

Rubini:

irwin

'60s

Polychrome

Irwin Rubin: '60s Polychrome

Curated by Carmelle Safdie with
an essay by Robert Wiesenberger

Exhibition and Catalog Design: Darling Green

Typefaces: Mais by Kurt Woerpel, Julien by Peter Biřak,
and Aperçu by Colophon

Printer: Cannelli Printing, West Haven, CT

Photography: All works photographed by Chris Austin
Photography, 2019, except for *Untitled Construction* (1964)
by Andrew Schwartz, Art Photo Biz, 2024

Special thanks to the Rubin Family, Jeanne Kramer-Smyth,
and Stacy Locke at Green-Wood, to Tom Huhn, Peter
Hristoff, Paloma Crousillat, and Mike Falk at SVA, and
to Jeremy Johnston, Ben DuVall, Robert Wiesenberger,
Jeremy Cooper, and Spencer Everett.

Flatiron Project Space

133 West 21 Street, New York, NY 10011
Presented by BFA Visual & Critical Studies,
School of Visual Arts



vcs.sva.edu



irwinrubin.com

october 1–
october 24, 2024
sva flatiron project space
133 w 21 st. nyc

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**

**positive
HALLUCINATIONS**



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

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



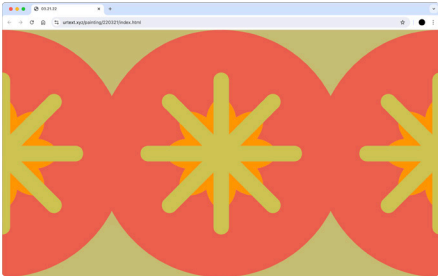
irwin RUBIN, untitled collage, (gift from the artist to MILTON KRAMER), 1961, mixed media, 5 x 3 in., collection of JEANNE KRAMER-SMYTH, silver spring, md

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 lollypop gardens.

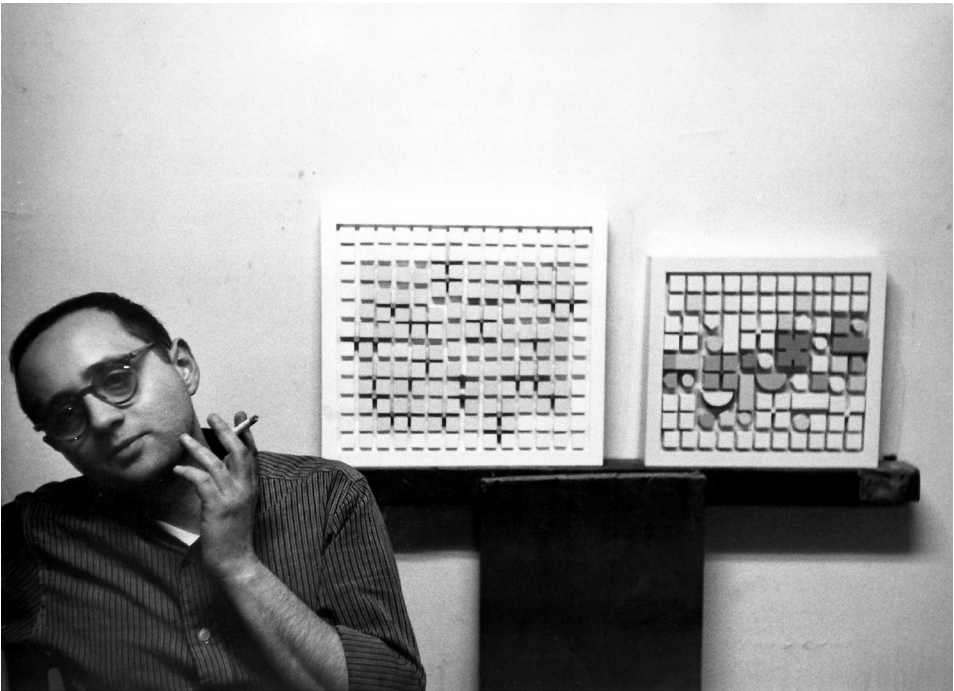
Yet some of the same pieces that plant Rubin in the art movements of the '60s also transport us to past and future archaeologies. In *Construction #21* (1961), variations on familiar punctuation marks and mathematical symbols are scrambled into alien hieroglyphs. And in a larger *Untitled Construction* 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

CANDY LAND:
irwin rubin's
color
constructions

Color is delectable in the painted wood constructions of Irwin Rubin. Consider *Construction #8* (1964), which I like to call “Cotton Candy Morandi.” Here pale pastel forms spring up like flowers inside a creamy white shadow box (p. 16). In *Construction #31*, of the same year, the box is black, a night garden. Tangerine circles on stems suggest lollipops; ruby red semicircles, gumdrops (back cover).

