

frieze

David von Schlegell

China Art Objects

For all those (myself included) requiring an introduction to David von Schlegell's art, the sculpture *Five Birds* and its attendant *Untitled Study for Five Birds* (both 1988) greeted visitors at the entrance to his exhibition. Birds in flight, cobbled from shards of aluminium tube and hanging on monofilament, cast fluttering shadows over the cut-paper studies on the wall behind. These were far from the most sophisticated works in the show, but they announced, for the uninitiated, the artist's fascination with dichotomies of form and weightlessness, land and air, the man-made and the natural.

The deft placement of these two pieces was down to the curatorial involvement of the artist's son, writer Mark von Schlegell, his step-daughter, artist R.H. Quaytman, and his wife, poet Susan Howe. Von Schlegell Sr. died in 1992, and this retrospective selection included a number of works made in the years just before his death. For those coming late to his oeuvre, Von Schlegell presents something of a puzzle. He became known as a sculptor in the 1960s, particularly after his inclusion in Kynaston McShine's 1966 exhibition 'Primary Structures'. But, like many others in that show, he never sat comfortably in the swiftly established canon of Minimalism. He was too inclined towards figurative evocations of sails, wings, wind and water; some even called his work romantic. Von Schlegell hit his stride in the late 1960s, making site-specific public sculpture, including a number of commissions for Storm King Art Center, in upstate New York. (*Five Birds* was itself a model for an unrealized sculpture for New York's Herald Square.)

The five untitled maquettes included here cannot do justice to what was surely most striking in the final sculptures: their towering scale and their nuanced interaction with their settings. Two models for *Pilot's Memorial* (1983) at Tulsa Airport, from 1979 and 1983, hint at the shifting viewpoints

About this review

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By Jonathan Griffin



David von Schlegell *Five Birds*, 1988, painted aluminium

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presumably available to passing aircraft passengers. Here, the simple wood and metal constructions looked rather quaint. Two tall steel poles with arcing feathered ends – a sculpture realized at Storm King in 1969 represented here by a table-top maquette and a scale drawing – belie the complex spatial dynamics they must have exerted at full size.

The heart of the exhibition beat, however, in the monochrome paintings that the artist made in his final years by pouring oil paint mixed with polyurethane onto sanded wooden panels. Seven of these were large – 122 centimetres square – while three smaller works suggested studies. Although Von Schlegell's layering of colour evokes the 1960s experiments of West Coast Light and Space artists, such as Ron Cooper, there was nothing fetishistic about his finishes. While in places his surfaces seem endlessly (and effortlessly) deep, at their unevenly hemmed edges the viewer is awakened to the simple liquid facts of the paint's application.

In others, specks of dust caught in the wet paint create the illusion of bubbles rising through deep water or comets streaking through space. *Grey Towards Violet (sic)* (1991), for instance, captures the smoky quality of early photography. Certain of the paintings added to this impression with bands of stained brown plywood at either side, which brought to mind 19th-century cameras or photographic plates. Although made 20 years ago, these paintings have an affinity with the abstract, camera-less techniques of contemporary artists such as Liz Deschenes.

Von Schlegell was, first and foremost, a sculptor; these objects, though we might call them paintings, speak more about physical construction than pictorial affect. Which makes it all the more surprising that many of them contain seams of dark colour that run diagonally across the panels from a lower corner – created by tilting the surface as the paint dried – thus introducing a whisper of illusional perspective. The squares could almost be pictures of rooms or tunnels receding into darkness. Even at the end of his life, it is clear that this unpredictable artist was unafraid of doing the very thing least expected of him.

Jonathan Griffin

Frieze

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THE HUFFINGTON POST

Frank, Peter, *Haiku Reviews, David von Schlegell*, Huffington post, March 2, 2012

David von Schlegell made his mark with especially light, graceful, and architecturally "sound" structures that addressed the minimalist concerns of his '60s heyday while rejecting the movement's pose of stubborn inelegance. This show traced von Schlegell's subsequent output, from his site-sensitive public sculptures (represented by maquettes and drawings) to his paintings of the '90s that return - with a vengeance - to minimalism. These monochrome panels, four feet



square or smaller, are deliberately but unself-consciously beautiful, their surfaces as much about the refraction of light as about color itself, and their restrained scale retains their objecthood for them, refusing to allow them to occupy our entire field of vision but also refusing to allow our gaze to wander. They are as gripping as gemstones. If the public sculpture "documents" restore von Schlegell to recent art history, these magical paintings give him a special cache.

(China Art Objects, 6086 Comey Ave., LA. www.chinaartobjects.com)

- Peter Frank

art agenda

by JOANNA FIDUCCIA
January 27, 2012

David von Schlegell

CHINA ART OBJECTS, Los Angeles
January 7–February 4, 2012

Whatever their intentions, posthumous gallery exhibitions rarely feel sincerely elegiac. Even the most reverential show can make the cynic in us suspect efforts to stoke the market for the master's remnants. This is not the case here. In contrast to the citywide retrospection of "Pacific Standard Time," the current bonanza of exhibitions celebrating (and, more to the point, often *promoting*) the region's artistic heritage, this exhibition of works by the American painter and sculptor David von Schlegell (1920–1992) seems to direct its gaze as much inward as backward. Thumbing through the press binders, filled with personal snapshots, newspaper clippings about von Schlegell's dauntless air force service, and black-and-white installation shots of von Schlegell's public works, I'm suddenly very aware that I am perusing not the press, but the family archives.

Organized with the help of that family—writer Mark von Schlegell, painter R.H. Quaytman, and poet Susan Howe—this exhibition gathers together monochrome paintings from his final years as well as models and sketches of his public sculptures. There is also a single supine piece of carved rosewood from 1988, whose burly underside belies a finely notched ridge that runs along its upper edge like delicate wainscoting. The piece is evocative of the kind of skilled domestic woodworking that marks the beginning of his career: though trained as a painter, von Schlegell began making sculpture after building his own house in the early sixties. But it was when he gave up on wood and started employing industrial materials and aeronautical forms that von Schlegell entered the minimalist narrative, notably participating in Kynaston McShine's canonical "Primary Structures" (1966) before going on to show with Pace Gallery and execute a number of radiant minimal public sculptures while serving on the art faculty at Yale.

Yet the tale told by this exhibition is less public and less timely. Hanging near the show's entrance is a study for a work von Schlegell never completed: five birds made out of painted aluminum (*Five Birds* [1988]), suspended beside five paper bird silhouettes, as though the sculptures had