

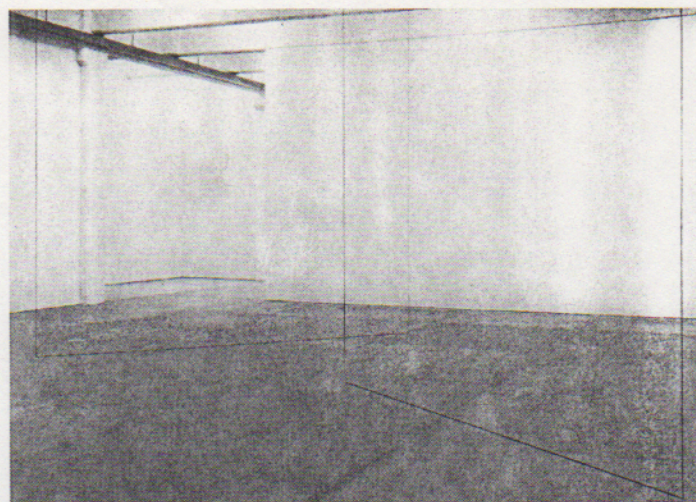
FRED SANDBACK

DIA CENTER FOR THE
ARTS
LAWRENCE MARKEY
GALLERY

Fred Sandback's exhibition at Dia is titled "Sculpture," which seems neither definitive nor inaccurate, just less misleading in its specificity than "Painting" or "Drawing," both of which might as easily have been considered, since the work involves line, plane, and color but not volume. Yet the artist is apparently attached to the sense that what he does is sculpture, and he sometimes uses the term "construction" as well. The reason is presumably that, as ethereal as his materials are—until recently they have been confined to taut strands of acrylic yarn—they are quite literally and materially there, without dissimulation, in conformity with a tradition that stretches from Russian Constructivism to Carl Andre (whose notion of sculpture as place is clearly relevant to Sandback's concerns). In this lineage, yarn would be the slightest material trace possible of the passage of a percept or idea into form.

Nonetheless, there is a definite pictorial component to Sandback's yarn sculptures—which is to say, a quotient of illusionism commingled with their more evident literalism. In fact, Sandback's strongest works are those in which this illusionism becomes most palpable, and in the Dia exhibition, at least, that means the ones he calls "vertical constructions" rather than those that employ diagonals. In all cases, the lines—like those drawn on a blank sheet—tend to be seen as edges, divisions of space into zones of relative fullness and emptiness, projection and depth, activity and abeyance, figure and ground, however fluctuant one's perception of which is which. In the case of the vertical constructions, this means that the lines open aesthetically charged "windows" or "doors" within the factual space. To see people walk through them is, somehow, to expect them to emerge on the other side of the mirror, like something out of Lewis Carroll or Jean Cocteau. To walk through them yourself, or just to shift the angle from which you view them, is to experience your perception for the fiction that it is.

As one might expect, the pictorial aspect of Sandback's work emerged more clearly in his works on paper, which were on view at Lawrence Markey in a selection ranging from 1966 to the present. In the earliest of these, the scattered points that presumably



Fred Sandback, *Untitled*, 1977, acrylic yarn. Installation view.

represent the "footprints" of a vertical construction in a square room amusingly impersonate the syncopations of a Larry Poons dot painting. In the others, as in the sculpture, line becomes means and subject. Yet the differences among those in which the sculptural line is projected within the specific setting of an (equally linear) architectural space, the abstractly architectural space of isometric projection graph paper, and the purely imaginative space of a plain white sheet (in which the only architecture is that implied by the artist's spare colored lines themselves) show how these works are essentially projections of perception that, neither visionary nor pragmatic, pass easily between literalism and fiction.

Sandback has also begun a new type of work that he calls "bas-reliefs" (shown in both exhibitions), small pieces (some diptychs) made with mostly diagonal lines incised at various depths into wood panels that are then monochromatically covered with acrylic house paint. In these it seems that space, made dense and heavy, has itself become a substance. Line is a form of subtraction rather than superimposition, but only a partly efficacious one: the substance of space persists as its own background. In that sense the bas-reliefs seem to renounce the play with perception's fictions that I've called illusionism, and therefore may announce a new phase in Sandback's work.

—Barry Schwabsky

ARTFORUM

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Lawrence Markey, Inc.

55 Vandam Street New York NY 10013

Telephone 212 627 4446 Facsimile 212 627 4448