

CLEVELAND CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Clay Ketter's "Goodbye Dekalb Avenue," 1998, is a geometric abstraction made out of commonplace construction materials, rather than paint on canvas.

ART

# A major statement on minimalism

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"Painting Zero Degree," the new exhibition at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, looked like it would be easy to hate.

The catalog, which arrived in the mail several weeks before the show opened on March 22, was full of artspeak. The illustrations depicted artworks that looked like minor variations on 1960s minimalism, the era that gave us the all-black, geometric sculptures of Tony Smith and Ronald Bladen and the all-white paintings of Robert Ryman.

Minimalism was great — the first time around. Does it make sense now to keep cranking out artistic commentaries on it?

Surprise: The exhibition, organized by Independent Curators International in New York, is a far more entertaining than it looked on paper. The artworks

EXHIBIT

## Painting Zero Degree

**What:** An exhibition showing how artists around the world are still pursuing ideas that animated minimalist art in the 1960s.

**Where:** The Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 8501 Carnegie Ave.

**When:** Through June 2. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Thursday.

**Tickets:** Suggested admission, \$4.

**Telephone:** 216-421-8671.

**Web address:** www.contemporaryart.org.

have more presence than the catalog suggested. The installation is beautiful. And the show is permeated with a dry humor and a kind of sweet nostalgia for the revolutionary aura of the '60s.

Despite all these strong points, the derivative nature of much of the work ultimately diminishes its impact. But more on that in a moment.

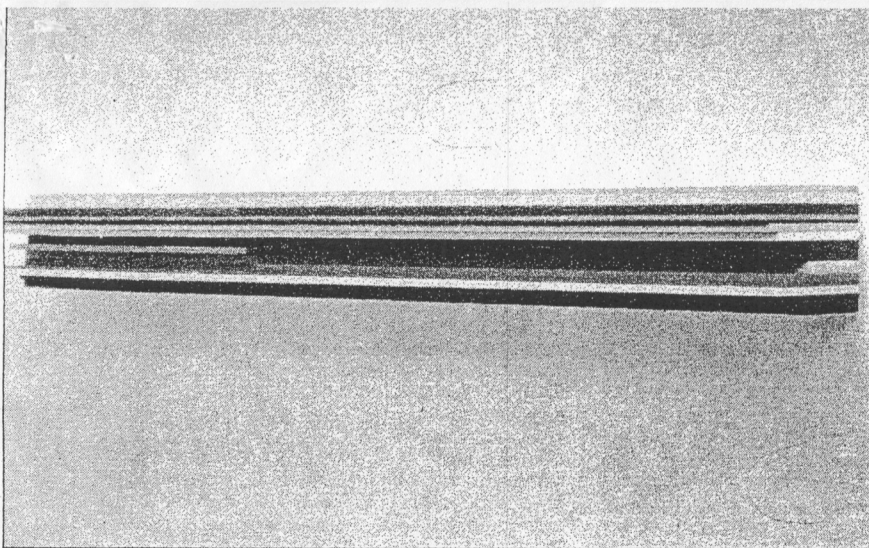
One primary example of the exhibi-

tion's lean aesthetic is John McCracken's "Thor," 1990, a black box standing 7.5 feet high, coated with shiny, jet black polyester resin on fiberglass.

With its chamfered edges, the work looks like a funeral effigy of one of the World Trade Center towers. The McCracken also brings to mind the shrieking monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey," another cultural icon of the 1960s.

