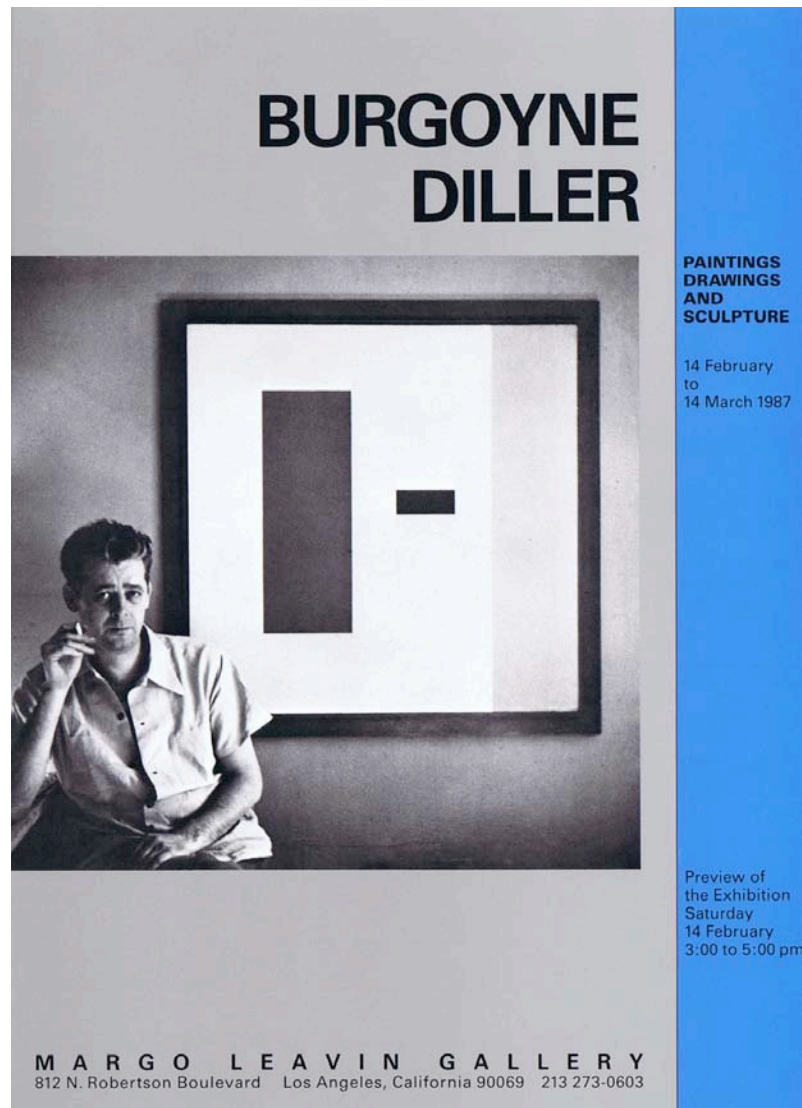


MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

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Larsen, Susan C. *Burgoyne Diller* (exhibition brochure). Los Angeles: Margo Leavin Gallery, 1987.



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The art of Burgoyne Diller stands as a singular achievement in American painting and sculpture of the twentieth century. Born in 1906 in New York, the handsome and athletic Diller went to Michigan State University on a track scholarship and found the collection of the nearby Art Institute of Chicago an inspiring introduction to early European modernism. By 1929, he had returned to New York City and enrolled at the Art Students League where his inquiring mind and unique sense of form led him to the work of the Russian Suprematist Malevich and to that of Mondrian and the De Stijl group of Holland. Diller grasped the importance and beauty of the work of Malevich and Mondrian while most of his own generation of younger Americans were enmeshed in the intricacies of Synthetic Cubism. By the early years of the 1930's, Diller had achieved his own vision in canvases and constructions. Their rectilinear formats embraced taut, geometric planes of unbroken color, giving this work a clarity and directness unmatched in American art until the advent of Minimalism twenty years later.

Diller was an articulate, brilliant and personable young man who found himself in the role of spokesman for a struggling generation of American modernists in the 1930's. During the hopeless period from 1929 to 1934, Diller met and encouraged his fellow students and teachers at the Art Students League and he became friendly with Hans Hofmann, Harry Holtzman, Carl Holty, Albert Swinden, and Vaclav Vytlacil among many others.

In 1935, Burgoyne Diller was appointed Director of the Mural Division of the Federal Art Project in

New York City, a position he earned by virtue of his natural grace as a person, his leadership and the strength of his own work as an artist. Diller won the admiration of his generation when he successfully supported the cause of young modernists in the bureaucratic and conservative atmosphere of the Federal Art Project. During his tenure as director, Diller commissioned and defended works by Ilya Bolotowsky, James Brooks, Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Albert Swinden and many others. Diller was able to maintain his own career as an artist during this public and stressful period in his life and he produced some of his most innovative and beautiful works in the late 1930's.

Diller entered a more private period of intense work after 1945, moving to a studio in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. There he developed a firmly integrated group of canvases, constructions and sculptures according to three major structural themes. The critic Philip Larson discovered these definitions in Diller's journals: *First Theme*: compositions formed by the 'free element' (rectangle without a grid); *Second Theme*: works based upon an 'element generated by a continuous line' (rectangles in a grid); and *Third Theme*: paintings built from an 'element submerged in activity' (more rectangles in a complex grid).

Diller's work of the period 1955-65 is marked by great confidence and the taking of risks in developing a deep emotional resonance in his work. His painting increases in scale and he introduces large planes of black, red, and yellow. His sculpture becomes virtually hieratic in its presence and balance of strong forms held in absolute and fixed tension. Unlike many of the younger Minimalist artists who began with symmetrical compositions and eliminated the rhythms and tensions of asymmetry in their earliest work, Diller spent a lifetime engaged in the purposeful play of opposing tensions, weights and interwoven planes. His thoughtful, often startlingly complete and powerful drawings reveal how Diller balanced the activity of his mind with that of his superbly tuned vision. Diller was the prophet and the precursor of an entire realm of art which came into critical focus just as his own life and career abruptly ended. His place in history has been restored in recent years but it is the evidence and experience of his art which has sustained his presence as an important American artist and always will.

Susan C. Larsen, Ph.D.