

Irwin Rubin: '60s Polychrome

Curated by Carmelle Safdie with
an essay by Robert Wiesenberger

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Flatiron Project Space

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irwinrubin.com

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Irwin Rubin (1930–2006) was a Brooklyn-born artist, educator, and collector. He studied at Cooper Union and Yale University, and taught at the Cooper Union Schools of Art and Architecture from 1967 to 2001. He was represented by Bertha Schaefer Gallery and Stable Gallery in New York City in the 1960s. Today, Rubin's work is held in the permanent collections of Yale University Art Gallery, Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, RISD Museum, Sheldon Museum of Art, Green-Wood Historic Fund, and the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. His sketchbooks and papers are collected in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, DC.

Carmelle Safdie is an artist, director of the Irwin Rubin Archive, and Visual & Critical Studies and Art History faculty member at SVA. She studied Color with Irwin Rubin in his final year of teaching at the Cooper Union School of Art.

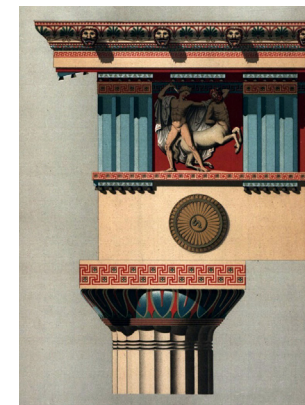
Robert Wiesenberger is Curator of Contemporary Projects at the Clark Art Institute and Lecturer in the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, both in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Ben DuVall is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn, NY.

Lenders to the exhibition

The Estate of Irwin Rubin, Brooklyn, NY
Carmelle Safdie, New York, NY
The Estate of Anne Brody, New York, NY
Jeanne Kramer-Smyth, Silver Spring, MD
The Green-Wood Historic Fund Collections, Brooklyn, NY

CARMELLE SAFDIE



RECONSTRUCTION OF COLOR SCHEME OF
THE ENTABLATURE ON A DORIC TEMPLE,
KUNST-HISTORISCHE BILDERBOGEN, (VERLAG
E. A. SEEMANN, LEIPZIG, 1883), VIA
WIKIPEDIA, 2024



IRWIN RUBIN, *CONSTRUCTION #5*, 1960,
PAINTED WOOD, 13.5 x 8 in., COLLECTION
OF THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY,
NEW HAVEN, CT

POSITIVE HALLUCINATIONS

Irwin Rubin embraced superficiality. Not Warhol's silver screen, or Stella's *what you see is what you see*, the ethos of the New York art scene that he was and wasn't a part of in the 1960s, but a commitment to adornment, surface, and embellishment. Rubin worked with polychromy, painting assembled woodwork in low relief, in a variety of bright colors. He made these sculptural compositions—almost all of which insist, like paintings, on claiming the wall—at the onset of a creative career that went on to encompass teaching and collecting, in a lifelong pursuit of color and craft.

As I write this essay, the primary illustration for the Wikipedia entry on Polychrome—referring to architectural elements and sculpture decorated in multiple colors—is an 1883 reconstruction of the color scheme on a Doric temple. The image bears an uncanny resemblance to *Construction #5* (1960), one of Rubin's first works in the medium. Now in storage in the Richard Brown Baker Collection at Yale, this arcade of miniature columns, casting internal shadows on a shallow painted space, establishes thematic and formal coincidences, echoing the diagrammatic space of this 19th century rendering of ancient architecture, resurfaced on the internet today, like a *mise en abyme* transporting us backward and forward through time.

In my Vision & Color class here at the School of Visual Arts, we talk about the myth of whiteness in ancient sculpture, how our misunderstanding of this work as monochromatic influenced aesthetic ideals in Neoclassical and Modern art. We discuss David Bachelor's *Chromophobia*, on fear of color in Western culture, and why we might dismiss ecstatically colorful artworks as garish or childish. Bachelor introduces the idea of *negative hallucination*: our ability to suppress color vision when, in the words of Josef Albers, it's *actually* and *factually* there. After viewing reconstructions of classical sculptures in the 2022 *Chroma* exhibit at the Met, we survey historic objects in the Greek and Roman wing of the museum, finding evidence of these "lost" pigments in plain sight. And we wonder why we needed experts and their 3D printed models to show us that the color is still evidently here. Can we imagine a museum outside the linear trappings of geography and history, and categories like painting and sculpture, where Rubin's work is not the colorful cousin of constructed monochromes by contemporaries like Louise Nevelson and Norman Ives, but their ancient predecessor, excavated in pristine condition from the ashes of Pompeii?

