

MAX FINKELSTEIN: SIGNS AND WONDERS

By Peter Frank

Max Finkelstein is nearly as old as abstract art itself, and has been making art, and showing it professionally, for longer than most of us have been alive. Finkelstein remains an unapologetic modernist, committed to a visual language that can embrace pure form or visual symbolism, or a combination of both, and can build on it to ends at once powerful and playful. His sensibility maintains throughout his oeuvre, but core aspects of that sensibility are great flexibility and an adventurous impulse: Finkelstein is always curious to see what happens if he does this thing or that thing, does something this way or that way, says something old in a new way or says something new in an old way. Whatever habits Finkelstein may have developed over his nearly seventy years of artmaking, he hasn't fallen into one rut.

He could have. Several bodies of his work have proven quite popular in their day, both with critics and with the public. He is best known, even now, for the aluminum constructions he devised in the later 1960s and early '70s. These inlaid assemblies, both wall-hung and free-standing, function like mosaics – but mosaics in which the components distinguish themselves one from another not by color but by the light they refract off their burnished surfaces, each surface throwing and bending the reflected light in a different direction, breaking up any sense of lockstep pattern. The Hexalum series that followed, occupying Finkelstein for the rest of the 1970s, and the Astral series of the 1980s were received with similar enthusiasm, and it's easy to see why: the luminous organic compositions he painted in enamel on the honeycombed aluminum surfaces (more geometrically in the Hexalums, more fluidly in the Astrals) shift, in shape and color, as the viewer moved past. The images are as fugitive and yet transfixing as abstract lenticulars, even though there is no "magic lens" fooling the eye. (Rather, the format takes the method Yaacov Agam had made famous a decade earlier in a whole different, and perhaps unanticipated, direction.)

But by the time Finkelstein became a darling of local (and to some extent national) audiences, he had already realized several solid, powerful bodies of work in three dimensions. And since his apogee, he has worked steadily, amassing more bodies of work that continue to distinguish themselves for their imposing structure, visual eloquence, and wit. Finkelstein's engagement with social and political concerns, little evident in his best known work, bristles throughout his abstract, and not-so-abstract, bronzes of the 1950s (which feature Biblical themes, although not exclusively), and recurs with even greater clarity and force in his painted wood assemblages of the '90s, notably the Bar Code series, which comment acidly on American violence and consumerism. But the Bar Code pieces share their bright colors and rhythmic compositions with the coincident Kachina series, a group of elaborate geometric structures that eschew political commentary – except, perhaps, in the honor they pay the aesthetic practices of southwest Native American peoples such as the Navajos and Zunis.

Finkelstein's love of geometry, and desire to infuse its supposedly austere forms with a sense of play, courses throughout this work, and continues until the present day (with such recent series as the architecturally motivated Exteriors, the gamelike Interiors, the globelike Geometric Portraits, and even a

sequence of chess pieces). This exuberant constructivism, and the sense of workshop-driven assembly that builds such rational exuberance, is the manifestation of Max Finkelstein's sensibility. It has taken myriad forms over the last six decades, and the change continues even as Finkelstein approaches the century mark.

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