

HYPERALLERGIC

Seeing Ourselves in Sculpture

Richard Nonas's sculptures alert each of us to the specificity of being — in a specific time and a specific place.

RHINEBECK, NY — A selection of small sculptures by Richard Nonas is currently on view at 'T' Space in the Hudson Valley. At first glance, these objects look Minimalist. Nonas defines his works with stark angles and uninflected planes; moreover, he avoids both representation and effects of the kind we tend to see as expressive. In the work of a card-carrying Minimalist, however, the reliance on basic geometry joins with anti-representational, anti-expressive devices to bring form to the verge of concept. A Minimalist cube encourages thought to supersede perception. By contrast, we cannot grasp a Nonas sculpture simply by thinking about it. His works call for intuitive, empathetic responses. Yet they are not gestural, not figurative, and so a question arises: with what are we empathizing?

Mounted on the white walls of 'T' Space, alone or in small clusters, these sculptures are built from scraps of unpainted lumber. Most works consist of two or three scraps, and are layered according to no discernible formal principles. It feels as if Nonas let the shapes and textures of his materials guide him to these configurations, which look resolved and yet alive to the possibility that they could be completely different. In traditional composition, whether sculptural or pictorial, the artist strives to create a sense of inevitability: we are invited to believe that the work simply must be the way it is. Dispensing with composition's balances and counter-balances, the Minimalists called upon geometrical symmetries to produce the

illusion of inevitable form. The rhetoric of necessity that sustains these effects and illusions has no place in Nonas's aesthetic. He is an artist of the contingent, and there is great pleasure in seeing — in sensing — how perspicuously each of his sculptures is what it is and, at the same time, is open to other formal options.



Installation view of *Notes on None* at 'T' Space, 2018 (all images courtesy of 'T' Space and the artist, photos by Susan Wides, unless otherwise noted).



Installation view of *Notes on None* at 'T' Space, 2018.

Some of Nonas's wooden scraps are fragments of flat boards; others are wedge-shaped; a few are pieces of unmilled timber. Though the last of these are his most irregular sculptural elements, irregularity characterizes all these works, if not in their constituent parts, then in their outlines. It's tempting to say that each is an individual, and yet that would introduce a hint of the figurative. A better way to put it would be that a Nonas sculpture is irreducibly particular — powerfully so. For it is the particularity, the specificity, the quiddity of these objects that can engage us intuitively. This is what we empathize with. Ordinarily one empathizes with another living creature — a person or perhaps a cat, if one is a cat person. It is subtly surprising to realize that we can empathize just as intensely with a non-figurative work of art. We can recognize in it a presence comparable to our own. Nonas alerts each of us to the specificity of being — or, more precisely, to one's own specific being in a specific time and a specific place.

Designed and built by the architect Steven Holl, 'T' Space resides in the hilly, leafy terrain around Rhinebeck, New York. As in so many of Holl's buildings, windows gather an unexpected abundance of natural light. The warmth of the summer sun renders the hues and the grain of Nonas's materials especially vivid. Down the road from 'T' Space is T2 Reserve, a stretch of densely wooded property that features, in a clearing, Holl's Ex of In House, a building so formally inventive that it counts as a piece of outdoor sculpture.

Ex of In House also marks the starting point of Nonas's *Where None**, an installation that stretches in a straight line for 900 feet, from the house to a far boundary of T2 Reserve. He establishes the line with 80 pairs of pinewood beams. In each of these units, one beam lies on the ground, perpendicular to the 900-

foot line; parallel to it is the other beam, propped on the first. As *Where None** advances through the woods, down into hollows, up over ridges, it is sometimes hidden by vegetation; from certain angles, one's view of the overall line is impeded by a tree trunk. Nonetheless, our awareness of *Where None**'s presence remains unbroken, for it inflects its site with a clear and unmistakable intention.



Installation view of *Notes on None* at 'T' Space, 2018.

With this work (the title of which is taken from the writings of Samuel Beckett), Nonas establishes a place without disrupting space. To see — or to sense — what this means, it helps to draw an equation: “place” is to “space” as “culture” is to “nature.” Traditionally, the last two of these terms have stood opposed to one another, sometimes violently. With *Where None**, Nonas doesn't transform a stretch of land in upstate New York so much as inflect it with a remarkably restrained sign of his presence, which was temporary, and his intention, which is permanent.



Richard Nonas, *Where None**, T2 Reserve, 2018 (image courtesy of 'T' Space and Richard Nonas, photos by Richard Nonas).

Plainly apparent but unobtrusive, the work's 80 units hover somewhere between built forms and natural phenomena. From certain vantage points, you can trace portions of its 900-foot length by eye. Or you can walk alongside it from one end to the other. Either way, your experience is entirely your own, prompted by the forms of *Where None**, but not absorbed by them. With this installation and the objects at 'T' Space, Nonas gives us art that fully acknowledges perceptions and intentions other than his own — namely, ours. His works enhance our sense of ourselves as specific presences. It's as if they have the power to empathize with us in all our unpredictable individuality.

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Weekend

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