Before we get too far into dessert, though, a couple observations about color are in order. First, color is optical: It is the perception of light reflected from an object as it passes through the electromagnetic spectrum. Second, color is material: The pigments used by artists have long been made or mined from stubbornly physical stuff. Philosopher Fahim Amir explains that the deep blue known as ultramarine literally means “beyond the sea,” as the Venetian merchants who acquired it did not know its precise origin—only that it was from an ocean away. This pigment, prized by Michelangelo and Vermeer, was made from lapis lazuli, which in fact came from a single mountain range in Afghanistan.¹ Yet color is also material in another sense. Amir asks us to consider color not abstractly, but in its actual shape: “It is impossible to think of any kind of form without color. Every form presupposes contrasting colors.” Here he cites philosopher Vilém Flusser, who insists that “we never see colorless forms—not even theoretically, with our ‘mind’s eye.’ We see exclusively colors in various shapes,” and, he dares to suggest, “that which we call ‘form’ is the border between distinct colors.”²

Irwin Rubin’s constructions appear as object lessons in this regard. Rubin (1930–2006), who taught color theory at Cooper Union in New York for almost three decades, might have suggested two more aspects of color. On the one hand, colors have a character: Certain reds might excite us, and certain blues soothe us. But as his mentor, Josef Albers (1888–1976), emphasized: “Color is the most relative medium in art.”³ Albers’s influence was formative for Rubin at the Yale School of Art, where he received his BFA and MFA (in 1953 and 1956, respectively). Colors are culturally conditioned and may appear differently to different people, but Albers’s insight was about how one color’s proximity to another affects both. He liked to talk about the “factual fact” of a color versus the “actual fact”; the former is what we understand a color to be, in isolation; the latter is how it is actually perceived—a matter of how it plays with others. Albers taught this in his classes, demonstrated it in his book *Interaction of Color* (1963), and explored it in his series of paintings and prints, *Homage to the Square*, which he made from 1950 until the end of his life. In these works, he used the

minimal scheme of three or four nested squares to elevate color from a means within painting to the subject matter itself. For engaged viewers, this was an active subject: Colors might appear to advance or recede, to whisper or shout, to harmonize or clash.

Color is the subject of Rubin’s constructions in distinctly physical ways. As he explained in 1962: “After working exclusively with flat paper collage for several years, I have recently begun to expand the flat plane into a three-dimensional one, in order to explore the possibilities of using color three-dimensionally. In my present constructions, the frontal planes are usually painted white or off-white. The side planes are painted with primary or other bright colors which are reflected upon the white surfaces. When viewed frontally, the only color seen is that which emanates from the almost hidden light source.”⁴ An example is his *Construction #21*, in which a two-foot square panel is covered with dozens of cutout shapes in a cryptic language of forms: circles, squares, and arcs; an uppercase “H”; a short-stemmed “T”; and an unmistakable asterisk (p. 11). The sides of these are painted orange, lavender, lemon yellow, or blue. From the front, the panel reveals only faint breaths of color—atmospheres and auras modulated by light, shadow, and mixing among neighbors. What Rubin loses in clinical control or didactic effect, as compared to his mentor, he makes up for in sheer visual delight.

The shapes in Rubin’s constructions are basic, in the modernist tradition of geometric abstraction (albeit sometimes used to representational ends). When he departs from modernism’s “timeless” language, however, it is in a paradoxically modernist way: He *constructs*, from squares and circles, quatrefoils—the decorative forms found in Gothic and Islamic architecture that are modeled on the shape of a clover. In his untitled blue and red constructions, both from 1966, Rubin combines squares, circles, and quatrefoils of different sizes and heights with Greek (equal limbed) crosses with bulbous caps. (p. 12 & 13). These cruciform shapes suggest a ground plan extruded up into the natural-light-maximizing residential towers of the 1960s. Both the blue and red constructions present an intense and joyous vision of urban life, in all its density and diversity, as imagined by a child of the city.

