

ART REVIEW: FRED SANDBACK AT DAVID ZWIRNER

Reviewed by Merle Molofsky

Fred Sandback, a sculptor working with acrylic yarn, created a body of outlining space to create a sense of presence where nothing was except the everything that could be limned, translated into volume and presence because Fred Sandback captured it for us. Much of his sculpture consists of colored acrylic yarn, stretched from floor to ceiling or along walls. Most often the sculptures outline rectangles, either suspended within the room in relation to each other, or along a wall.

Although Sandback outlines empty space, we have the sensation of staring at something present, as if the yarn outlined transparent volume. When several people are wandering the gallery where his work is displayed, they respond to the nothingness enclosed by yarn as if it were dangerous, as if they were about to collide with plate glass. Or they are challenged to walk through the enclosed space as if it were a doorway, as if they were Alice through the Looking Glass, entering another dimension. The experience can feel uncanny, because we have an immediate sensation that the world as we know it is no longer knowable, it is not what we think it is. It is transformed because we are invited to see with the artist that space is mystery.

Because Fred Sandback worked the way he worked, seeing what he saw, doing what he did with simple acrylic yarn, we see what is not there. His work creates spatial barriers that are non-existent, and we find ourselves called to investigate space on his terms, breaking faith with the assumptions he teases us into making in order to discover how transgressive we want to be. We walk through non-existent barriers to prove to ourselves the boundaries do not exist. We discover that if we start someplace, at a point where he begins, and follow his eye, we will end somewhere, at a point where he has ended, but we do not go anywhere, we are still at his mercy, following a line that leaves us free, but tangled in a fragment of his mind.

A major aspect of his art is that it essentially is interactive, because as we approach it and view it, we see myriad planes and relationships among the strands of yarn forming the outline of rectangles, only because we are moving. A figure-ground game plays out. Nothing is stable. In a sense his sculpture is a reverse mobile, remaining static as we move, but giving us the illusion that something is unfolding, something is being revealed, new relationships emerge. Because we change, therefore the static forms change.

As a poet and psychoanalyst immersed in the potential of verbal communication, I wish I could describe his work in words, which of course is impossible. My faith in the power of language is challenged by the lived presence of the power of his imagination and the challenge his work offers regarding our perception of what we think of actual space, actual presence. "Untitled" (sculptural study, six-part construction, ca 1977) is composed of black acrylic yarn outlining six spaces, standing in relation to one another in a way in which each rectangle mirrors negative space, which changes as the viewer moves around it. And catalog and art book reproductions do not communicate in any satisfying way the experience his sculpture offers. Even with an image to refer to, unless these rectangles are experienced in space and experienced as the viewer moves, the power and magic of the work is not conveyed.

Other than the sheer aesthetic pleasure of discovering his work, of feeling spaces unfold and reveal themselves while mystifying the viewer, what is the emotional significance of

Sandback's work? One possibility is the invitation to consider boundaries, to accept or reject boundaries based on one's own response to the experience. If one viewer "fearfully avoids crashing into a sheet of plate glass" while another "gigglingly steps over a threshold, enters a doorway," the reaction to boundary is in the mind of the viewer. There is neither plate glass nor doorway, only a few strands of colored acrylic yarn.

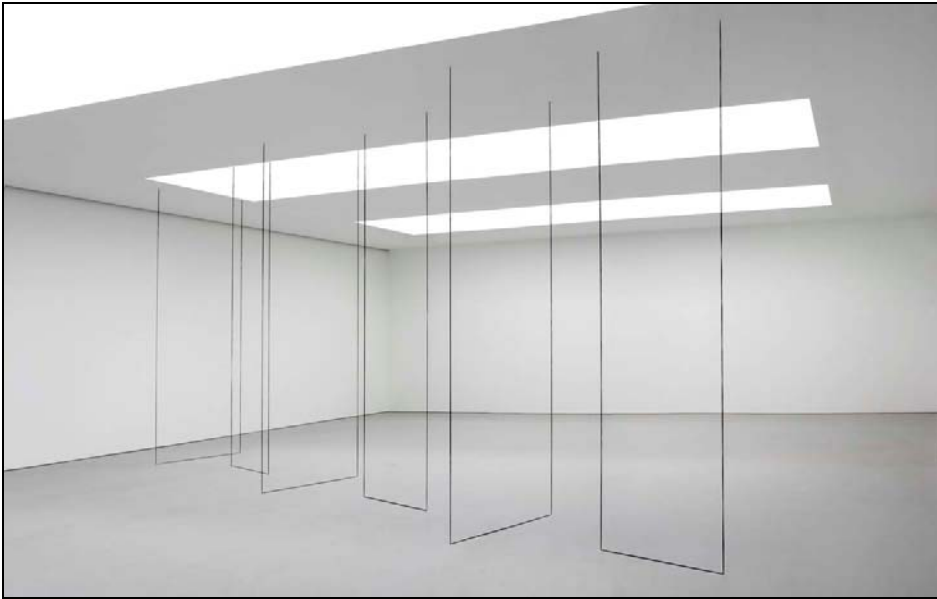
Another possibility is the unsettling aspect of confronting the fact that what seems to be an external object is actually an internal object representation projected onto a nothingness, onto a blank screen that exists only because an outline of essentially nothing has been drawn. The experience of discovering a sheet of plate glass or a doorway is similar to transference manifestations. The possibility of discovering these projections exists only because a container has been offered. Whether the container is a few strands of acrylic yarn or the person of the analyst is merely circumstance. The mental activity is that of a viewer or an analysand.

