

20. Untitled, 1960. Oil on canvas, 49 x 46 in.



To: ICA Miami
From: The Myles Foundation
RE: Donald Judd’s Paintings

Eileen Myles

It makes me unbelievably sad that my life is so marked by failure and so is my work—inexact, peppered by loss, just a mountain of melancholy ~~shit~~ really. My earliest attempts to hold things in a sort of fashionable austerity were merely a reflection of New York in the mid early seventies—all those men with curly hair hovering over their unlined drawing pads in SoHo, sullenly trying to pick up women and explain conceptual art. Every drawing was a thought. Like the steps a dog takes. And it was already too late of course.

Heroically I taped a piece of legal paper on my apartment door that read: CENTER FOR MINIMAL LIVING. I could celebrate less. But my excesses, my inability to stand my ground and my habitual sheer dykey alcoholic laziness, which has dogged me all my life, drunk or sober, these conditions have simply defeated me. Surges of clarity (my books, yes) but still not much. To illustrate: like the time in 2010 when I couldn’t be *bothered* carrying the two boxes into my apartment from the truck after my girlfriend and I drove east back from Montana—a momentary (but habitual) carelessness (an immune and godly feeling) which accounts most likely for the mysterious loss of *all* the original final drafts of my young work, as well as the plastic storage bin of *all* my best archival photographs which I somehow managed to have up until then—my past is gone. Though today I still have the truck, a four-wheeled monument to loss. It barely runs yet I drove it to Marfa in 2015. It’s parked outside right now. But it’s late, much too late. So much is gone, only my living career remains, this careening thing, growling feverishly over the mold that has covered what is gone, my loss.

So . . . Don. I tell people I am writing about Donald Judd’s paintings. They say I didn’t know there *were* any. I say yeah. Very early on. Before he went to Marfa. People say so how is it there. I say great. Currently my institution is trying to talk to his. In order to address these transitional works. It’s an exaggeration but I will say it. These are the last paintings before he became him.

I mean I think the career holds these paintings more than the work itself. The dollar holds the land more than the land. I wonder if even that is still true. I commissioned a poet friend Brandon Shimoda to write something about Judd’s paintings. He wrote quite a lot. Finally he offered this: *Maybe I am mistaking paintings for dreams. Or premonitions.* Judd’s paintings (1959–61) feel like written things to me. Pleasurable, clean, a map, a hair, a symbol, a sign. A vignette.

I think it’s very interesting that my friend Erin Kimmel owns the first house Donald Judd lived in in Marfa. A careful person and an art critic she explains she didn’t know *that* when she

bought the house. An ex-girlfriend Zeborah, a Texan who now works in film, came to town when I was working on this. She booked a tour of the Chinati Foundation and I happily went along. I didn’t remember having seen the Chamberlains before. I had just seen some prints of his in a gallery in town that reminded me of one of Don’s paintings. A tiny one, 14, that looks like love and war.¹ I liked John Chamberlain’s messy Taylor Meade film. Kevin, a local, a high school kid gave us the tour. At the end of it I was lying on the ever-present giant bed and I asked Kevin if he liked this or do you think it is stupid meaning the film. Both, he smiled. Since Judd famously insisted that art can be fabricated by whatever methods you like (as long as the result is art) I want you to know that that’s what’s happening here. And I myself also briefly lived in that first house of Judd’s on Washington Street when I first moved here. Did you know George Washington was the richest man in America when he was President of the United States. Donald Judd did not die rich; in fact he left a lot of debt. And I decided I would not get to the bottom of it with his paintings of his, Judd’s, but will make something of them by drawing from various sources in the world of them, I could make something living. To install his paintings in the Marfa I know now, an almost world.

I think of the paintings as orange but only two are. And if I count *all* the ways orange enters these paintings, then half of them are. Orange is strong. Judd is orange. I’m thinking, of course, of that fat attractive book of his writings that came out last fall. People like to say he’s *really* a writer. And he *is* a great writer. I think he pretty much wrote this town. Has his sound-alike Donald Trump was destroying America when I saw that people who like him mainly enjoy saying his name. Like they’re flipping an unclear something off in that way. Judd is one decision, Trump is another. I think Judd also saved this town. You drive through Valentine, you think *shit*.

