

# The Brooklyn Rail

Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture  
July/August 2006

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ArtSeen

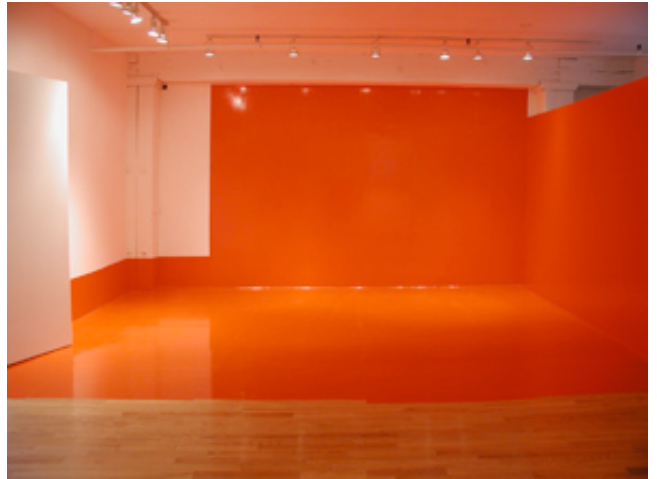
## Reto Boller

by Jennifer Riley

James Nicholson Gallery  
May 11-June 24, 2006

When David Smith's burnished steel surfaces absorbed the colors and light of their surroundings they proposed an entirely new way of engaging with sculptural space. The colors of the landscape or the interior locations where these works are sited became nuanced reflections linking the objects to their environments. Zurich-based artist Reto Boller, born one year after Smith's fatal car accident in 1965, seems to extend Smith's achievement by inverting it.

Boller creates both on-site installations and smaller format works in various media. Whether in a gallery or the landscape, he chooses materials that reflect rather than absorb the light and colors of their context. For example, in a large outdoor public installation, the artist covered a flat roof with a thick blanket of dark blue porcelain shards, upon which deflected sunlight twinkled like stars. In his New York debut at the James Nicholson Gallery, this inversion is first perceived from the hallway leading to the gallery, which is set aglow by an installation of glossy, hot-rod red adhesive applied directly to the floor and walls, covering a considerable amount of the gallery space. This three-dimensional painting declares its boundaries in crisp straight edges against the wooden floor and flat, bright, white walls while simultaneously enveloping the viewer in its ambient, reflected color. Boller's sensitivity to architectural structure allows him to draw and define the space with an expanse of color so that the whole interior becomes the pictorial ground, including the other works of art.



Reto Boller, "Untitled" (2006). Courtesy of James Nicholson Gallery.

Like Smith, who had to confront surrealism and abstract expressionism, Boller has had his own set of conceptual and formal challenges to digest. Although nearly one hundred years have passed since the birth of Dada in Zurich and much has changed in terms of the initial purpose of the movement (which was founded to diminish social pretensions, ridicule the human situation, and force audience self-awareness by attacking their common assumptions about art), there are contemporary artists, like Boller, who employ similar forms, gestures and attitudes towards materials which like a steady heart seem to keep the beat of the movement alive. There is also the recurring aesthetic attitude of Minimalism, in which the process of reduction—the removal of personal elements, external references, symbolism, illusion, and allegory—leaves only the object

itself. Finally, there is site-specific installation, which grew out of Conceptualism as well as Minimalism.

Boller's use of 'non-art' materials like aluminum panels (a common material used in building skyscrapers), his elevation of the valueless (vinyl adhesive), the frequent absence of gestural inflection in his application of paint, the emphasis on surface, and his decidedly casual installation methods with sheetrock screws, places him in the position of being both recipient and extender of the traditions and discoveries of those previous generations. The major difference, however, is that Boller is not simply sampling and recombining. Instead, he is carefully creating situations that acknowledge and challenge issues of form, color and perception; residing in the zone between painting and object, Boller's project reflects his fascination with the conceptually-driven work of the artist Blinky Palermo (1943–1977), though Boller succeeds in using an organic formal vocabulary rather than Palermo's more austere constructivist language to conduct his visual experiments. He also credits the work of Dieter Roth (1934–1998) as an influence that allowed roughness and incompleteness as well as the improvised and the ephemeral to surface in his work.

The sources of Boller's individual images may come from the world we live in, yet because of the way in which he manipulates his materials to arrive at a certain form, our recognition of those images tend to reside just beyond the edge of the mind, like a word trapped on the tip of our tongue sliding into memory or dream and back again.

At Nicholson, Boller pairs his site-specific installations with a selection of drawings and monochromatic poured lacquer panels. These works often have three-dimensional elements that literally push into the viewer's space. The six works on view are extremely varied in scale and approach, yet a subtle and poetic dialogue slowly unfolds among them. They tend to share materials, colors or forms, while formal issues, such as recession and projection, tend to flip-flop from one piece to another. For instance, one large brown vertical panel has a center that protrudes not unlike an oversized dimpled potato on a flexible plastic support, while across the room a large black panel with an uneven silvery circle initially appears to thrust forward yet succeeds in remaining flat. The red adhesive installation, which initially courts spatial recession, grows solid and inert in contrast to the expanse of the matte white wall, which expands phenomenally due to a lack of inflection or surface movement.

Like the surface reflections that poetically connect David Smith's sculptures with their surroundings, Boller's varied works seem to be linked together by a thoughtful consciousness at play, proposing painting situations to engage the intellect and especially the imagination.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**