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# The Subjective Object

*While showing an enduring preference for the casual touch, deliberately creaky facture and modest materials, Richard Tuttle has over the last 40 years created an exceptionally varied body of work, as a current traveling retrospective makes clear.*

**BY RICHARD KALINA**



*View of "The Art of Richard Tuttle," showing his 1967 series of dyed cloth pieces; at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo Ben Blackwell.*

*All photos this article courtesy SFMOMA.*





In September 1966 two important shows opened on the same day in the same building on 57th Street in New York—"Eccentric Abstraction," curated by Lucy Lip-pard at the Fishbach Gallery, which introduced Post-Minimalism, and "Ten," a key show from the early years of Minimalism, curated by Robert Smithson at the Dwan Gallery. Minimalism and Post-Minimalism's histories (and personnel) are intertwined, and ongoing critical examination coupled with significant exhibitions has brought them even closer. The large-scale retrospective of Richard Tuttle's sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints and artist's books organized by Madeleine Grynszejn for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (and currently at the Whitney

Museum, New York) gives us a chance to examine in depth the work of one of the most original and indispensable members of the Post-Minimal group.

If there was something that Minimalism and Post-Minimalism undoubtedly shared, it was their ability to upset people. For many, there seemed to be, maddeningly, nothing there to see. Tuttle, in particular, managed to get under people's skins. His 1975 survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum, which featured pieces of rope on the floor and short lengths of string and bits of wire attached to the wall, was lambasted in the press and led eventually to the firing of Marcia Tucker, the show's curator. Hilton Kramer's vituperative *New York Times* review remains a benchmark in



**In 1972 Tuttle took dematerialization still further with the wire pieces, which are about as close to not being there as he could get.**



Portrait of Herbert Vogel, 1974, acrylic ink on heavy-gauge wire, 3½ by 3½ by 2¼ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

the history of postwar art-critical nastiness, so much so that Robert Storr felt it necessary to discuss it at length in his contribution to the current exhibition's catalogue.

Though there may have been doubters, Tuttle has always had many people strongly in his corner, and at the beginning of his career he had the good fortune to land at the legendary Betty Parsons Gallery, first working there, starting as a gallery assistant, then showing with Parsons from 1965 until her death in 1982. The gallery's place in the history of postwar art and its low-key, idealistic ethos made a strong impression on the young artist. One of the most influential galleries of the '50s, it had been home at various times to Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, Tony Smith, Ellsworth Kelly and other abstract artists with a poetic, reductive bent. Martin, whom Tuttle met when he was in his 20s and she was in her 50s, became a lifelong friend and inspiration.

The first works that Tuttle showed at Parsons were called the "Constructed Paintings." They were built from two congruent plywood shapes that were held an inch or two apart by a thin wooden strip attached to the plywood by hundreds of small, carefully hammered nails. Hovering somewhere between painted sculpture and sculptured painting, they had edges drawn with an elegantly wavering line—a harbinger of virtually all of Tuttle's subsequent work—and an even matte acrylic surface. The colors Tuttle chose were often odd, slightly grating "decorator" hues—for example, a light violet-gray panel placed flush to a white one that is in turn abutted to a flesh-colored one in *Chelsea*, a minty sea-foam green in *House* and an insistent mid-tone peacock blue in *Torso* (all 1965). The overall shapes, whether in single- or multipanel works, read initially as straightforward, undemanding forms—rectangles, inverted "U" shapes or simple curves, with each panel painted a single, uninflected hue. Even

though the forms are seemingly straightforward, the paintings do not want to stay put perceptually. They quiver, go off plumb, slide away from you. The twin rectangular panels of *Torso* (1965), for example, have completely different color weights, with the buoyant, pastel orange on the left barely tethered to the dense cedar green on the right. The panels are physically abutted but not flush, since the edges are not ruler-straight, and the whole ensemble cants over to the right, though not far enough to create anything so conventional as a "dynamic" diagonal. These works (with the possible exception of a slightly earlier group of ten small cardstock cubes, each with different forms cut out from it<sup>1</sup>) come about as close as Tuttle gets to orthodox Minimalism. And it is clear that for him, Minimalism's geometry and orthogonal orientation are things to play off of, not go deeper into.