To say Don is Marfa is well I can’t even finish that sentence. Because the truck is part of my archive now and not really a vehicle I got myself something else and Tina Tae, a former student, is driving it right now across America. El Paso is where I’ll pick it up. She attended a huge class I taught in San Diego in the aughts, I mean big like a poetry factory. It was such a pleasure to “up” the scale. Every poet has taught a workshop forever. It was different to make it huge. I stood on a table. I created a graduate writing program in San Diego and then I fled. I’m somewhat the Judd of there. I read in San Diego the other day and I got a standing ovation. I’m like a

1. Actually they are all untitled. These numbers correspond to the plate numbers in this publication.

Minotaur. If I stayed I probably wouldn’t have lost as much as I have but unfortunately I was dying. A university is a place that’s about preserving but also about this death. You begin to run its machinery and then you cease running your own. The last class I ever taught there was perfect because of what they, the students, did. It was called distributing literature and by the end “poetry” was gone. That’s the point I think. To give it away. I have two theses in this piece of writing. Don is a poet (or possibly a poem) and Don is a woman. Some boy students in the distributing literature class stuck poems in between fruits at Whole Foods. That’s good I said and two girls went into frats with big white teeshirts and black markers and got the drunk boys to write poems on the teeshirts and wear them and the girls videotaped that. Uh huh I said. Best was the Michael McClure poem a perfect lyric poem and these two other girls put each word of it on a refrigerator magnet and put all of the words on a tray and marched around the campus getting workers to make poems out of those words. The Michael McClure poem yielded so many accidents and finally it seemed that it was an accident too. The poem undone yielded multitudes.

Dear Don,
What I’m suspecting these paintings are about is an exhaustion of the efforts to make paint *arise*. It’s a Buddhist word and it could mean dimensionality or just come to life. It seems that’s what you intended to do and it almost does and a few of them along the way are really stupendous works. I have looked at the paintings from all angles beginning with a pdf I received on my computer. I downloaded it and I began to take notes. I figured I’d write my essay based on those early impressions and then get to Marfa and look at the real paintings and then whoomp. I’d be done.

Instead it’s been a little hard.

I’m not going to make too much of those earliest notes but I offer a few:

pl. 20 Howling and lonesome

Kind of a map
body on the ground
a piece
and a burned metallic
color

pl. 18
cut over like an etched
type thing
photographic distance

pl. 19 web of shapes
built up

pl. 21 oh sure
gendered and treated

pl. 14 attempt to give the
shapes some heft
with color, a coast &
a map

pl. 23 Try this inserting its
wily geometry on the dark

Okay that’s plenty. I won’t even bother with the one I call “the
brick.” Which is actually designated pl. 27.

What it is is a grey patch of black diagonals, a geometric
looking thing, like a flag at the dead center of a larger black
square of painted canvas the constitutive elements of which
are truly this thick black painted heap of bumpy marks, tex-
ture and strange arrows. Sheer over-painting. The pleasure
in a few of these paintings and especially this one is how
genuinely fucked up it is. It’s orderly but fed up. They are all
advanced failures, philosophic, and finally not so geometric at
all. This one’s kind of a band-aid. A cry for help. Even a joke.

I tried reading him next. This is Don:

*In Russia the past is fully remembered and in the United
States it is fully forgotten.*²

I enjoy that kind of writing. It’s an aphorism that always
seems so wise. Yet it’s not true. America enjoys an apho-
rism while it’s sitting on the toilet and America burns. I think
he knew that. Judd is swift and pithy but he died in 1994. It
was a different world. By ’95 Russia had thoroughly banned
the past and America had a teeming present of OJ, the
white Bronco and the whole nation (us) watching that on
teevee. So by now it’s entirely else. More of a blended pres-
ent. Russia over twenty years has begun making things up
to fill the void, history most of all. And we are imitating them
now with the other Don. But what’s similar in some way is
the frustration I see in his paintings. Yet he fixed it in Marfa,
his next world.

This place is primarily for the installation of art, necessarily for

2. Donald Judd, “Marfa, Texas” 1985, in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed.
Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation, David
Zwirner Books), p. 429.

*whatever architecture of my own that can be included in
an existing situation, for work, and altogether for my idea of
living. As I said, the main purpose of the place in Marfa is
the serious and permanent installation of art. I insist on this
because nothing existing now, despite the growth of activity in
museums and so-called public art, is sufficiently close to the
interests of the best art.*³

Judd hands us the best way to look at Judd. It’s bracing and
haughty. “I insist on this.” To properly regard his everything
(here in Marfa at least) one should view it as an installation.
And I am a fraught installation around another installation,
both being of another century and also one who regards
stumbling as a kind of perfection in the contemporary (tem-
porary) void and now I shall regard Donald Judd’s paintings
within it, just a review? No I don’t think so.