The use of premodern shapes, of quatrefoils and crosses, reveals Rubin’s playful relationship to history and ornament—fields considered *verboden* by his orthodox modernist forerunners. Indeed, what would grow to be known as postmodernism was starting to put out buds at this time: Architect Edward Durell Stone’s controversial (and since redesigned and renamed) Gallery of Modern Art, at Columbus Circle, which Rubin would have surely known, was completed in 1964 (Fig. 1). The architecture critic of the New York Times, Ada Louise Huxtable, indelibly described the tower as “a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops,” words that seem literalized by Rubin’s *Construction #5* (p. 1).⁵ Rubin’s taste for old things is no surprise to anyone who has visited the family’s landmarked brownstone in Brooklyn, which teems with offbeat collections of all kinds, in vitrines and frames, set against original wood paneling.⁶ These predilections place him in good company with other midcentury designers, such as Alexander Girard (1907–1993), whose passion for international folk art—and toys and games in particular—inspired his graphics, interiors, and bold textile designs for Herman Miller from

4. irwin RUBIN quoted in “new talent usa: painting,” *Art in AMERICA*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1962, 30.



Fig. 1. edward durell stone, gallery of modern art, 1960–4.



Fig. 2. alexander girard (interior) and eero saarinen (architect), miller house, columbus, indiana, 1953–57.

5. ada louise HUXTABLE, “huntington hartford’s palatial midtown museum,” *new york times*, february 25, 1964.

6. see CARMELLE SAFDIE, “constructing the miniature museum: from the irwin rubin archive,” spaces archives (blog), november 14, 2022, <https://spacesarchives.org/resources/blog/rubin-archive/>.

1. fAHIM AMIR, ultramarine (afghanistan) (grazi: forum stadtpark, 2024), 175.

2. vILÉM FLUSSER, “farben statt formen,” lob der oberflächlichkeit. für eine phänomenologie der medien (mannheim: bollman, 1993), 123. quoted in AMIR, 171.

