



Mosaic Relief III

John Ernest

Not on display

Title/Description: Mosaic Relief III

Artist/Maker: John Ernest

Born: 1964

Object Type: Relief

Materials: Aluminium, Formica, Perspex, Wood

Accession Number: 31547

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

Mosaic Relief III is one of at least seven reliefs in a series that John Ernest began in 1960, using the square and the right-angle isosceles triangle as basic units. [1] The relief is based on a rigid grid system which limits the possibilities that can be achieved using these units. Within these self-imposed restrictions, Ernest introduces variations of colour, shape, relief and surface to create a dynamic arrangement that deliberately unsettles the viewer's perception of the work.

Ernest was committed to exploring the potential of non-figurative art and was part of an informal network of artists associated with British Constructivism. He was fascinated by parallels between the rules of geometry and the new ways that artists were engaging with abstract spatial relationships. Writing in 1961 about his interest in mathematical concepts and systems, he described 'trying to achieve some of the beauty of a formal mathematical system in a visual experience'. [2]

The Mosaic Relief series was closely related to this process, as Ernest described in a letter to the Tate Gallery in 1967:

'The mosaic relief form grew directly out of my interest in devising visual analogies for abstract or conceptual structures - usually mathematical. In 1959 I discovered a method for portraying "Group" tables on which I based a number of maquettes. In these the visual structure corresponded precisely with particular mathematical structures. Later I rejected these objects (which were lost or destroyed) because of views I held at the time as to the relations between art works and models. Nevertheless Mosaic 1 grew directly from secondary attributes of these analogues. The two principle ideas involved in No1, as well as the others in the series are:

1: The limitations of choice imposed by the restriction to a fixed number of possibilities within a grid system.

2: The evocation of a hierarchy of appearances within such a severely restrictive system. The visual elements are grouped or clustered to allow for the formation of alternative assemblages. Qualities such as colour, shape, relief, surface quality, etc., accumulate variously to make different wholes. Ideally the visual structures are unpeeled one from another by shifts in the focus on the spectator's attention.' [3]

Mosaic Relief III was part of Ernest's solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1964. Michael Morris purchased *Mosaic Relief III* in 1967. [4]

[1] Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.195-204. *Mosaic Relief III* is illustrated on p.203, along with other reliefs from the Mosaic Relief series.

[2] John Ernest, 'Some Thoughts on Mathematics', *Structure*, Third Series, No.2, 1961, pp.48-53, p.49.

[3] Letter from John Ernest, 20 March 1967, published in *The Tate Gallery Report* (London: Tate Gallery, 1967), p.25-6. Tate acquired *Mosaic Relief No.4* in 1966, see [‘Mosaic Relief No. 4’, John Ernest, 1966 | Tate](#)

[4] John Ernest *Constructions 1955-64*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1 July – 1 August 1964, Cat. No. 14. See 31573 and 31547 in the Sainsbury Centre collection for the two additional reliefs that Morris purchased from this exhibition.

Exhibitions

John Ernest *Constructions 1955-64*, ICA, London, 1964

John Ernest, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1964

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

'Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction from Constructivism to Op Art', Museum Barberini, Potsdam, 15/2/2025 - 18/5/2025

Further Reading

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.195-204.

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), pp.14-15, p.28.

Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.

