

ARTFORUM

Brian O'Doherty

SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

131 Bowery, 2nd Floor

January 8–February 12

"The grid glides, stammers, and blurts with different lengths and colours," Brian O'Doherty wrote regarding his use of Ogham, an ancient Irish linear alphabet, in his paintings and sculptures from between 1968 and 1979. In groupings of perpendicular lines, Ogham vowels mark O'Doherty's quizzical, skinny wall sculptures from this period, tethering abstraction to both language and the body. These wooden constructions adapt Mondrian's modernist lexicon: Primary colors and black decorate their sides. Mirrored aluminum forms a V-shaped depression in each of their centers, with the Ogham marks etched into the material. This sets up a contradictory optics. One stretches and strains, past language, to see a reflection, with abstraction relegated to the peripherals. This is recognizably Duchampian: Rigid adherence to an obscure code produces mystery and humor.

This exhibition spotlights a little-known phase in the hybrid career of this artist, critic, novelist, and former director at the NEA of myriad alter egos. Cocurated by Prem Krishnamurthy and Simone Subal, the revelation here is O'Doherty's proximity to, and deviations from, Sol LeWitt's artist-free drawings of the same period. Consider the two paintings, both *Untitled*, 1975, based on O'Doherty's "Hair Collages," 1975, in which the artist would contrast the form of hairs from his head with straight lines of precisely the same length. The body is quantified, then rendered in line, for systematically impure abstraction. In 1976, O'Doherty would famously critique the "white cube." These forgotten experiments exhilarate as provocations constrained by that very context.



Brian O'Doherty, *Untitled*, 1975, watercolor stick on canvas, 66 x 66".

— Daniel Quiles

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Critics' Pick
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