Irwin Rubin: '60s Polychrome brings together these painted wood constructions, along with a group of collages, all made from 1960 to 1966, and marks the first public exhibition of the artist's work since that decade. Rubin's



IRWIN RUBIN, CHRISTMAS CARD, (gift from the artist to Bertha Schaefer), 1961, mixed media, 3.5 x 3.5 in., collection of the Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln ne



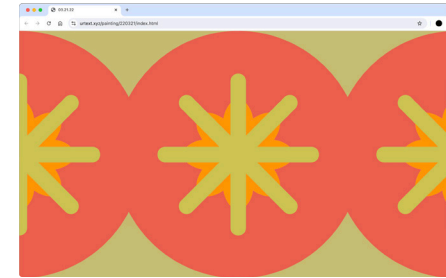
IRWIN RUBIN, Untitled collage, (gift from the artist to Milton Kramer), 1961, mixed media, 5 x 3 in., collection of Jeanne Kramer-Smyth, Silver Spring, MD

collages, made with paper, fabric, and pressed leaves, evolved out of his MFA studies with Albers at Yale. In the '60s, Rubin framed these intimate works within handmade wooden boxes as gifts for gallerists, collectors, and friends—a handful lent back by their heirs, and the Green-Wood Historic Fund who collect artworks by artists interred in their cemetery, for this exhibition. An unfamiliar flora of blossoming circles, a semi-circle, and a diamond crops up across compositions from 1961. Atop purple and paisley horizons, these groovy buds are reminiscent of Pucci scarves, or Peter Max's "Be In" poster, soon to epitomize the Summer of Love. Vibrating geometric flower motifs, like the hot pink and green in *Collage #6* (1966), resemble bolts of Marimekko poppies but at the scale of a Persian miniature, insisting on a distanced relationship to the good-trip fashion and print culture of the era—appropriate to a non-participant who spent his Saturdays studying Islamic Art with H. Khan Monif uptown.

This exhibition is arranged much like Rubin's approach to his wooden constructions, with a focus on color and form but a resistance to working into systems. Grouped together on one wall are three examples from an ongoing exploration of reflected color and movement. Here Rubin works with hand-cut blocks, cropped pegs, and halved and quartered rods on gridded axes. These compositions, appearing near-white from frontal view but revealing a simultaneous pop of toylike primaries as we move around them, are in dialog with lenticular, kinetic, and "chromoplastic atmosphere" art that Yaacov Agam, Carlos Cruz-Diez, and Luis Tomasello exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art's *The Responsive Eye* in 1965. Instead, Rubin's *Construction #21* (1961) spent the early '60s touring the United States in *Wit and Whimsey in Twentieth Century Art*. The title of this lesser-known exhibition, organized by the American Federation of the Arts, disregards familiar art-historical labels, capturing the uncompromising spirit of joy and play in Rubin's work.

While Rubin's perceptual abstractions were never formally acknowledged as Op art, others were recognized in group shows that link him to proto-Pop and Neo Dada. *Construction #4*, as well as *Construction #10 (Façade)*, which is not exhibited here, were included in the *New Forms—New Media* exhibitions at Martha Jackson Gallery in 1960. These works employ the same wooden modules as those mentioned above, but are arranged in tiered compositions, like a hobbyist modeling industrial mechanisms and Classical architecture with the nuanced harmonies of secondary hues. In *Construction #31*, and the horizontal *Untitled Construction*, framed behind glass, both 1964, Rubin's shapes spring up on dowel-stems, in the overt figuration of smiling lollipop gardens.

