

## Brian O'Doherty

SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

Nearly twenty years after Barnett Newman's second exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery—the now-canonical show at which he presented *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–51; *The Wild*, 1950; and *Here I*, 1950,



View of "Brian O'Doherty," 2017. From left: *Meribah*, 1970; *Minus Yellow*, 1970; *Places*, 1969. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle.

to widespread critical disdain—and only a few months after his death, the Irish artist Brian O'Doherty debuted a series of sculptures in the same space. Six feet tall and under three inches wide and thick, these works were each made from two strips of polished aluminum that had been joined together at angles to form a V- or W-shaped groove and then "framed" by strips of painted wood. On the reflective surfaces, O'Doherty had scored a series of lines that somewhat cryptically spelled out words in ogham, an ancient Irish alphabet consisting of lines that ran above, below, or through a centerline. Ogham provided O'Doherty with an elegant way to combine his interest in minimal forms and language—to give a voice to pattern. It is a system that the artist has used since the late 1960s in drawings, sculptures, and, more recently, paintings.

"Speaking in Lines," an exhibition mounted at Simone Subal Gallery in collaboration with the New York gallery P!, presented four of these mirrored sculptures, two of which appeared in the early Parsons show. For *Meribah*, 1970, named for the biblical site where Moses created water by striking a rock, O'Doherty brushed the wood edges with a bright sea blue and etched the word MERIBAH in ogham in the aluminum twice: It appears running from top to bottom on the left-hand band and from bottom to top on the right-hand side, so that transliteration is possible no matter which side is hung facing upward. Yet O'Doherty also rendered the writing incomprehensible: Not only does the polished aluminum reflect the viewer and the surrounding gallery space, it also doubles the already doubled series of lines. Since the letters of ogham are asymmetrical—and since it matters which way off the centerline they rise or fall—this doubling makes the characters virtually illegible.

In their proportions and adamant verticality, O'Doherty's ogham sculptures clearly hail Newman's own "skinny paintings," such as *The Wild* and *Untitled 4*, 1950; Saul Ostrow has noted that the titles of several works in the 1970 exhibition, most obviously *Here* and *One*, suggest a link between the two. In fact, a schematic drawing of his planned installation, reprinted in the brochure for the current exhibition, indicates that O'Doherty's *Here* and *One* were situated close to where Newman had placed his own sculpture, *Here I*. In Ostrow's view, O'Doherty's reference to the Abstract Expressionist was meant to critique or even mock the older artist, and there is little doubt that O'Doherty's emphasis on line and the material properties of perception and language were poised against Newman's metaphysical approach. But the thrill of small, tightly focused exhibitions like "Speaking in Lines" is that they can open up such readings to nuance. Here, four ogham sculptures confronted two lesser-known paintings from 1975, each based on the works in O'Doherty's "Hair Collages," 1974–75, series. The small collages, which were not on view, are corporeal versions of Marcel Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913–14; O'Doherty

plucked a hair from his head, dropped it on paper, and then drew a line of the same length intersecting it. In the ensuing paintings, O'Doherty (at the time showing under his *nom de guerre* Patrick Ireland) perversely enlarged the scale to a five-and-a-half square feet. The curved line of the hair is only relatively related to the watercolor line on canvas; the all-critical indexicality is gone and in its place is a mark that stretches the length of one's arm span. Most importantly, O'Doherty seems to be genuinely invested in the question of scale that had been so critical to Newman. The paintings make a case for returning to his work (and doing so outside what O'Doherty has called his albatross of the white cube) and looking again, ever more closely, to see what else his practice has yet to reveal.

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