

ARTFORUM

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Denzil Hurley (1949–2021)



TWO YEARS AGO, at the Milton Resnick/ Pat Pasloff Foundation, I mounted a group show of work by abstract painters who were generally below the art world's radar but who'd caught my eye and about whom I thought frequently. They had awakened something in me that wouldn't let go. Borrowed from a Broadway musical about Annie Oakley, the title was "Doing What Comes Naturally." It was intended to bait critics because I am of the firm conviction that art is by definition artificial and

Denzil Hurley, 2013. Photo: Zhi Lin.

therefore unnatural, making me skeptical of the assertion that what seems compelling in a given artist's work is that way because it had to be. Rather, art is persuasive and hard to forget precisely because the artist makes it so, and for that to occur they must choose or invent conventions that impose the most exigent demands on their specific talents and sensibility. De Kooning was correct when he said that, in art, any idea is as good as another—sorry die-hard discourses, but it's true. Case-by-case, however, not just any idea will elicit the best from a given artist and their medium. For my exhibition I selected seven who had managed to find themselves in "the place just right," as the old Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" would have it.

Denzil Hurley, the Barbados-born, Yale-educated, Seattle-based painter who died in July at seventy-two achieved just such simplicity—twice over. The body of work that initially made his name locally and nationally consisted of tablet-like canvases that could be expansive as well as vividly compact. Most were marked, mapped, and animated by sometimes nearly legible but more often blurred inscriptions embedded in monochrome grounds that ranged from the subtlest of tans and beiges, to radiant yellows and oranges, to deep earthen grays.

The adjective “minimalist” comes to mind because Denzil’s compositions were sparse, however their facture was intuitive rather than systematic. Yet aside from that qualification the term is accurate to the degree that the paintings eschew Sturm und Drang or overt declaration in favor of formal suggestion and a steady but memorable visual pulse. Starting in the early 2010s, Hurley dedicated himself to constructing polyptychs out of irregular as well as modular panels painted with the same exquisite touch, many of which were idiosyncratically mounted on struts made from found tree limbs and branches. Without owing any stylistic debt to her, they recall the quirky elegance of Moira Dryer’s work, which I had previously featured in a MoMA “Projects” exhibition. Moreover, their pathos is of a similar nature inasmuch as both resonate with the poignant vitality of an artist aware that s/he is about to be cut off in their prime.

Rather than competing with his ability to produce a steady flow of first-rate work, Denzil’s dedication to teaching—which he pursued as a member of the tenured faculty at the University of Washington—enhanced it. His concern for other artists did as well. Back in 2012, when I was struggling to keep my balance as Dean of the School of Art at Yale (which I had never attended and found to be an alien environment), Denzil contacted me to say that he had an exhibition planned at the gallery of Francine Seders. Among the other North West Coast artists this remarkable French expatriate represented were Mark Tobey and Jacob Lawrence (happily she has just published a memoir)—and Denzil invited me to join him in making it a two-person show. Given my high regard for him—and the fact that I’d rarely shown since the 1980s—it took all my nerve to agree. But miraculously the combination clicked. I will forever be grateful to Denzil’s generosity. His spirit of creative fellowship is one of the reasons that, despite all evidence to the contrary, I still believe in the existence of an art community.