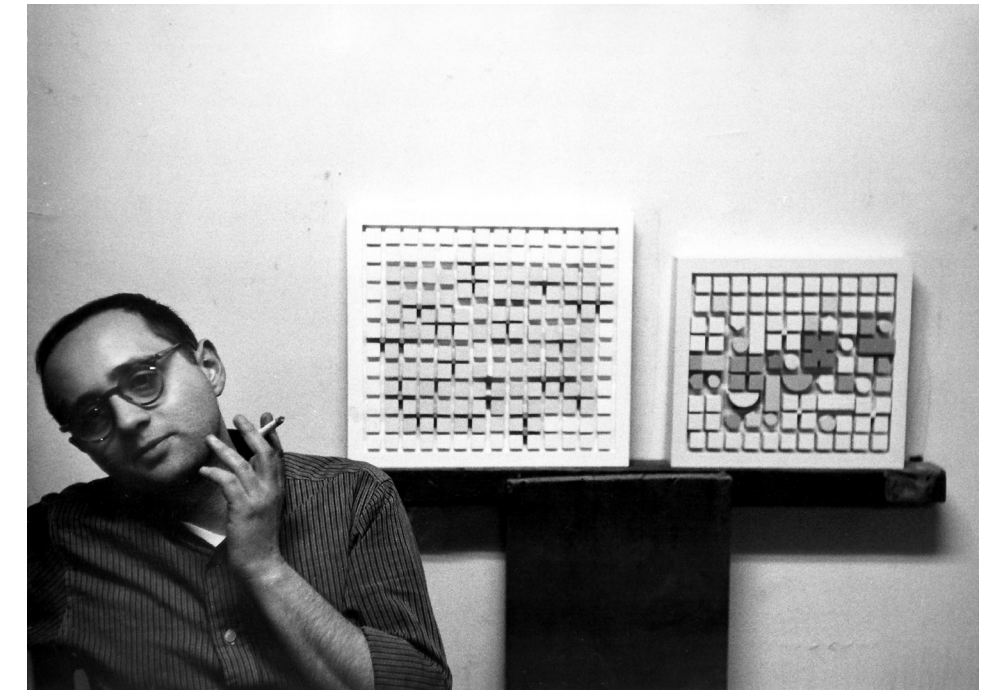
Yet some of the same pieces that plant Rubin in the art movements of the '60s also transport us to past and future archaeologies. In *Construction #21* (1961), variations on familiar punctuation marks and mathematical symbols are scrambled into alien hieroglyphs. And in a larger *Untitled Construction* from 1965, a grid of blocks dissolves centrifugally into a silent, static Pacman maze. Like in an early Telstar video game, we're trapped within the shallow, topographical space of the frame, bouncing in the canals between Rubin's proto-pixelated shapes. The rods and circuitous pegs in *Construction #4* (1960) are like the knob and dial hardware of the yet to be invented and soon to be extinct gaming consoles that simulate this vertical and horizontal movement. In his last two and



Ben duvall, HTML/CSS painting - 03.21.22 (urtext.xyz/painting/220321), 2022
HTML and CSS files viewed on internet BROWSER
dimensions VARIABLE

most ambitious constructions from 1966—both untitled but dubbed "large red" and "big blue" in his record book—Rubin works with radially symmetrical forms derived from nature that appear across Byzantine and Medieval ornamentation, stacking cruciform, quatrefoil and flower shapes into telescopic projections, kaleidoscopic architecture.

Drawing a connection between Rubin's hand-built structures and our contemporary digital space is Ben DuVall's *HTML/CSS Painting (after Rubin)* (2024), created especially for this exhibition. DuVall, who has been coding a series of virtual paintings since 2022, manipulates the readymade geometries and color systems that are the building blocks of websites to create durational compositions animating in near-infinite sequences. Here his limited shape vocabulary of squares and rounded rectangles flattens Rubin's cubic and cylindrical modularity into slow-moving graphics on the large monitor facing West 21st Street. Framed between the architectural ornamentation of the Beaux Arts building and an exterior view of the exhibition within the gallery, the web-based piece runs 24 hours a day for the duration of the show, inviting us to engage with Rubin's work through projections of color and light.



IRWIN RUBIN WITH TWO OF HIS PAINTED WOOD CONSTRUCTIONS, c. 1962