3. JOSEF ALBERS, interaction of color (new haven: yale university press, 2013), 1.

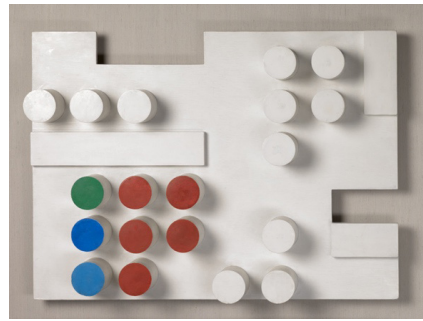


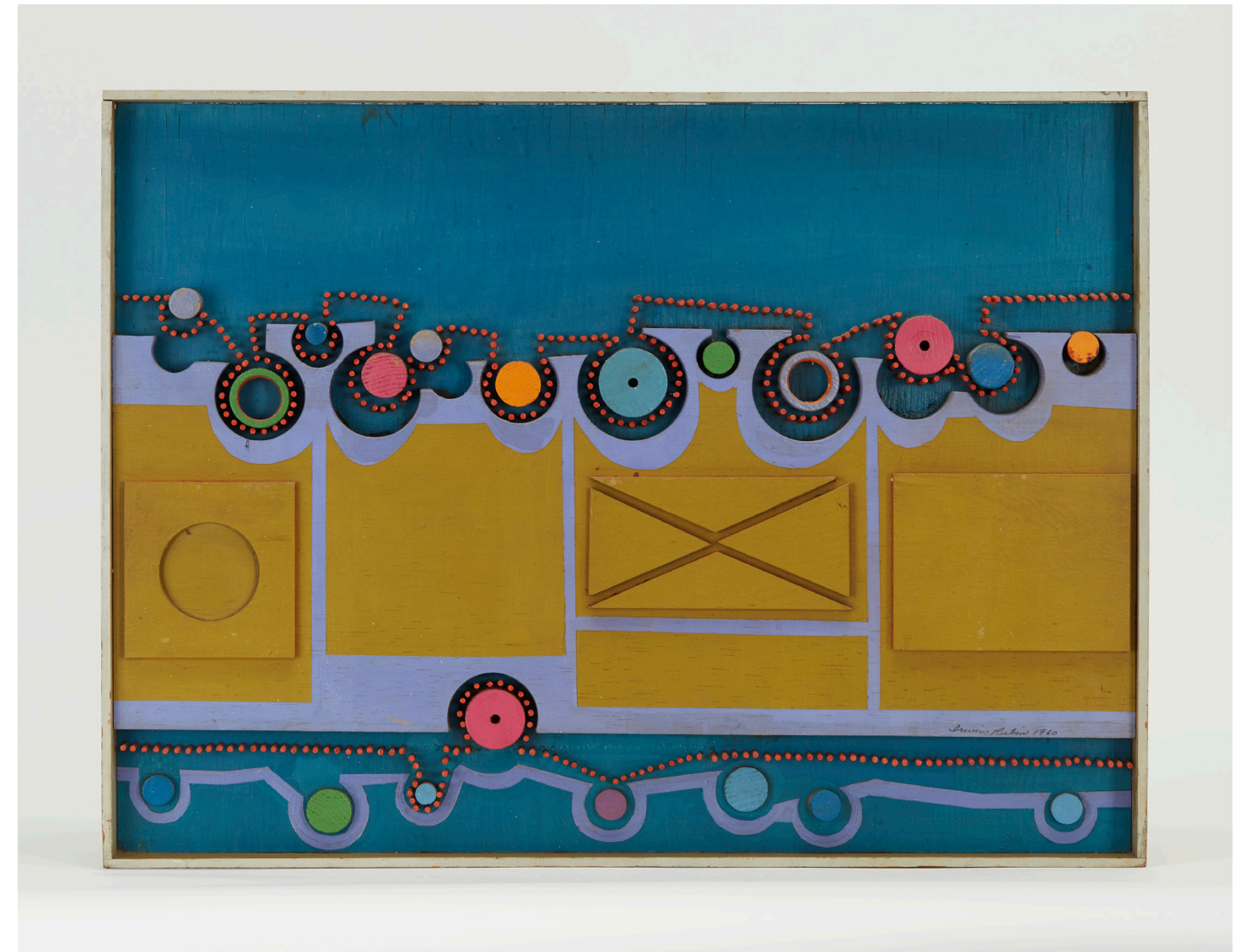
Fig. 3. sophie taeuber-arp, relief, 1936. painted wood. kunstmuseum basel, inv. g 1968.107.

7. william seitz, the responsive eye (new york: museum of modern art, 1965).

