

David Trowbridge



Cirrus 1971

DAVID MICHAEL TROWBRIDGE

RECENT PAINTINGS

OPENING SATURDAY, NOV. 6, 1971 7-10 P.M.

CIRRUS

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NOVEMBER

The Work of David Trowbridge

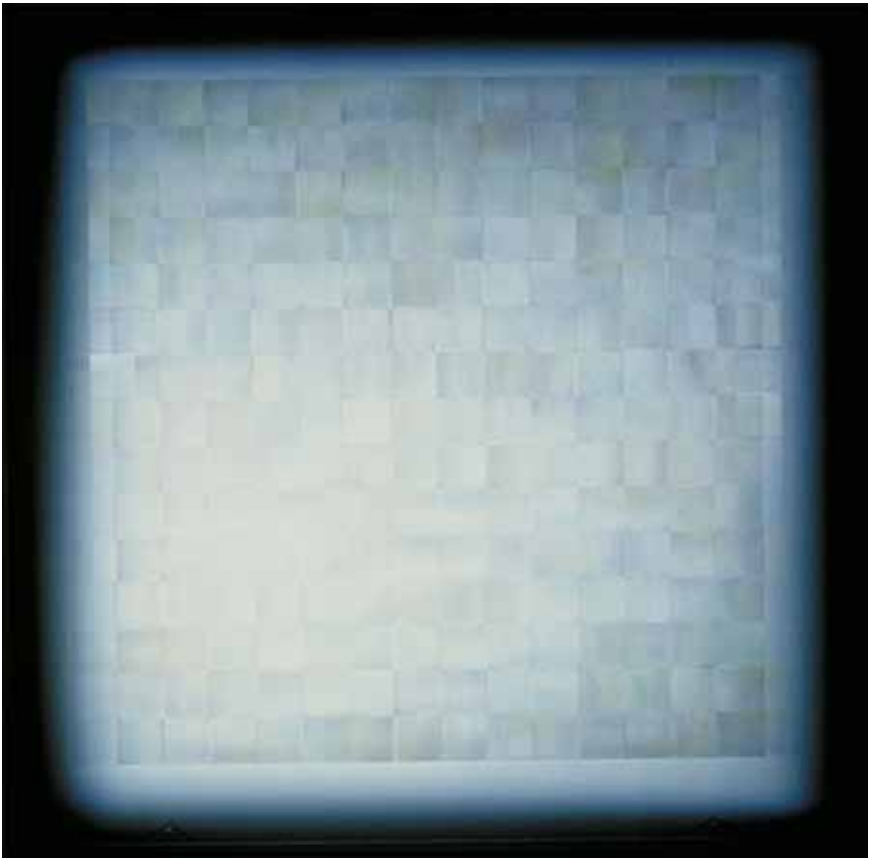
by M. Austin Haight

In the '70s David Trowbridge's work consisted primarily of plexiglass which, after being painted with thin movements of acrylic lacquer, were hung barely an inch away from the wall in order for a stage light to shine through the translucent material and reappear as new light on the wall behind. All that is really left of these works are a collection of transparent slides in the Cirrus Gallery archives. Having passed away in 2009, David Trowbridge left little for the researcher's eye to come across in terms of information or the *raison d'être* of his art practice. Similar to the thin veils of paint on his see through paintings, he did not leave much to be bothered with in conjunction with his work. He is gone, and so much so is the trace of any baggage.

I had to scour the internet, and libraries for information on the whereabouts of his work, of his person. But such is the situation with a lot of Los Angeles artists: the information that should justly be there often is not. So often when concerned with writing a catalog essay much is put on 'Why' the artist does what they do along with the 'How'. How does one account for such a loss of information in a world that today is full of it. David Trowbridge was just not 'full of it'. In a preface Trowbridge wrote for a

show he curated, "Most exhibitions of contemporary art seem to focus on works that are at the center of an artist's expression. Only later are other aspects of an artist's body of work examined. Sometimes these other aspects are quite revealing."

