do is scratch the surface to unleash their lethal depths.





Ken Price  
Untitled  
1994/1995  
Ceramic, earthenware with  
burnt umber and metallic  
purple opalescent paint  
6 x 5 x 4 inches  
(15.2 x 12.7 x 10.2 cm)

Peter Alexander  
Untitled (Sphere within Cube)  
1965  
Polyester resin  
7.25 x 7.25 x 7.25 inches  
(18.4 x 18.4 x 18.4 cm)





Ed Ruscha  
Drib  
2015  
Dry pigment and acrylic on  
paper  
11.25 x 15 inches  
(28.6 x 38.1 cm)



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