



Daniel Marzona Concentrating on the essential – how Kenneth Noland achieved unexpected clarity and expressivity

By now, Kenneth Noland (1924–2010) is rightfully recognized in the United States as one of the greatest painters of his generation. After training at Black Mountain College (1946–1948), where he gained deep insights into the European Modernist tradition under Josef Albers and other teachers, Noland systematically devised new forms of abstraction in painting.

Though he would eventually make his mark as a leading pioneer of “Colour-Field” painting, Noland was still searching for his style in his early work, straddling the middle ground between Klee and Albers, in other words between gestural and strictly geometric abstraction. Beginning in the mid-1950s, he produced his first truly original works, the “Circle Paintings,” and honed in ever more precisely on his main work. From then on, the harmonious organization of form and colour on the image surface using the most elementary of visual motifs became his focus. In the process, Noland made consistent use of the “soak-stain” method developed by Helen Frankenthaler, which involved applying multiple layers of colour onto the raw canvas one after the other. The stratified pigments evoke a feeling of volume, and thus create an illusion of spatiality in the image.

In 1962, while in the process of relocating from Washington D.C. to New York City, Noland began working on a new set of works he called the “Chevron Paintings,” in which he experimented with the V-shape as a key structural element of his pictorial space. “Sun Dried: Japanese Space” can be considered one of the salient works from the series, and this for several reasons. For one thing, its topsy-turvy frame is one of the first known examples of a “shaped canvas.” Setting himself apart from Frank Stella and other artists who sought to highlight the nature of their paintings as an object in the context of a minimalistic discourse in which the visual motif and the shape of the canvas essentially collapse one into the other, Noland seems to be deploying the “shaped” canvas in order to accentuate the visual effect he is seeking to create. The square canvas has been turned by 90 degrees and a roughly 30 centimeter-wide stripe – evidently grounded but otherwise unworked – runs down the middle of the image. Extending out horizontally to the right and left of the stripe are two vertically tapering triangular fields painted in light brown with a somewhat cloud-like texture. These in turn transition laterally to two smaller, irregular triangles in which the raw canvas lies exposed. The whole is cradled inside the V-shape of two sliver-like triangles painted in basic white at the bottom of the image. The carefully thought-out composition and colouration of the pictorial elements creates an impression of volume and visual spatiality, in that the two darker triangle shapes almost seem attached to the picture by hinges, virtually swinging open towards the viewer.

The unforced lightness with which the artist manages to vivify the image’s visual effect while employing comparatively simple means of design is certainly what gives “Sun Dried: Japanese Space” its exceptional quality. But this virtuosity also bespeaks the outstanding rank which Noland’s oeuvre holds in the larger context of American painting of the 1950s and 1960s.

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Asheville/North Carolina 1924 – 2010 Port Clyde/Maine

"Sun Dried: Japanese Space". 1963

Acrylic on canvas. 161.5 × 161.5 cm (63 5/8 × 63 5/8 in.). On the reverse with coloured pencil titled in black, signed and inscribed with directional arrow: „Japanese Space“ Kenneth Noland. On the stretcher a label of the André Emmerich Gallery, New York (here with the title information "Sun Dried: Japanese Space").

[3036] Framed.

Provenance

John Murchison, Dallas / Private Collection, North Rhine-Westphalia

EUR 400,000–600,000

USD 465,000–698,000

Exhibition

Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective. New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1977, cat. no. 34, ill. p. 72

- **Kenneth Noland is one of the main exponents of the American school of "Colour-Field" painting**
- **One of the first known examples of a "shaped canvas" in American art history**
- **The work was part of the historic "A Retrospective" exhibit devoted to Noland at the Guggenheim in New York.**