According to James Hayward, "David was old school and wouldn't play such games." The art world was different then, people just wanted to make art, they didn't want to get famous, "they just wanted to find a job teaching art, and to make art with the time and money afforded by such a gig". That is exactly what Trowbridge ended up doing. A majority of the artists he knew he had around him during his time teaching at UC Santa Barbara. The roster included light and space artists John McCracken, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, and abstract painters Stephen Westfall, James Brooks, and of course, James Hayward. These artists were a group who Trowbridge fraternized with and gravitated around, who, in regards to his own work can be seen as almost a mediator between the subtle musing Light and Space artists and the painterly feel of the abstract painters. However, his use of materials, his physical/nonphysical presence of his paintings, his absence of interest in "creating an

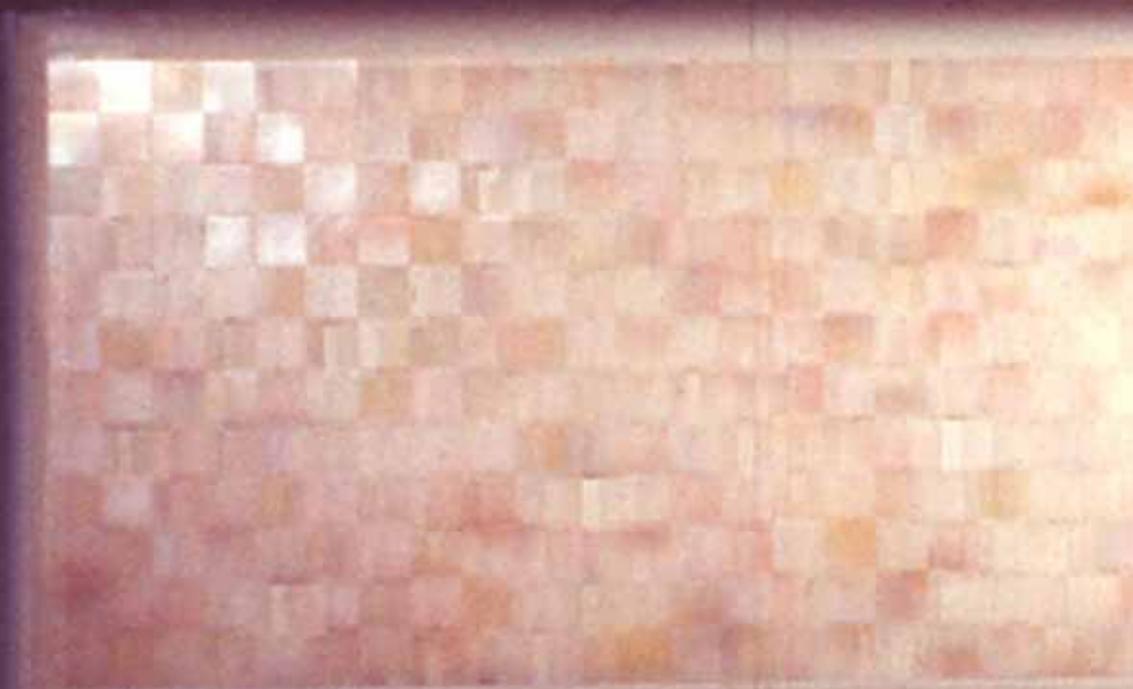


Untitled

Plexiglass, Lacquer Spray Paint, Cast Shadow, Light Reflection, Theatrical Projection 1971

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environment", the disparate combination of plexi, acrylic and light, belie a different configuration compared to the artists above. Trowbridge shows that there are other uses for light in Los Angeles.

Trowbridge may have been friends with Hayward and Westfall but he did not paint like them, and he may have known Turrell but he did not envision light and space the same, perse. Upon first glance at Trowbridge's work, the first thing one notices, in terms of the light projection piece, is that the work is not just hit with a spot light, but instead, the piece itself glows. Above each work projector-like fixtures splay light over each painting perfectly, such that only the edges gleam ever so slightly as all the light is directed through the plexiglass and paint. As mentioned above, the paint, not like the thick embodiment of painterly gesture as