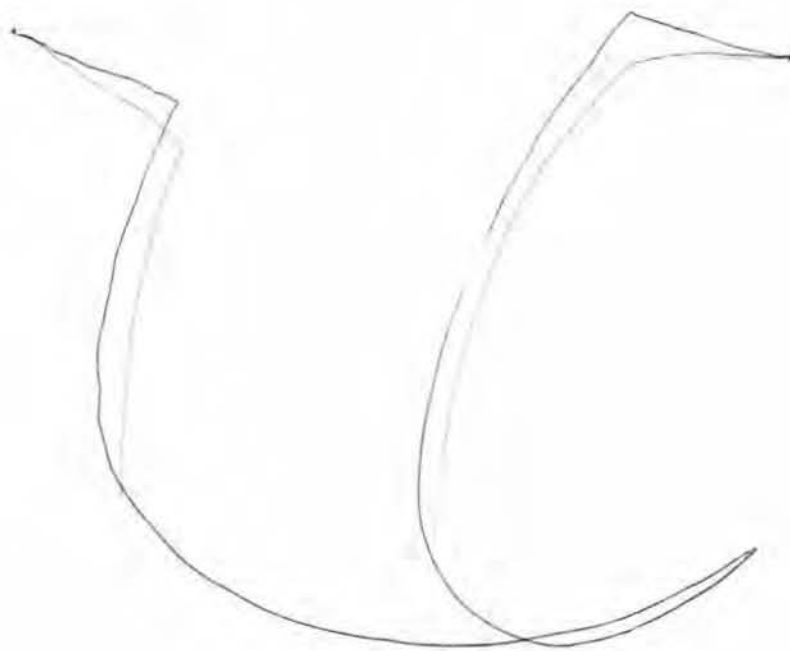
The "Constructed Paintings," their indeterminate color and slightly irregular edges notwithstanding, were still very much objects, and Tuttle, along with other Post-Minimal and Conceptual artists, became interested in dematerializing his artwork. In his unstretched canvas works from 1967, Tuttle took the same sorts of quasi-geometric shapes that he used in the "Constructed Paintings," cut them out of canvas with the help of a paper template, hemmed the edges, and then balled them up and put them in a pot of fabric dye. The canvas was hung out to dry, and the result was a wrinkled, unevenly pigmented surface. The colors of the pieces—rust, gold, orange, blue, green—were rather wan and unassertive to start with, and over the years, depending on the permanence of the dye and the piece's exposure to light, they have faded to even paler shades. This fading, though, has resulted in surprisingly little esthetic loss. Such chromatic flexibility, combined with the way the pieces were meant to be displayed and stored, underscores their lack of preciousness, their consciously diminished aura. Tuttle wanted them to be pinned to the wall, or even spread out on the floor, with the orientation left up to the owner or curator. There was no prescribed back or front, up or down, and the pieces were meant to be kept wadded up in a cloth bag when they were not on display (although, as an SFMOMA curator assured me, no institution would ever do that).

For all the outward signs of casualness, these works are not quite as

3rd Rope Piece, 1974, cotton and nails, 3 inches long. National Gallery of Art.







*10th Wire Piece, 1972, florist wire, nails and graphite, dimensions variable.*

hand as they might seem to be at first. The shapes, in particular, are carefully considered. Many of them have a hidden perspectival element. *Yellow Triangle with Three Thicknesses* (1967), for example, a chunky 3-sided shape with a cut-out triangular center resolves itself into a two-dimensional representation if you mentally extend the interior lines the thickest side and connect the outer and inner meeting points of the other two bars. Similarly, an untitled piece from 1967, boxy with odd ting legs, becomes, with the addition of internal divisions, a much more prehensible tablelike form. As Tuttle moved further into the series, he gan to focus on the octagon. These pieces, for me the most compelling he 1967 cloth group, were devised by a simple yet effective generating tem. Two squares were laid on top of each other, rotated, and the parts t stuck out were cut off, leaving an uneven, eight-sided figure.

In subsequent work Tuttle moved further toward dematerialization. A group of paper octagons followed the cloth pieces. Conceived in 1970, 1 dated then, they must be created anew for each installation. Tuttle s them out of white paper and pastes them flat onto a white wall. They ow the contour of the wall and, because of the relative thinness of

the paper, pick up the texture of their supporting surface. Importantly, they carry no sense of physical or optical weight, and, depending on the quality of light, can become virtually invisible. In the SFMOMA show, 12 paper octagons were attached to the curving walls near the windowed staircases. They caught the light in different ways—some looked like light projections, some were almost totally whited out, and some were banded by the windows' cast shadows. The effect was subtle and quite magical.