He did not allow for failure in a great part of his vision. Maybe
he allowed for it later. Like later on. But the planning was all:

This is Judd:

*In the summer there are twelve cottonwoods around the pool,
which in the winter become an elevated thicket.*⁴

Sounds like Camelot. It’s great but how can one ever trust
(any) nature to do the right thing. Likewise the trees chosen
most recently by Robert Irwin died. Nature habitually it does
wrong. If death is wrong. What I like about Judd’s paintings is
that they are frankly a part of nature. They are argumentative,
they are uncomfortable. Nature is inside and outside of them.
It’s in him and I think he can’t stand it. In the later not sculp-
ture things, nature is outside, I think.

He says:

*What is possible to do is perhaps second to what exists in the
scale of ultimates.*⁵

In his way, that’s humble. I read it as if Judd were Jean des
Esseintes, the narrator of the 19th century novel *Against the
Grain* in which an aristocratic aesthete retreats from the world
in order to meditate on literature, perfumes, philosophy and
art. I keep hearing in contemporary accounts (like last night
at dinner I learned that habitually he amassed piles and piles
of things. Furniture, jewelry, rugs, paintings.) The thing I find
so compelling in my brief formal study of Donald Judd is that

3. Ibid., 430.
4. Ibid., 430.
5. Ibid., 431.

I am looking at a Twentieth Century Midwesterner obviously
a deeply talented and brilliant man initially entering the New
York art world as a thinker and artist, then retreating in 20
years to a West Texas town, there enacting the contemporary
tendency to acquire unused industrial property repurposing
it here, then for a permanent art exhibition of his own work
and that of his friends and further to house his children and
himself and hiring much of the surrounding town to realize this
work. Was he bilingual? It seems the town liked him just like
they loved the movie *Giant*. In Donald Judd’s time there was
an event called Open House they put long tables down in the
arena at Chinati and everyone in town was invited to sit down
and have a meal. I’m thinking of the conceptual artist Paul
Chan producing Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” in New
Orleans after Katrina. It seemed like such a white thing to do
(he’s not) but among his many cooperative gestures with the
town were these neighborhood by neighborhood chicken din-
ners served as part of the show. Did any women do a project
so large? Laura Riding wore a tiara in Majorca that said she
was queen. She was the white goddess. And a woman did
name this town Marfa. It used to be Pumptown. She was the
stationmaster’s wife who read novels and she found the name
Marfa in a Jules Verne novel, Michael Strogoff. And for a while
a gallery in Marfa (run by Erin Kimmel & a partner) was named
Michael Strogoff in honor of that.

Okay. So I *did* enter New York in 1974, only to experience
an art world full of plans and designs. Where’s the pictures I
thought. Inadvertently I followed Judd to Texas a little more
than two decades after he passed and I discovered his mea-
sured and gleaming work sitting here looking right at last. It
changes every day a young artist told me at dinner last night.
In the fog in the rain. I do get it and even love it up against
here. He just needed the added female of the world, the fact
of nature. It’s always attributed to *her* so just for the moment
let’s claim it. But the wide perversity of the Judd accomplish-
ment is just not to be missed. It was a place and it became
this place. And I can’t think about his paintings any way other
than to look at them as a kind of a gateway drug to here. Not
Arthur Rimbaud’s final poems as he went off to be a smuggler
in Africa. No it’s much more like Patti Smith leaving poetry
to become she. To make a band. To leave “art” is what
becomes poetic. The paintings are residue.

Along with cash and carry there are two definite corollaries,
one, that any artist who objects to anything is a “difficult
artist,” and second, that the institutions concerned with art
are mostly irrelevant to it, and mostly inimical. Even an artist
whose work is suited to cash and carry can be called “diffi-
cult” if the artist is fussy about what happens to the work in
the museums and galleries. An artist requiring even slightly

special conditions is difficult beforehand.⁶

This is Judd of course explaining the necessary logic of doing
what he did, becoming Marfa and Marfa becoming him. By
the word perversity I mean the logic of control. Yet what
moved him does smack of the female condition. The difficult
woman of course is a problem in all the worlds she’s found.

And she’s found around everything. The space is this (her).

Take that:

*A distantly related work has long been sketched for the
ground floor of my building in New York, a cast-iron building,
a type which James Bogardus thought should have cast-iron
beams, which cannot support, and iron doors.*⁷

I offer this quote as a specimen of distanced creation, as
if something apart from Judd had drawn the plans. Am I
misreading him here. Language positions itself to explain how
we see the world. It proposes its conditions as our conditions.
Judd sees himself almost as a third party in abeyance almost
until the condition is right. It’s biblical.

I love his clarity around how much actually gets done.

