



ROBERT HUNTER

Lisson Gallery, London, January — February, 1975

Bruce Adams

Robert Hunter has become an exceptional figure among the younger generation of Australian artists by virtue of the recognition so recently accorded to him by that holy of art holies, New York's Museum of Modern Art. In 1974 Hunter was selected along with such artists as Vito Acconci, Brice Marden and Daniel Buren, to participate in the exhibition, 'Eight Contemporary Artists'. Although so few artists were involved, it was described as MoMA's largest exhibition of new art since 1970, which implies its significance as a museum statement on art in the mid-1970s.

That exhibition was organized by MoMA curator, Jennifer Licht, who earlier in 1974 had visited Australia with a travelling band of mostly New York based artists, all accompanying a touring survey of recent American art. This visit helped precipitate Hunter's rise from the anonymity of suburban Melbourne into the public, museum arena of New York.

Hunter's recognition in America is readily understandable when one considers his one-man exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, his first show in London. Three wall-stencilled installations, of silver-lined squares incorporating a limited variety of linear bisections, were of a similar theme to his American pieces, and indeed to his Australian works, notable his 'Sydney Wall' at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1973. The installations of Hunter are completely dependent on their physical context, being architecturally inseparable from the rarified environment to which they attach themselves. Against the matt, white walls of the Lisson Gallery, Hunter has applied his simple linear geometries, squares of muted silver-grey, elevated above the opaque whiteness only by their thin skin of sharply edged glossy paint.

The three squares of the Lisson installation, each with their particular arrangement of vertical, horizontal or diagonal bisections, are symmetrical, whole forms. And yet Hunter allows for a very subtle, secondary interplay within each work, modulating his muted metallic tones to suggest a degree of spatial illusion in the interrelationship of adjoining lines, a suggestion which is ultimately denied by the more assertive and real, physical flatness of the pieces when seen as whole units.

Hunter has always adhered to a rigid aesthetic, purely minimal in spirit, exercising such total restraint with his chosen vocabulary that his wall-

paintings flirtatiously risk cancelling themselves out. Commenting on his New York pieces, Max Kozloff not unfairly concluded that Hunter's work effaces itself. Self-effacement has to do with modest understatement, to the point of personal concealment. Hunter's stencilled marks are not greatly revealing in any expressive sense, unless one cares to elaborate the implications of their assuredly elegant coolness. Unfortunately the ability to be cool is in itself neither remarkable nor unique, especially in the context of art over the past 15 years. But Hunter's art is of a kind that discourages any wide associative view — the spectator must somehow contend with the visual and physical facts alone. Luckily the very spare experience of his elemental forms is not without its pleasure. The subtlety of his painting is a precious thing, albeit as fragile and as intentionally ephemeral as the sealed, world-denying environment that supports it.

The overall maturity of intention and outlook reflected by Hunter is indicative of the situation shared by his contemporaries working in Australia, those artists who have long since discredited the pursuit of mere chauvinistic, regionalist mythologies in Australian art, in order to embrace the more significant issues and problems facing art in general. Whether Robert Hunter in particular proposes any new advance within an idiom that long laid claim to innovation remains the one necessary, though by now heavy-handed, question tempted by his very delicate, minimal forms.

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