In 1972 Tuttle pushed things still further with the wire pieces, which are about as close to not being there as he has managed in his work. Part object, part performance, the wire pieces are re-created (or, one might say, remembered) by the artist every time they are put up. Tuttle comes to the task with no physical template for the work, but rather a memory of what the original looked like. He stands in front of the wall with his shoes off and draws a pencil line on the wall without lifting the point, in the process tracking the recalled outline of the original work. The shape is reasonably simple—a good example is *10th Wire Piece* (1972), the underlying form of which is a "V" with horizontal extensions at its ends. Once the pencil line is drawn, he takes thin florist's wire, attaches it by a nail to





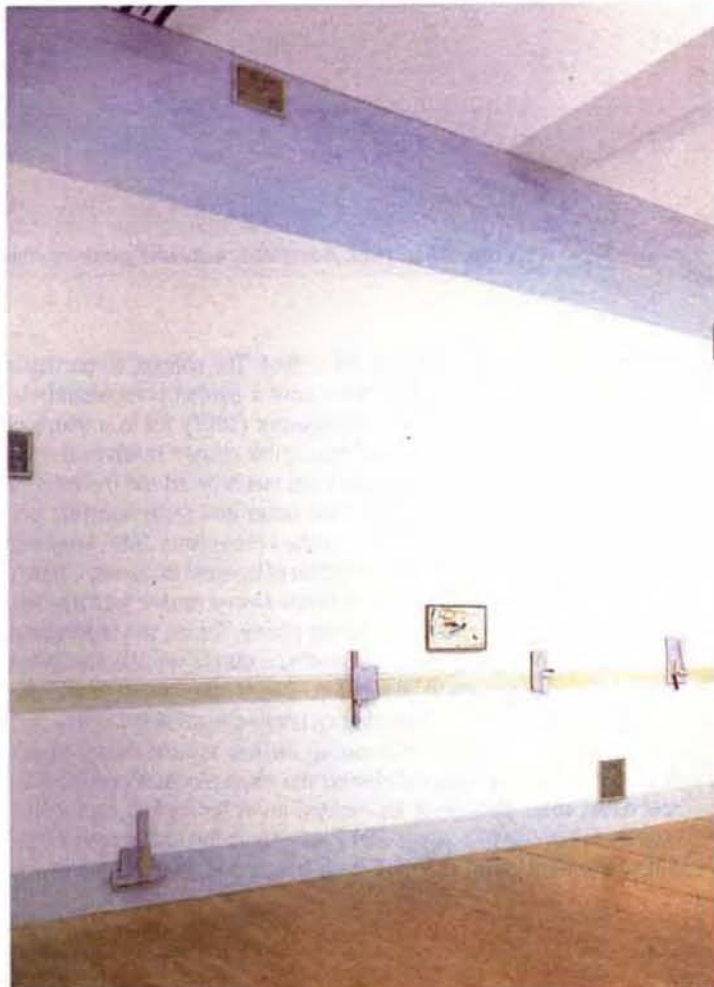
View of "The Art of Richard Tuttle," showing (foreground) *There's No Reason a Good Man Is Hard to Find I*, 1988; (left) *Six*, 1987; (right) *Turquoise I*, 1988; and (on wall) the watercolor and graphite series "*40 Days*," 1989; at SFMOMA. Photo Ben Blackwell.

**As the '80s progressed, Tuttle's work took a decided turn away from reduction, and began to incorporate a wider range of materials and techniques.**

one end of the line and retraces the pencil's path in wire. When that task is done, the wire is either attached at the other end of the line or not, and either left whole or cut at some point. In whatever state Tuttle leaves the wire, the springy, recalcitrant material takes on a life of its own. The piece is then lit, and another element, a shadow, is introduced. All three linear forms work in counterpoint, and each brings the same insistent insubstantiality to bear on the finished work.