*Not much gets made of all the possibilities, yet it’s a lot con-
sidering that it’s against the grain.*⁸

Or this:

*In college I thought that in England in the first novels
the concern with courtesy and proper behavior was so great
because these were new and being learned. A little later I
thought that the reputation of the French for rationality was
because they were less rational. Similarly, the Germans
emphasize organization because it’s new and different. The
Americans want to be free and to be democratic because
they are not.*⁹

What about Judd and being male. A man wants to be ele-
mental and pure because he isn’t. I remember a male critic
once referring to a female painter: She’s an endless woman.

6. Donald Judd, “19 February 1986,” in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd
and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation, David Zwirner Books), p. 436.
7. Donald Judd, “21 February 1993,” in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd
and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation, David Zwirner Books), p. 817.
8. Ibid., 817.
9. Donald Judd, “21 May 1993, La Mansana de Chinati,” in *Donald Judd
Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation,
David Zwirner Books), p. 820.

He must intervene, he must make her absent because she is space. The woman is nowhere (named) in Judd’s work. He is inventing her as space.

Judd’s work is activated by the negation of the feminine. Children exist as residue like Giacometti’s work. It’s a mother-less world.

Chinati built a pink stage for Solange and it’s currently part of my screen door. Dogs kept tearing the screen door open. Solange and Chinati shut it up.

Latin America opened its veins and created the renaissance. What part of that is not decadent.

Two cats going out to greet a person.

I am now becoming entirely incidental in order to make a real world, a thinking world, a wandering place around Judd’s paintings. And these things feel right, too.

I read this Joy Williams story about women screaming with their skin peeling off (in Hiroshima) stupid stupid Americans.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Did the black rain actually quench your thirst?

TAKAKURA: No, no it didn’t. Maybe I didn’t catch enough rain, but I still felt very thirsty and there was nothing I could do about it. What I felt at that moment was that Hiroshima was entirely covered with only three colors. I remember red, black and brown, but, but, nothing else. Many people on the street were killed almost instantly. The fingertips of those dead bodies caught fire and the fire gradually spread over their entire bodies from their fingers.

And were they screaming and burning saying stupid stupid Americans? I looked for that quote everywhere. I couldn’t find it.

The next morning I walked in through the big flapping green rubber curtains into the conservation wing of the Judd Foundation. I’m a little late. The paintings, I’m told, will be shipped to Miami soon. Eileen, hurry up.

Here they is.

pl. 29

Well what do I see. The first one’s washy yet topographical. It’s orange. Bright fucking orange. It has a central artery,

a line running down it. When I look over quick at the row of them—lines, loops they look more like plans to me than paintings. I guess that’s the hangover from first seeing them digitally. In reproduction you see the plan more. It’s writing in a way, to copy anything. You don’t get the experience you get the thought. Soon as I start moving around I see the awkward love, the frustration, the presence, the compulsive or obsessive erasure then the painting over again and again which makes heft. That’s time I guess. Painting’s not music, it’s time. I think more than anything else.

pl. 29

It’s fairly tie-dyed. The surface puckers. There’s a red stripe inside the white stripe that for a while is taped on. He’s trying to add more *thing* to it. Plus the red stripe inside the white feels like inserting an institution inside of a painting. Rather than geometry it’s emo, it’s a desperate measure. Ha. How old is Judd at this point. Thirty-three. The age at which in spiritual circles they say a person “kicks the frame.” Release from temptation a numerologist told me. The guy’s got four more years of reviewing. These paintings are like archways to the invisible. They’re all about limitation and then pushing against that and some of course are quite beautiful.

Like “29.” I guess Judd didn’t call his painting that, then. He called them nothing but today numbers are what we get. It’s so un-fond. It’s such a way of counting the paintings, while pushing their butts into the future. I’m trying to look at them not the system. Not the room the painting is leaning in, about to be shipped. Like cattle. But the paintings are staring at me. I’m out of here, they cry.

pl. 30

This one’s a lot more handsome—it’s kind of a rock show—with a blur. It’s an orange and purple painting with a dark orange line wriggling down its center. There is even a pussy drip. A gathering spot. And several roads miss-taken. A lower purple rivulet shoots off at a bend. It’s deliberate and shaky. The stripe has a young dark double. It wavers leaning up against the process and though it’s a pleasure to look at it’s an exploration of what painting can’t. It *can’t* move, it can’t flip, it can just build up and be open once in a while. The pussy is the spot that *is* and so are the purples anti-roads.

There was a giant meth bust in Marfa tonight. Helicopters and everything. It explained a lot people agreed.

pl. 20

This one I definitely like less, care less about. I say that though

it does kind of *lift*. It’s like the less they are paintings the more they do *do* something.

