

Thomas Gentile: Color Light Air

Gallery Loupe,
Montclair, New Jersey
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By Bruce Metcalf

I used to think Thomas Gentile was a minimalist. The thought bothered me a lot. Minimalism is all about concepts translated into objects, but to me minimalist sculptures themselves are not particularly compelling. They are blank and boring, merely accessories to theory. If Gentile was a Minimalist, I was not interested.

I was so wrong! Gentile's fifty brooches and one necklace in his recent exhibition *Color Light Air* at Gallery Loupe prove him to be something else entirely. His forms may be pared down, but that sensibility and intention

is not about illustrating an idea. His pieces are all about providing an exhilarating experience. One has to slow down and look closely, but the rewards are intense.

The show featured works from a number of series, both old and new. The necklace and many of the brooches were finished in Gentile's familiar eggshell inlay. There were irregular geometric forms in solid colors, which Gentile has been doing for years. But clearly Gentile is still experimenting: there were also four brooches in an eroded paint surface, as well as four brooches with a thick marble-dust finish that were new.

Gentile says that he tries to convey a certain energy in every piece. He complains that he finds Ellsworth Kelly's paintings dead, but feels that Josef Albers's color studies buzz with vitality. And he recounts how he used to be unable to look at Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* for more than a minute: the sheer dynamism of the painting overwhelmed him, and he had to look away. It's precisely that dynamism that he wants in his own work. His insistence that

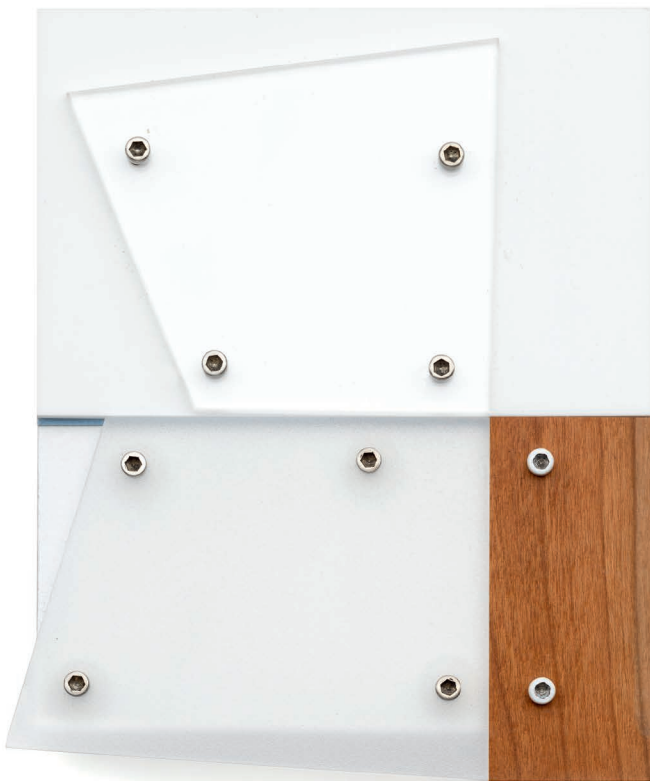
jewelry should communicate a sense of energy separates him from doctrinaire minimalists like Judd and de Maria. The best of his work crackles with a kind of electricity, which comes from the object, not the idea.

What excites me most about the work in this new exhibition is Gentile's attention to detail. A horn onlay, vaguely transparent, wraps over the edge of a brooch to reveal the laminations in the plywood beneath. A blue brooch secured with four stainless nuts reveals dots of orange paint on each screw end. The color on the back of a brooch wraps around one edge, telegraphing what ordinarily would be hidden. You have to look closely before these details register, but when they do, it's thrilling. Such details are on the edge of perception. It's a pleasure only possible in jewelry, where small scale is the norm.

After I saw the exhibit, I went back and looked at the catalogue of Gentile's 2016 retrospective at the Neue Sammlung in Munich.¹ It was easy to see how he continues



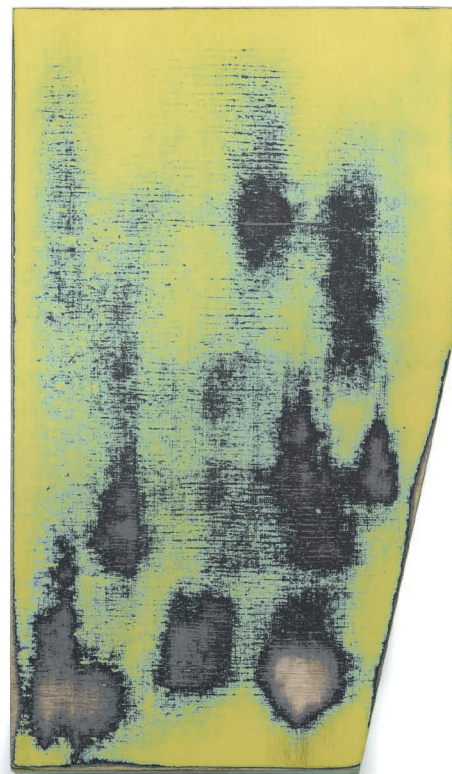
Thomas Gentile, Brooch. Eggshell inlay.
49 x 51 x 53 mm



Thomas Gentille

Brooch

plywood, transparent and translucent acrylic, lacquer, resin, stainless steel, nylon, resonated paper, air
100mm × 88mm × 20mm



Thomas Gentille

Brooch

plywood, lacquer
5 × 2 3/4 × 5/8 in.

longstanding series, but with new variations. One series consists of rectangular painted panels overlaid with equally rectangular sheets of frosted Plexiglas. In the older work, the edges of the panels were always parallel to the edges of the Plexiglas, making for rather static compositions. In his extensions to the series featured in this new show, Gentille has the edges of the frosted surfaces overlap the colored blocks at angles. Not only are the new brooches livelier, but as the Plexiglas crosses over the paint, it modifies the color behind in a subtle way. It's not a noisy effect, but it sure is memorable.

Many of the brooches are made from plywood about a half an inch thick. They have a chunky, corporeal quality, like little bodies. One of my favorite brooches consisted of a blocky "L" form that projects off the body. The form is blunt, but its eggshell onlay with blue background is almost impossibly delicate. The contrast between form and surface is a bit startling, bordering on aggressive. The tension is what makes the piece work so well.

All of Gentille's jewelry is rigorously abstract, absolutely devoid of representation, semiotic content, or overt metaphor. You might think that

Gentille makes no concessions to wearability, but that's not so. He thinks constantly about weight, so the necklaces are comfortable, and the brooches don't tug on fabric. All his jewelry is surprisingly light. It takes real skill to pull this off, even though it might be invisible to the casual viewer.

I hesitate to use the word "master," because the word carries implications of unimaginative craftsmanship and a domineering attitude. Nonetheless, Gentille is a true master. His craft is impeccable, but that's not what makes his work sing. It's how well and how carefully he thinks. Nothing escapes

his attention. Everything is considered, everything is resolved. Thomas Gentille's thoroughness is the result of decades of experience, trial and error, experimentation. It all comes together in every single piece, and it *cannot* be faked. Here is a jeweler at the height of his powers, and one is fortunate to stand in the presence of genuine mastery.

Bruce Metcalf is a jeweler based in Philadelphia.

¹Angelika Nollert, et al, *Untitled*. Thomas Gentille: *American Jeweler* (Stuttgart: Die Neue Sammlung/Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2016).