I'd seen the wire pieces before, but I was still surprised that so much could be done with so little. I'm not sure I can say the same for the notorious *3rd Rope Piece* (1974), a 3-inch horizontal piece of cotton clothesline attached exactly 3 feet up on the wall by thin nails at the center and both ends. I came to the exhibition expecting to be really taken with it, but I wasn't. Yes, it carries the large expanse of wall on which it's centered (width-wise), it feels a lot bigger than it is, and you can see it perfectly well from 75 feet away (it has been installed so that it is visible from the next gallery). Ultimately, though, the whole thing seems rather rhetorical, the kind of experience you can just as easily read about as see. To be fair, Tuttle has not spent the intervening years cutting up small bits of rope and putting them on the wall. Artworks have different meanings and effects at different times, and it's not reasonable to expect everything to speak as radically and forcefully as it did 30 years before.

Of much greater interest to me was a vitrine containing seven very small sculptures executed in the 1970s. (The given dates are no more

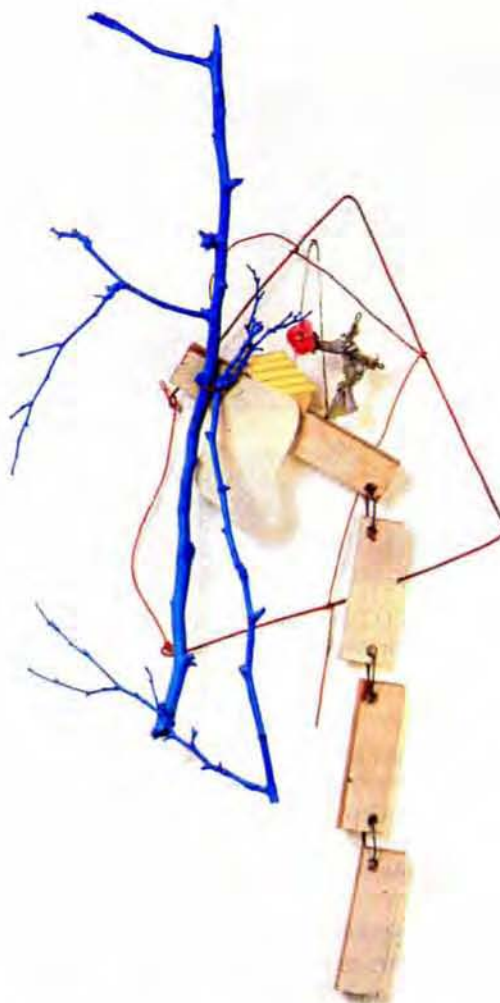




precise than this.) They don't seem like much: two little curved parallel rectangles of galvanized metal (*Lines*), a length of heavy wire bent into a symmetrical, reclining structure (*Portrait of Herbert Vogel*), two identical pieces of wood resting on top of each other, painted at the joining and slightly displaced (*Rest*) and two roughly cut diamonds of plywood joined together by a little piece of knotted string (*Two Blocks*). However, these sculptures possess a weight that belies their physical modesty, for they lay out a vocabulary of abstract sculpture, a set of visual templates not dissimilar to Richard Serra's famous programmatic list of infinitive verbs ("to roll, to cut, to tear, to shorten . . ."). Their scale and execution is just right: they manage to feel big and small, tough and vulnerable, worked and found, savvy and naive, all at the same time.

**T**uttle's earlier work was not moving solely in the direction of the reductive. During this period he drew continuously and inventively in a variety of materials. Color, which had been emptying out in the larger work, asserted itself in the drawings, almost in readiness for its eventual return in the sculptures of the '80s. A suite of 11 untitled watercolor and graphite drawings from 1971, each 13¼ by 10¼ inches, stands out for sheer beauty and deftness of execution. In them Tuttle pencils in the outline of a form—an O, a sort of keyhole shape, three joined rings, a meander—and within its boundaries lays in thin multicolored lines of luscious bleeding watercolor. No matter how the shape turns, the watercolor striations are always horizontal, lending the abstract shapes the feeling of landscape and imbuing them with a jewel-like decorative opulence.

As the '70s neared an end, Tuttle explored new territory in another series of works. They were, not surprisingly, small and seemingly casual. In this series, he took watercolor paper, cut it into a shape—often a variation on a rectangle—painted and folded it, attached it to the wall and then physically extended that form out onto the wall itself, either by continuing to develop a particular painted area there or by elaborating the form in



*Monkey's Recovery for a Darkened Room, 6, 1983, wood, wire, acrylic, matboard, string and cloth, 40 by 20½ by 12½ inches. National Gallery of Art.*

*Left, view of Inside the Still Pure Form, re-creation of the 1990 installation at Blum Helman Gallery, New York, wood, graphite, latex paint, watercolor, spray enamel; at SFMOMA. Photo Ben Blackwell.*



pencil. In *Titolo 4* (1978), a loosely painted horizontal rectangle of light cobalt green, partly on the paper but mostly on the wall, stabilizes a white, folded-paper form set on the diagonal, while in *Title A* (1978) a black and ochre L shape is augmented by a penciled outline drawn directly on the wall.