Yet another possibility is the discovery of shifting relationships. As the viewer moves, entirely new configurations of non-existent objects emerge, configurations of outlined emptiness. We believe we see volume, but we see outline. In a family dynamic, or in a therapy group, or in a government, as each family member, or therapy participant, or politician moves, expresses herself/himself, the relationships shift because one person has moved, has changed. Even a two-person field cannot remain static. If a dynamic has existed for years, and one person undergoes psychic change, the dynamic by definition will change. Sandback's work evokes the experience of relationships shifting because perception shifts.

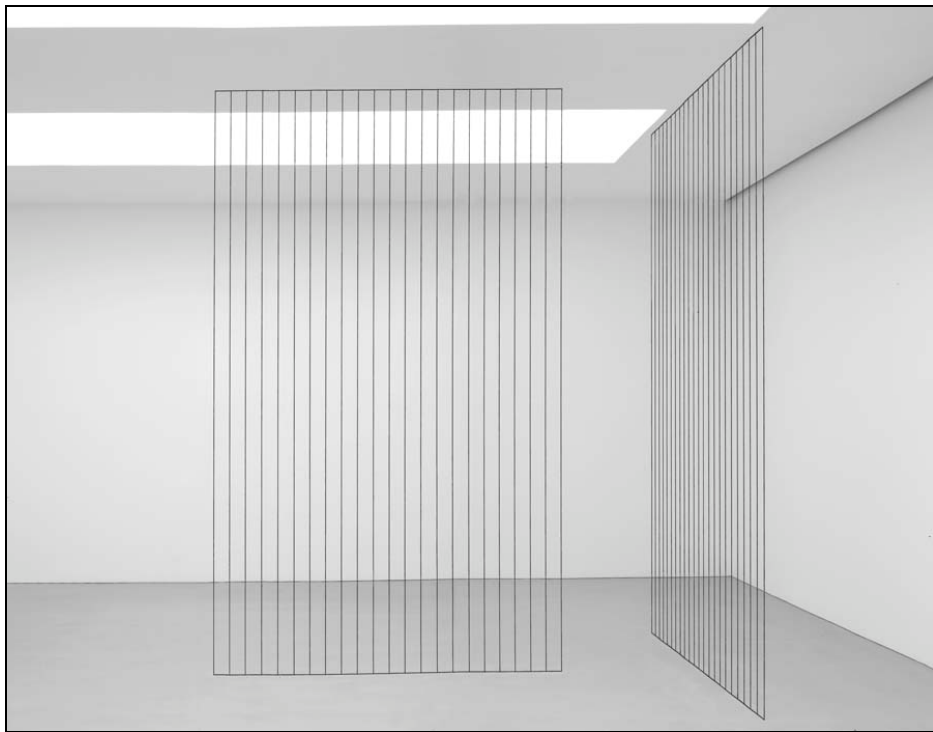
In addition to emotional richness, Sandback's sculptures are ultimately spiritually evocative. In his invitation to us to see the ordinary, to see space limned by five and dime quality yarn, to see what always exists but to see it as both full and empty, he opens us to a spiritual dimension in which neither fullness nor emptiness is "the answer," or "knowable." His work is peaceful, meditative, and full of light. I had a similar experience in the vastness and dimness of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, with work totally different from these sculptures. The Rothko paintings are imposing presences, surrounding the viewer, in a dim, cavernous space. The Sandback sculptures were displayed in the stark, open, light-filled, sinuously unfolding space of the David Zwirner gallery, 525 19th Street, New York City, January 9 – February 14, 2009. This is the second exhibit of Sandback work I have seen at this gallery, and worth seeing the next time his work is shown here.

Merle Molofsky

(Photos on next page)



FRED SANDBACK
Untitled (Sculptural Study, Six-part Construction)
ca. 1977/2008
Black acrylic yarn
Dimensions vary with each installation
Photography by Cathy Carver / Courtesy Zwirner & Wirth, NY



FRED SANDBACK
Untitled (Sculptural Study, Two-part Vertical Construction)
ca. 1986/2008
Black acrylic yarn
Dimensions vary with each installation
Photography by Cathy Carver / Courtesy Zwirner & Wirth, NY