Hayward but ever so quietly airbrushed, is sprayed, such that in spots here and there the colors are allowed to pool in order for colors to mix, and collide, congeal into soft new forms and mingle alongside one another. On the surface these paintings are delicate in and of themselves, relying on a grid-like pattern which from a distance provides the illusion of the plexiglass being not one but many tiles positioned together on the wall. The Gestalt of Hayward's work does not end there. His literal use of both light, above, and the space between light and painted plexiglass, painted plexiglass and wall below signal a definitive imagining of object and ground, which plays interestingly with one's eyes when examining the work more closely. This is a purposeful examination of the physical and non-physical properties of Trowbridge's paintings. Herein, the light which lies on the wall behind the plexiglass builds on the painted surface, which faces the wall not the viewer, such that all the paintings appear glass-smooth on the surface with depth and the shadows of new colors which lie behind. This space between the wall is a container for the light, a non-physical painting, a threshold for the light to pass through and then transmutify. The ground of color on the wall indeed adds another dimension to the paint on the plexiglass and as a synergy between light and space and abstract painting. With all elements in conjunction there is a completeness of the whole and yet an admiration for all the parts, one may focus on the spiel of colors on the wall or in the opalescence on the plexiglass

or become distracted by the motes of dust floating in the gaze of the projected light from above.

One can imagine the effect of being situated in front of one of Trowbridge's "Light-Paintings", as one might call them, with all the lights in the gallery shut off and only the single work lit from above. The palette Trowbridge employs for his work is not inherently dramatic, instead serene and earthy, the encapsulated grid-work of his largest painting in the series (51" x 100", 1971) takes on a grandeur not unlike a mural in its landscaped form but essentially derives all its strength from simply being. Trowbridge did not aim to create heroic work, however, if one has the ability to view these pieces in darkness with one piece lit, the realm of the cinema comes to mind. These works have the possibility to command such a reading as being bolstered to the status of motion picture harmonies. But what is not meant to be read is the support of the paint. Unlike the typical painting which relies on a canvas over stretcher bars, Trowbridge's work does away with the canvas and justifies that a painting should be nothing more than paint under light. Without a canvas holding the paint, the plexiglass works as a way for the viewer to see how the light moves through the paint and how when anything is held up to the light, one can see it in completely new and different ways.

And as it will be evident of Trowbridge's work through the seventies, this grid of control he uses will eventually dissolve so that the color and light that collide are more free to wander. But within this work from his first show, the grid elicits a stillness, a propensity for the viewer to lay their eyes over the grid in a line akin to reading a sign or lines of poetry, raking one's head back and forth as each subtle chromatic innuendo from colored block to colored block is measured and personally decoded. The beauty herein

is that Trowbridge is not hoping to garner specific answers from the viewer, these are not illustrations of ideas on the grand scheme of things or schematics for enlivened themes from an archaic artifact or re-envisioned farce. They can be "read" but the works do not have to be--just seen, only seen. The viewer is left to only do as much "work" as they choose to do and investigations to not have to be more than what is needed in terms of adding or subtracting art historical debate or academic circumstance.