The shape is outlined in white with this black internal stripe, making it kind of fetal, womb-y, it reminds me of those weird pamphlets mothers used to tell their daughters about the inside of their bodies. Ugh. I recoil. But alternately and this is the interesting part you can flip the figure, but then you drop it again and like a New Yorker might say looking down on this form flat on the floor (which is where they’re going) this shape is a crime scene.

Judd wants to be a woman. I feel it all over the place. I mean c’mon— the impulse to be an institution, to be the house, to *hold* the art in perpetuity, even momentarily apart from the marketplace, to feel timelessness in it, to feel the time, is a female not so much urge as capacity. Internal space seems to be what Don’s trying to produce in these paintings—by deployment, by truncating, by interruption.

In Judd’s writing his pronouncements are so often hyperbolic (more poetry than true) but hyperbole always makes space. While overtly in the world here—I mean the Marfa he made, the Chinati Foundation, Judd Foundation, the lay of the land there is no trace of the woman. It’s all this growing, declaiming, measuring, naming, id to define a place, I mean, the unspoken separatism of that, but no id at all. She’s hidden. He ate her.

It reminds me of what Brandon Shimoda said: His paintings remind me of murder.

pl. 13

This one’s pretty clowny. It’s like catholic grade school art class in 1959 or early ’60s. *This* is modern art. It also seems a bit of a pantomime. Then the upper left, a white spread. And a coffee drip? That what it looks like. Down the center of the painting.

I did a phone walk with the conservator to identify this or that damage. What about the whole black area on the side of the painting. It looks pretty crinkled. Even squamous. But she says it’s stable.

pl. 15

I shrug. The grey thickens. I don’t think I have to talk about every single painting. There’s 13.

pl. 18

This is when I first noticed the Judd ribbon throughout. Here it’s belabored cause the whole painting’s surface is thick raised paint and then all those shadowy black lines behind the white scoop that resembles the big dipper . . . I can’t tell if they’re under or over. I’m not a technician. Orange by the way. The texture starts to become the point, the foiled but adamant stripe.

I’m admiring the legal pad with my notes in line breaks and individual drawings of the paintings they look great with tiny notes. I’m thinking of my archive. The presence of these there is already better than the piece I’m writing. Can I just use *this*. Why not go forward in the present already with value.

pl. 28

Here’s a big dirty white one—blue loopy trail with fragile drips then the hollow blue loop running up and down, creating the space. I can’t not think maps, land, possession. I know it’s ridiculous to project the present archive (that I’m standing in) onto the future (which is the present) imputing institutionality onto these poor innocent paintings. Yet they are over-determined by where I stand. They look like a land project of some sort especially this is truly a blown-up detail from a beautiful OLD INEFFICIENT MAP. It’s knotted down in its lower portion like the blue is attempting to fight before merging with the transparent tube. Or maybe it’s a political map of struggle—before you simply go, *eh!*

I just want this one to be in my home.

I think about those little ancient streams under Manhattan. City plans can’t stop them - that water moves silently deep under the streets and intersections. Or Collect Pond in Lower Manhattan (around Chinatown, Little Italy.) It reflected the sky over Manhattan until the 18th century when people killed it with garbage, dead animals and stuff. Collect Pond is still down there in some way. Way beneath the earth. Look at this.

pl. 21

Another of the truly haunting ones. Brandon’s right. It’s ghosty shit. Grey and scraped away so it’s paint *and* clinging patterns, the grey winding up being very bright, because the surface is splotchy, it’s a brightness that *occurs* yet the painting feels trimmed by its own interior, by that almost iridescently white white stripe with the red inner stripe at

once erased right at its center. It's a staccato gesture making something open at the start

Why *do* I love
this painting so much
it's a downpour
combination of teeming then the scraped removed paint
makes a constant action a *being*

meeting is a blip
road stops
blip
a wholeness here also
I BELIEVE
In that internal space
drawn, allowed

pl. 19

This one's a big chalkboard, it's black
and bisected, intersected

full of curves
rough black strokes
over distant orangey

you got bright white lines
again as they fade
and dip & double

leave, shake
he's def making
spaces with the erasures
he's mainly
interested in that

I do think this one is superb
Holds all its pastness
Echoes, erroneous
Millions of little

Stripes
zap zap zap

frenetic to
calm

go sit on the steps
(in the Judd Foundation
conservation department)
in indirect
light the
negative positive
of his plan
it's almost girly

in its cadence

all work to
make this
bright wide [white]
but the work
is all there
nothing's gone
the time
the nervousness
because a
machine could
do this & it
did

disposing of the
man! Spectral

failed machines
Can a ghost pass through water?

failed again
man is here
but wished to
be female
judd foundation
mr. mom