

Norman Zammitt CARTER & CITIZEN | Los Angeles

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Here's a telling anecdote about Norman Zammitt's large-scale paintings: His monumental North Wall, 1977, which features prominently in the J. Paul Getty Museum's "Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950 – 1970," was found displayed not on the walls but on the ceiling of its owners' bedroom when it was tracked down by the show's curators for their 2011-12 exhibition. The painting's horizontal installation was ostensibly necessitated by its monumental size – eight by fourteen feet. But the decorative appeal of Zammitt's big striped paintings (the very quality that might inspire a collector to mount one on the ceiling) may also explain why the late artist is so little known outside Los Angeles: His large works can veer uncomfortably close to '70's – style interior design

The recent exhibition of Zammitt's small paintings at LA's Carter & Citizen gallery demonstrated just what a difference scale can make. Like the painter's mural size works, the small pieces bear an obvious relationship to nature, composed as they are of gradated bands of color that evoke brilliant sunsets or shifting hues of sky over water. But the diminutive size of these works also allows them to keep one foot in the realm of abstraction. Executed on canvas board and mounted to float an inch or so off the wall, the smaller paintings – some the size of a postcard – are scaled to the eye rather than the body, allowing a greater separation from the phenomenological effects of the landscape-like larger paintings.

With works drawn entirely from the artist's estate, the Carter & Citizen show nicely represented the California artists' signature technique of chromatic scaling. For example, in *Green One II*, 1977, seventeen bands of color compose a sixteen-by-twelve

inch work. Beginning with a wide strip of light blue at the top, the composition descends along sixteen incrementally narrower bands that also progress in hue until, at the lower edge of the painting, the piece is anchored by a thin line of deep navy, roughly a quarter the width of the uppermost stripe. Between these poles, the intervening registers make their way through a spectrum of blue-green to green-blue. But the gradation occurs even *within* each of these intermediate stripes, the ever so slight movement along the spectrum apparent only upon closer view.

Among his contemporaries, Zammitt was known for employing scientific techniques and mathematical logarithms to execute his compositions. But of the ten pieces in this show, the paintings that appeared freshest were arguably the simplest. One thinks of *Red to Green*, 1975, a five-by-seven inch canvas composed of just seven equally spaces, solid-colored bands. Somewhat overshooting the range promised in the titles, the colors in *Red to Green* pass through an unexpected but visually satisfying combination of primary hues and offbeat tones: red, two shades of orange, mustard yellow, avocado green, dark green-blue, and dark blue. Here, Zammitt dispenses with the spiritual overtones and optical illusions explored in many of his other paintings (e.g., his “Elusive Eureka” works) in favor of a straightforward study in color.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Zammitt’s simplest compositions is their uncanny way of seeming at once immediate yet distinctly out of time. If his large-scale paintings can be connected to the 70’s moment during which they were made, the works on view here – *Red to Green* or the equally basic *Black to White*, 1974-80 – appeared more the product of Bauhaus-era exercises than monuments of Light and Space, a movement with which Zammitt is frequently associated.

According to the gallery, none of the works on view had ever been shown in a proper exhibition, a fact that suggests Zammitt himself may have considered them to be studies. But if this artist is to receive greater art-historical consideration – which is likely, given his inclusion in “Pacific Standard Time” – then his small paintings should play some role in his critical reevaluation. And as an added bonus, there will be no concerns as to whether or not they’ll fit on the walls.

- Jennifer King

Image : Norman Zammitt *Diagonal I*, 1979. Acrylic on canvas board, 9 x 12 inches