

ART REVIEW

Hunting a Tribe of Minimalists on the Streets of the Upper East Side

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

Published: January 5, 2008

Unlike the sleek white boxes of Chelsea, the town house galleries of the Upper East Side tend to be small, old and charmingly idiosyncratic. Wooden floors creak, antique moldings and multiple doorways eat up wall space, and ghosts of residents past lurk in the shadows.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

“Chair” (2001-2) by Tom Friedman, at L & M Arts.

Just for those reasons these galleries can be curiously refreshing settings for contemporary art, especially for ultramodern genres marked by abstract purity and timelessness. Right now three notable exhibitions in the neighborhood pivot around Minimalism, one of modern art’s most enduringly popular styles.

L&M Arts, the prosperous granddaddy of Upper East Side galleries, offers “The Complexity of the Simple,” which beautifully mixes works

of reductive abstraction and of anti-orthodox insouciance by 19 older and younger artists.

The tone of the show is set in the gallery's grand front room by the unlikely pairing of works by [Ellsworth Kelly](#) and Tom Friedman. Mr. Kelly's piece is a diptych of diamond-shaped canvases — one black, one white — and Mr. Friedman's is a wooden chair with so many holes drilled into it that it seems to be dissolving in space. Platonic order meets obsessive-compulsive surrealism.

Pass through a green and silver plastic beaded curtain by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and you're in a room of breathtaking elegance. To the left a triangular brick-red painting by Robert Mangold has three squares neatly drawn on it in graphite; to the right an [Agnes Martin](#) canvas bears straight, horizontal pencil lines on its cream-colored surface. On the floor between them sits a sculpture by Roni Horn, a weighty volume of solid black glass the size and shape of a bass drum, with a top so shiny that it looks like liquid ink.

Take the semicircular stairway from the front room to the second floor and you come to Liza Lou's big three-dimensional cartoon of a gnarly tree limb covered by zillions of tiny, gold glass beads. Jutting out from an inwardly curved wall with no other means of support, it is comical and mysterious. You might contemplate it while sitting on a wood and metal bench nearby, which happens to be a conceptually enigmatic sculpture by Mark Handforth.

A room to the left holds an early sculpture made of crushed auto-body parts by John Chamberlain. Its compacted Abstract Expressionist energy seems to be pushing everything else in the room — including works by [Dan Flavin](#), Daniel Buren, Mark Grotjahn and David Hammons — up against the wall.

Seven pieces in a room on the other side of Ms. Lou's rotunda are unified by a finely tuned sense of color. A wall-mounted [Donald Judd](#) box with a colored plexiglass panel built in casts an orange light, which is picked up by the burnt orange in a blow-torch painting by

Yves Klein and by the central peach-colored square of a Josef Albers painting. Two metallic-gold stripe paintings by Rudolf Stingel provide a slightly greener shade of warmth, while a sculptural set of open white cubes by [Sol LeWitt](#) and a sheet of wrinkled, mirrored Mylar under plexiglass by Anselm Reyle add clear, colorless notes.

Eleven blocks to the south, in Vivian Horan's luxuriously homey second-floor gallery, which has a wonderful carved marble Neo-Renaissance fireplace and an immense bay window in its main room, is a small, well-selected show of abstract paintings and sculptures called "Deconstructed Geometry." It includes some of the same artists in the L&M show.

An orgasmic bouquet of brightly colored crushed metal parts by Mr. Chamberlain and a glossy Minimalist red box by John McCracken face off on pedestals, while a sumptuous, posthumously executed mural by Mr. LeWitt, who died in April, presides. The painting presents the image of a large cube with red, blue and purple sides on a mustard yellow field. Across the room a diminutive sculpture by Carl Andre consisting of five copper bars placed end to end in a 20-inch row rests on the floor.

Mr. Mangold turns up here too. His monochrome canvases with thoughtfully drawn lines suggest an inexhaustibly fruitful exploration of Euclidean subtleties.

Back up north, on 79th Street, Mr. LeWitt appears in yet another Upper East Side show, as a contributor to, and the subject of, a memorial exhibition organized by the sculptor Dove Bradshaw. Titled "Ten Artists/Ten Materials," it is at the Bjorn Ressel Gallery, a bright and narrow high-ceilinged second-floor compartment whose most conspicuous feature is its hideous brown wall-to-wall carpet.

Mr. LeWitt is represented by an endearingly simple wall drawing penciled according to his 1972 instructions, which read, "A not straight line from the left side to the right, drawn at a convenient height."

Appropriately, given Mr. LeWitt's role as a father of Conceptualism, the exhibition includes a text piece from 1970 by Robert Barry. Mirrored vinyl letters applied to one wall spell out, "Something which can only be known as something else," which becomes more interesting the more you think about it.

There's also a LeWitt-like wall drawing of radiating lines by William Anastasi, who made it while blindfolded. In another LeWittish gesture, Merrill Wagner used four different brands of a color called Indian Red to create a washy wall painting of four horizontal bands.

Other works here have to do with seriality. They include a set of aluminum blocks by Mr. Andre; a collection of pod-shaped, palm-size white porcelain forms by Marcia Hafif; a set of heavy iron bars with angled ends by Richard Nonas; and geometric patterns by Melissa Kretschmer executed in pale yellow wax on the gridded panes of the gallery's front windows.

Some monolithic forms are on hand too. A dark, mound-shaped cast-bronze sculpture on the floor, by Jene Highstein, and a flat white plaster triangle in slight relief on the wall, by Ms. Bradshaw, converse about heaviness and lightness. They might also discuss the mind-spinning intersection of past, present and future that happens regularly in art galleries all over the Upper East Side.

"The Complexity of the Simple" continues through Jan. 31 at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; (212) 861-0020, imgallery.com. "Deconstructed Geometry" continues through Jan. 17 at Vivian Horan Fine Art, 35 East 67th Street, Manhattan; (212) 517-9410, artnet.com/vhoran.html. "Ten Artists/Ten Materials" continues through Jan. 26 at Bjorn Ressle Gallery, 16 East 79th Street, Manhattan; (212) 744-2266, ressleart.com.