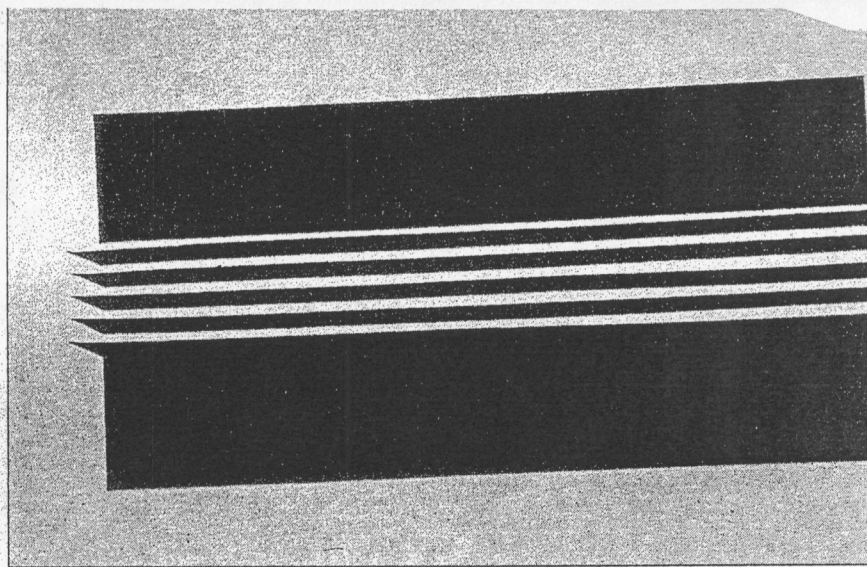
Such resonances are visible throughout the show. Sophie Smallhorn's floor sculpture of colored cubes lined up in a neat grid is a humorous response to Carl Andre's famous floor tile sculptures. Karin Sander's "Brushstroke," a solitary swipe of oxblood paint daubed on a gallery wall, brings to mind Roy Lichtenstein's pop art brushstrokes of the 1960s and '70s, which were, in turn, sendups of abstract expressionist painting from a decade earlier.

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Sophie Smallhorn's "Untitled (22)," 1998, is an anonymous-looking multicolored sandwich made of medium-density fiberboard.



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The abstractions of Gladys Nistor, such as "Untitled," 1998, bring to mind sections of bar codes stamped on consumer items.

ART

FROM E1

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The trouble with work like this is that to get all the inside jokes, you need a shopping cart full of textbooks.

The show's title itself derives from "Writing Degree Zero," a famous text written in 1953 by French literary critic Roland Barthes, who tried to identify the essence of writing, like a chemist isolating an element from a particular compound. The artists in the exhibition are trying to do something similar with the language of painting by eliminating all traces of individuality from their work, such as, say, identifiable brushstrokes.

Another thread in the show is that all the artists involved want to blur the boundaries between painting and the environments in which we live. That is, they want to shatter the separation between art and life. This connects their work to important early 20th century modernists

such as Piet Mondrian or Kasimir Malevich, who envisioned their geometric paintings as harbingers of a new utopia that would permeate all of society.

The paintings and constructions of Clay Ketter, made from standard building materials such as drywall and plastic laminate, refer to this idea by consciously evoking the right-angled grids of Mondrian. But because they also look like walls sliced out of construction sites, they function as an ironic revision of Mondrian's utopian dreams.

Other artists, including McCracken, want their works to be a kind of new decor for the high-tech age. They promote a lean, purist aesthetic that would look hip anywhere in the world, like the fashions of Prada or the furniture of Philippe Starck.

This is the kind of environment suggested by the severe geometric abstractions of Felipe Mujica, or the paintings of Gladys Nistor, if that's what they can be called, which consist of stripes of black felt contact paper glued to the gallery walls.

The biggest surprise is that the exhibition shows that this kind of minimalism, dominated primar-

ily by New York-based artists several decades ago, is now popular around the globe. Mujica hails from Santiago, Chile. Nistor resides in Paris. Smallhorn lives in London. The show's international scope adds considerably to its interest and importance.

Another surprise is that the show is transgenerational. It includes works by first-generation minimalists and conceptual artists, including Daniel Buren of France, who wants to fill galleries around the world with neutral-looking stripe patterns placed in settings where viewers least expect to find art. In the center's show, the floor outside the gallery's restrooms is covered with gray and white vinyl stripes specified by the artist, and fabricated by the center's exhibition manager, Ray Juare.

Ryman, another major figure from the first wave of minimalism, is also represented in the show, with two exquisite white paintings from 1977 and 1985. They focus a viewer's attention on the barest essences of painting — a surface covered with brushed pigment.

If there's anything to dislike

about the show, it's that it suggests that the main route of discovery in contemporary art is to pursue ever more subtle commentaries on the recent past.

As such, the work represents part of what might be called the New Academy. It's the contemporary equivalent of the dry, conservative, 19th-century French painting against which the impressionists rebelled in the first great wave of modernist art. More than anything, this suggests that contemporary art students would be wise not to imitate anything on view at the center. Instead, the best strategy would be to see it and then react against it in complete and total artistic rebellion.

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