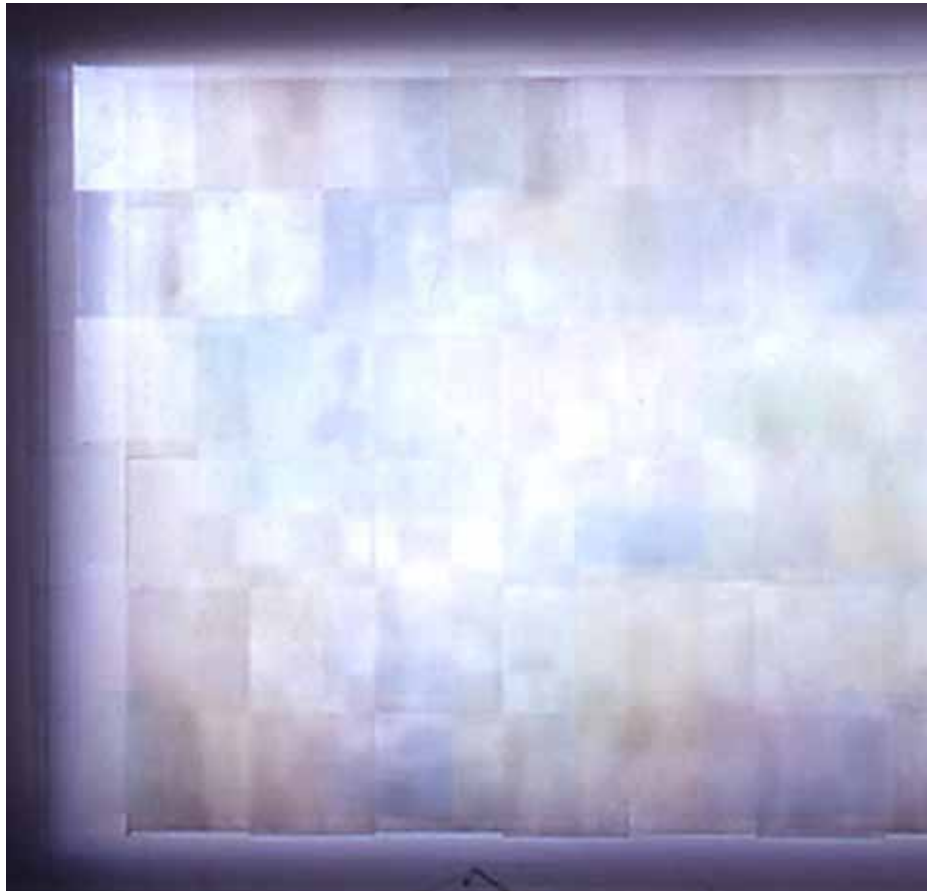
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Countering this literal reading, in regard to the grid pieces, are the group of paintings with titles of Hawaiian trees. Trowbridge's work was provided with a more thorough development during his stay while teaching in Hawaii. Surely the flora and fauna of Hawaii influenced him, as these smaller paintings in the series show a movement similar to those of trees. The movement located within each piece is much more visceral with flows and veins of papery thin paint coursing off the plexiglass. Some are less angular in composition, allowing for differences

