



Relief: Triangular Motif II

John Ernest

Not on display

Title/Description: Relief: Triangular Motif II

Artist/Maker: John Ernest

Born: 1959

Object Type: Relief

Materials: Aluminium, Formica, Hardboard, Wood

Accession Number: 31573

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

The dynamic relationship between three linked triangles dominates this shallow relief. They have been marked out in wood, aluminium and hardboard to form a vertical strip, set against two panels of white formica. The materials have been carefully layered to create a series of planes, which come in and out of view as the spectator moves around the relief.

John Ernest was committed to exploring the potential of non-figurative art. He began making abstract constructions in London in 1954, and went on to focus on meticulously constructed geometric reliefs. [1] The tension between viewing the individual parts of the relief and experiencing the work as a whole was crucial for Ernest:

'I want to bring about a struggle in the mind of the spectator between the separateness of the parts and the unity into which they are meant to fuse.' [2]

The isosceles triangle was an important motif for Ernest and reoccurs in his reliefs. The repetition of triangles used in this and other works was informed by Ernest's interest in the complex dynamics of symmetry. He was fascinated by parallels between the rules of geometry and the new ways that artists were engaging with abstract spatial relationships. Ernest clarified that this was not about directly translating mathematical concepts and systems into artworks. He was interested in how mathematics could further an artist's discovery of new conceptual frameworks:

'True symmetry, the discipline which precisely determines a structure of spatial relations, has no place in the arts. Though it may provide an artist with a rigorous background against which he may fashion his work, he cannot use it in its pure state. But the artist who explores symmetry, may find in the formal rhythms and hyper-rhythms of space, a rich material for the tense and vital structures which he is concerned to build.' [3]

Ernest was part of an informal network of artists associated with British Constructivism, which included Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, Anthony Hill, and Stephen Gilbert. He exhibited *Relief: Triangular Motif II* in a series of touring exhibitions that distinguished this group in the early 1960s. [4] In 1964 *Relief: Triangular Motif II* was part of Ernest's solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Michael Morris purchased *Relief: Triangular Motif II* from Ernest in 1964. [5]

Lisa Newby, June 2021

[1] Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.195-204. *Relief: Triangular Motif II* is illustrated on p.202.

[2] John Ernest, 'Statement', Gazette No.1, London, 1961, p.3. Copy available in the Sainsbury Centre archive.

[3] John Ernest, 'Symmetry', Structure, Third Series, No.1, 1960, pp.9-16, p.16.

[4] British Constructivist Art, ICA/American Federation of Arts touring exhibition, USA and Canada,

1961-2, Cat. No. 30; Construction England, Arts Council touring exhibition, UK, 1963, Cat. No. 10.

[5] John Ernest Constructions 1955-64, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1 July – 1 August 1964, Cat. No. 6. See 31543 and 31547 in the Sainsbury Centre Collection for the two additional reliefs that Morris purchased from this exhibition.

Exhibitions

British Constructivist Art, ICA/American Confederation of Arts touring exhibition, USA and Canada, 1961-2

Construction England, Arts Council touring exhibition, UK, 1963

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, ill. p.202.

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.