By the early '80s Tuttle began to work seriously with the idea of the frame. This investigation allowed his drawings to assume an increased sculptural presence but also put another structural and referential system into play. In the "India Work" series of 1980, a piece of paper with a small quasi-geometric watercolor image painted on it is floated in an elaborate, multileveled unpainted wooden frame that the artist designed. Rather than simply being something to physically protect a drawing and visually isolate it from its surroundings, the frames in "India Work" end up carrying as much esthetic freight as the drawing elements themselves. Other series in a similar vein followed: "Hong Kong Set" (1980), "Brown Bar" (1981), "Old Men and Their Garden" (1982) and "La Terre de Grenade" (1985).

As the '80s progressed, Tuttle's work took a decided turn away from reduction, and began to incorporate a wider range of materials and techniques. Where once it seemed hard for people to even recognize that a work of art was on display, now complex, colorful, almost baroque sculptural objects left no doubt about what they were. Not





New Mexico, New York #14, 1998, acrylic on plywood, 16½ by 23¼ inches. Collection Susan Harris and Glenn Gissler, New York.

that Tuttle abandoned his casual look and creaky facture. That some of these works barely held together was the point—they were about connecting the disparate and discombobulated, cobbling together a coherent visual language out of the odds and ends of life. The work exuded a kind of jittery charm and was becoming humorous, in a low-keyed way.

*Monkey's Recovery for a Darkened Room*, 6 (1983) is a wall-mounted piece consisting of two tree branches painted bright blue, a deformed rectangle of red wire and string, twists of cloth, curved forms cut out of mat board and hanging, clapperlike lengths of wood attached by loops of wire to each other at opposite corners, so they descend in a diagonal, steplike fashion. The piece is hard to describe, and others are still harder. A list of materials is helpful for getting the feel of a wall sculpture like *Two or More XII* (1984), if not its exact look: fabric, aluminum Pepsi can, wire, feather, glass, cardboard, enamel, acrylic, spray enamel and dry pigment. The "Sentences" series of 1989 even tossed lightbulbs into the equation, and these pieces—freestanding or nearly so—are probably the funniest and most eccentric in the whole show. *Sentences III*, a 6-foot-high slab of blue painted wood, its crown curved like a tombstone or surfboard and festooned with three nonfunctioning red bulbs in ceramic sockets on its top, five white working ones along the side, and a busted-up plywood grid on its front, feels like a science-fair robot project gone very wrong. Another favorite of mine is *There's No Reason a Good Man Is Hard to Find I* (1988). One of the biggest sculptures in the show at roughly 6 by 7 by 7 feet, it is a concoction of wood, PVC pipe, metal bolts and screws, heavy gauge wire, tissue paper, acrylic, imitation leather and industrial-quality thread. It spirals up from the floor with a kind of jaunty, stuttering beat, black bags over its joints, an orange tissue-paper flag on a wire at its top, ready to flutter in the wind.

These works from the '80s have an excess and theatricality very much in tune with the times. This was the decade of Neo-Expressionism, and a tendency toward over-the-top accretion was widespread. And yet Tuttle, prolific as ever, fashioned restrained, nicely damped-down work during this period as well. Of particular interest is *The Baroque and Color # 8* (1986). A perfectly symmetrical, high-waisted vaselike form slightly more than 5 feet high, it is constructed from rice paper stretched over a gridded wood armature, and loosely colored on and around the grid lines with a bluish-red tint. It is lovingly constructed, elegant and just the right scale—a bit big for a vase, a bit small for a person.