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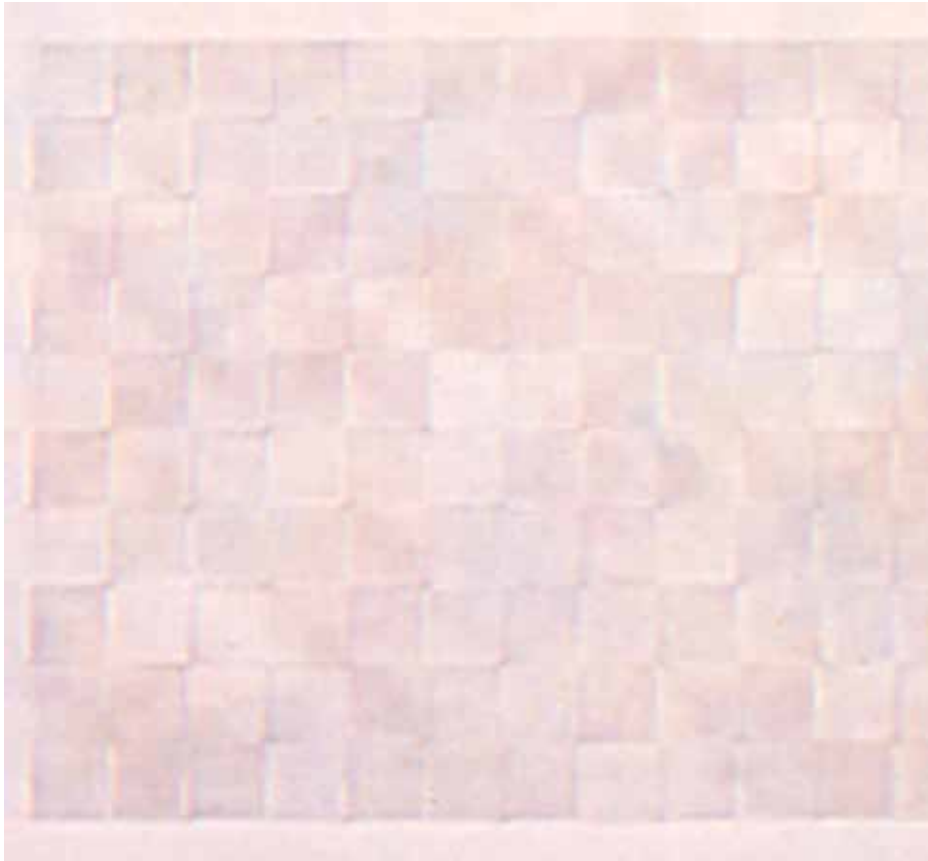
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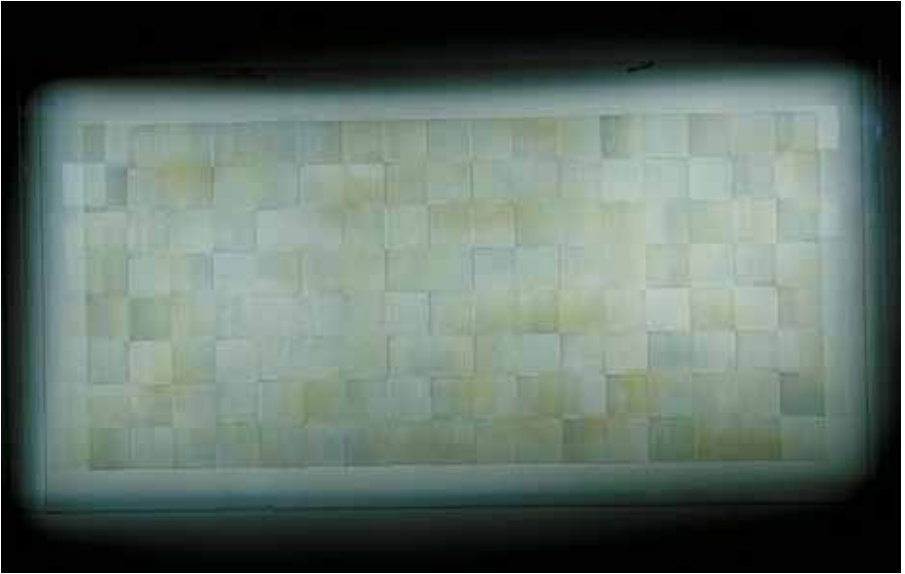


in the sense of speed in movements between separate images. The “strokes” of paint, so to speak, of these pieces can almost be seen as a tip of the hat to Hayward’s energetic movements on his canvases.

As a whole, each painting’s particular moment is not diffused among the rest. There is a resonance which carries on between all of them despite there sometimes being almost an absence of color and only patchworks of light. This resonance is intuitive, evocative of the time Hayward described, when the art world was “far more idealistic and much less theoretical”. The thing about these works that is the least subtle coming from a gentleman described as “oblique and opaque” is that there is no academia when it comes to investigating these works and realizing their own portrayal of lambent beauty and silent aesthetic. Trowbridge’s works are just that, some things to be seen and imagined with rather than mounds and mounds of intellectual baggage which one must be educated enough to sort through in order to devise some semblance of cerebral rapport. That is not to say these works have no thought in mind or intelligence afoot, for much too often it is the information that embellishes the work to the point of being ‘full of it’.

Untitled

Plexiglass, Lacquer Spray Paint,
Cast Shadow, Light Reflection,
Theatrical Projection 1971



DAVID MICHAEL TROWBRIDGE

- 1945 August, Born Hartford, Conn.
1963-5 Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa
1965-67 B.F.A., Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa
1967-69 M.A., Fresno State College, Fresno, Calif.
Lives in Santa Monica

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1967 Northern California Arts Exhibition, Sacramento
Cal State "Small Images", Los Angeles
1968 San Joaquin Annual, Fresno, California
National Print and Drawing Show, Dekalb, Ill.
1969 San Joaquin Annual, Fresno
New Faculty Show, Fresno State College
1970 San Joaquin Invitational, Fresno
Sculpture for the Campus, Fresno State College

ONE-MAN SHOWS

- 1969 Fresno Arts Center
1970 Orlando Gallery, Encino, Calif.
1971 Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles



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