In 1988 Tuttle moved to New Mexico and made it his primary residence for 10 years. He eventually built a house on top of a mesa in Abiquiu, Georgia O'Keeffe's town. The move to New Mexico pushed Tuttle's art in a new direction, making it both simpler (maybe "less dense" would be more accurate) and more spatially expansive. *Inside the Still Pure Form* (1990), an installation that occupied the entire exhibition space of the Blum Helman Gallery in New York, was re-created for the SFMOMA show. At the museum a large white room was painted with five narrow horizontal bands. Two blues, corresponding to the sky, were placed near the ceiling; two yellow stripes (one very thin with a thicker, paler band beneath it) ran through a central horizon line; and a bar of viridian green sat at ground level. Thirteen modestly scaled relief sculptures (most of them with a geometric, constructivist look) and 14 framed gouache and graphite drawings were set around the room at varying heights, relating to the bands like notes on musical staves, so that the room took on the feeling of an environmental musical score. For all the possibility of a jazzed-up, frenetic look, the installation felt calm and contemplative.

Tuttle worked with a spare but evocative installation technique in the "Line Pieces" of 1990 and his 1992 installation "Fiction Fish," at Mary Boone's SoHo gallery. In this latter series, pencil lines started on the ceiling, a foot and a half away from the wall, and continued down to almost floor level, where each ended with a small sculpture "attached" to it, like a fish on a line. At Boone there were 24 "fish," and they managed to animate (and syncopate) that long, continued on page 159



Waferboard 8, 1996, acrylic on waferboard, 36½ by 22 inches. Collection Rainer and Susanna Peikert, Zug, Switzerland.

Opposite, *Memento, Five, Grey and Yellow*, 2002, wood, fabric, corrugated cardboard, latex paint and monofilament, 27 parts; shown here in "Richard Tuttle: Memento," 2002, at the Museu Serralves de Arte Contemporânea, Porto, Portugal.



# Tuttle

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rectangular space. At SFMOMA, space limitations and the show's chronological ordering allowed for only two of these pieces. They flanked a door, and if you paid them sufficient attention they held their own, but otherwise they tended to get lost amid the more assertive work around them.

Tuttle now divides his time between Abiquiu and New York. This split is reflected in the 1998 series "New Mexico, New York." In this group of works, two layers of 1/4-inch plywood are superimposed, the smaller top piece aligned with at least one edge of the bottom piece. This placement results in a kind of "flap" and gives the pieces an envelopelike quality, bringing to mind the mail and the disembodied communication that comes from living in two places. *New Mexico, New York #14* is a horizontal red rectangular form, with wavering edges and a top edge that curves in concavely. The flap angles in from the two top corners and becomes a horizontal line that runs long a bit lower than halfway down. Painted with a very thin, uneven coat of white acrylic that allows a graphite line and patches of raw plywood to show through is a thick line that moves down along the left-hand flap, turns horizontally and, paralleling the horizontal portion of the flap, branches out into a loop. The looping line suggests a road or a river.

The inherent qualities of a wooden support are likewise used effectively in the 1996 "Waferboard" series. These wall-mounted works are made from a commercial plywoodlike material fashioned from compressed aspenwood scraps. The aspenwood scraps are all different sizes and shapes, and the board is splintery when cut. Unlike ordinary plywood, which can claim a certain esthetic neutrality (except in Donald Judd's work, when it is thick, unblemished and decidedly elegant), waferboard is so texturally assertive and crummy-looking that perhaps only Tuttle could see its potential as an artistic material. The shapes he creates in the "Waferboard" series are complex, curving and vaguely floral. Each work is divided into discrete areas, and each internal section is painted a different quiet color—in the case of *Waferboard 8* (1996), for example, two kinds of dusty pink, golden yellow and yellowish green, a deeper green and two rayish blues, plus black and white. The insistent "piecemeal" texture of the waferboard reads through the thin paint, and the scraps end up looking like a combination of fallen leaves and impastoed brushstrokes. More than any other work by Tuttle, these pieces recall the American modernism of Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe.

In recent years Tuttle has pushed further into installation work, as in *Femento Five, Grey and Yellow* (2002), which features two large ribbed forms suspended in the air at a diagonal and surrounded by a cloud of objects that look like the letter P. He has also embarked on a number of ambitious print projects, with Crown Point Press among other firms, and has investigated the abstract pictorial in works like the "Ten" series of 2000, in which ten 10-inch-square plywood boards are displayed on the wall, stacked pyramidally—four boards on the bottom row, three in the next, then two and one. Two examples of this series are represented in the exhibition. The most suggestive and poetic is *Ten A*. The work is left unpainted for the most part, but it is adorned with evocative, mysterious little objects, plus a depiction of what appears to be a mountain and a ladder.

The recent work that made the strongest impression on me, however, was *Replace the Abstract Picture Plane IV* (1999). In this ambitious piece—"Replace" in the title is clearly an exhortation—Tuttle is trying to get the viewer to rethink the normal flat picture plane that has defined abstraction for the past century. He does not do it (if indeed it can be done) by merely creating an obvious substitute for such a plane—something suggesting perspectival depth, for example (as Al Held did). Instead he sets up a 40-part grid of square plywood panels, each panel divided into two equal vertical rectangles, and each rectangle painted a different thinly applied color. The panels are floated in a white-painted frame, and the grid can be configured in any way the curator desires, as long as it makes an overall rectangle. In this installation there were four

horizontal rows of ten panels each. The two color choices for each panel are intuitive, although the colors on the right hand side generally end up being optically heavier. Your eye is moved along, as usually happens before a grid, in a rational fashion, but it is never allowed to rest, either laterally or in terms of spatial advance and recession. Tuttle's intention is to disrupt perceptual expectations of unity, to take that which might normally be read as a seamless screen, a modernist paradigm of coherence, and turn it into something shifting and contingent. *Replace the Abstract Picture Plane IV* has the feeling of a Josef Albers pedagogical exercise taken as far as it could possibly go, and then pushed a bit further. It's logical, fanciful, chromatically and optically ravishing, and if, as Tuttle has said, the picture plane needs replacing just like a car battery, then this seems like a perfectly reasonable alternative.

Organizing a retrospective exhibition of an older, still highly productive artist can be tricky. Richard Tuttle is in his mid-60s—too far along in his working life to have the simpler midcareer survey but, considering the sheer amount of work that he continues to make, not anywhere near ready for the grand summing up. A Tuttle exhibition raises a number of curatorial and historical questions. How do you give a sense of continuity and thematic consistency to a body of work that, on the surface, seems to resist it? How do you preserve the sense of fecundity and eruptive imagination, the feeling of an art willed into existence from unlikely materials, summoned from the world of the not-yet-art and seemingly ready to return to it? While Tuttle's art is offbeat and idiosyncratic, it is also very much mainstream. The history of which he is a part is in an uncertain state—partly codified, partly in flux. Where, after 40 years of work, does Tuttle fit into the larger frame of Post-Minimalism, and how does an evolving Post-Minimalism relate to our changing ideas of Minimalism?

Some of these issues are addressed in the thorough catalogue, which includes extensive essays by Madeleine Grynsztejn, Robert Storr, Richard Schiff and Katy Siegel, as well as smaller pieces about specific exhibitions and projects. Historical research and critical speculation aside, a retrospective must pose and ultimately answer the question, what are we to think of this artist? The organizers of this exhibition and of the concurrent one devoted to Tuttle's extensive print production at the nearby Crown Point Press Gallery collaborated closely with the artist to select and present a body of paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints and artist's books that preserve Tuttle's spirit of inspiration and unpredictable invention, but also keep potential anarchy at bay. Thanks to these efforts, we can see the development of a visual language, a syntax of abstraction, and follow the thread of it as it moves through the years. Tuttle's work has been remarkably well served in this exhibition. While the sheer volume and complexity of the material makes demands on the viewer, seeing such a large selection renders it more coherent, not less. I am concerned that as the show travels and pieces are removed (the Whitney version, for example, contains about 20 percent fewer works than the original) the overall effect will be diminished, and, as a result, Tuttle's work will appear more eccentric and less conceptually elaborated than it is. I hope not, because Tuttle is not only an original, but one of the most important representatives of a group of artists whose historical significance is only now coming into focus. □

1. This work was included in Barbara Rose's important article on the subject, "ABC Art," *Art in America*, October-November 1965, pp. 57-69.

"The Art of Richard Tuttle" debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [July 2-Oct. 16] and is currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [Nov. 10, 2005-Feb. 5, 2006]. Thereafter, it travels to the Des Moines Art Center [Mar. 18-June 11, 2006]; the Dallas Museum of Art [July 15-Oct. 8, 2006]; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago [Nov. 11, 2006-Feb. 14, 2007]; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Mar. 18-June 25, 2007]. "Richard Tuttle: Seven Years at Crown Point Press," curated by Richard Tuttle and Valerie Wade, appeared at the Crown Point Press Gallery, San Francisco [July 1-Sept. 17].

Author: Richard Kalina is an artist who also writes about art.