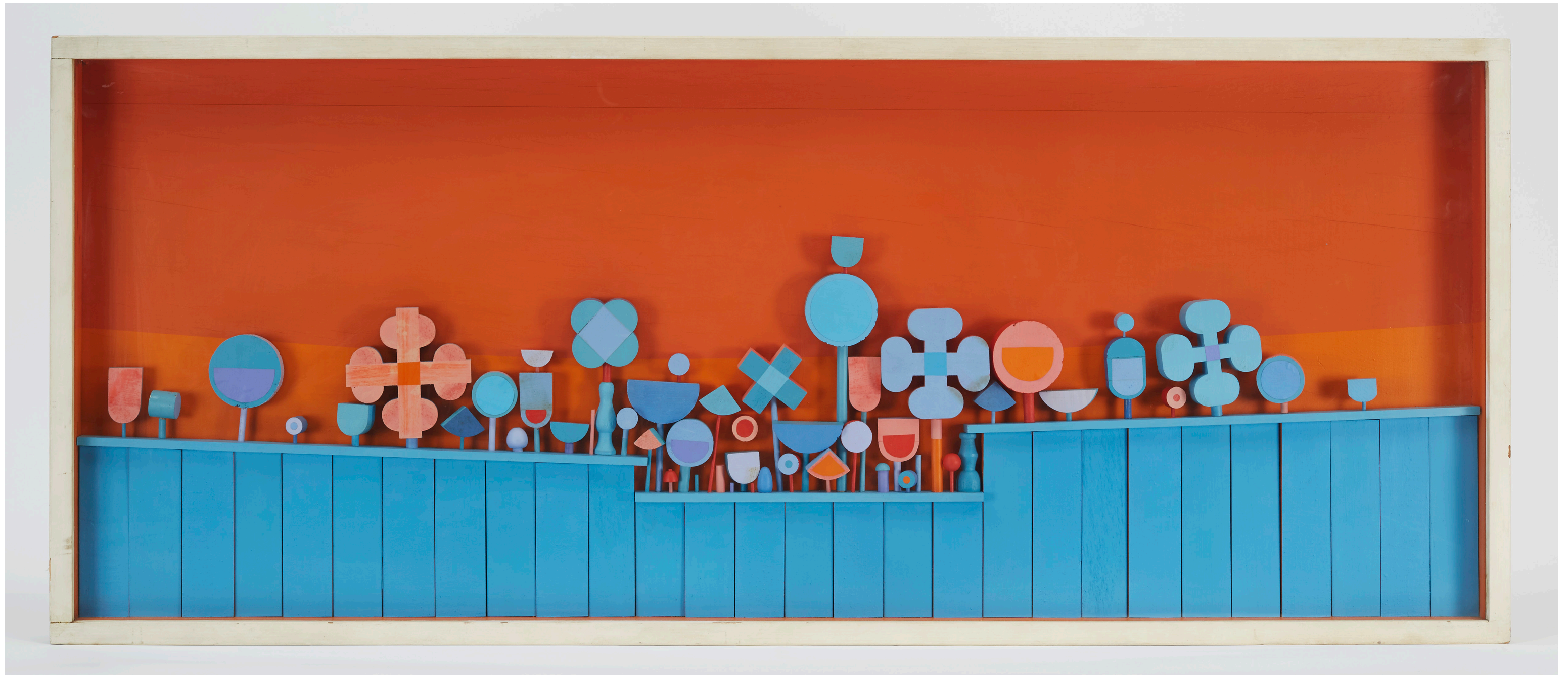
the 1950s to 1970s (**Fig. 2**). Indeed, examples abound of ancient, indigenous, and non-Western forms fertilizing modernist design, whether acknowledged or not.

Rubin exhibited his constructions with several dealers in New York. In 1960, he was featured in a show at Bertha Schaefer Gallery, *Six Techniques, Six Nationalities*. Earlier the same year, he participated in the exhibition *New Forms—New Media*, at Martha Jackson Gallery, alongside artists such as Lee Bontecou, Joseph Cornell, Jasper Johns, and Louise Nevelson. Rubin's work represented neither new forms nor new media, per se, but the capaciousness of this show's title—like the other, emphasizing technique—made clear that sculptural relief in 1960s New York presented a fresh challenge to the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism's insistently flat surfaces. Of course, Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943) had made extraordinary painted wood relief constructions in the 1930s, in France (**Fig. 3**). Yet while Taeuber-Arp's reliefs were in the tradition of Suprematism and Constructivism, with a Dadaist's penchant for chance, Rubin's work was perceptually oriented—if not quite in the illusionistic, proto-trippy mode of Op art emerging at the time. The latter tendency was canonized by the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, in which Albers and his disciples, contemporaries of Rubin such as Julian Stanczak (1928–2017) and Richard Anuszkiewicz (1930–2020), were featured prominently, alongside leading color field painters such as Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella, whose inclusion somewhat diluted the show's argument.⁷ Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine Rubin in the show—which inspires the question of why his artistic career did not take a different turn.

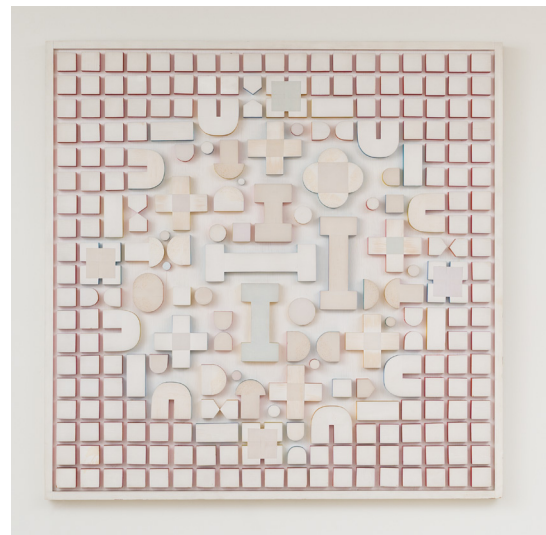
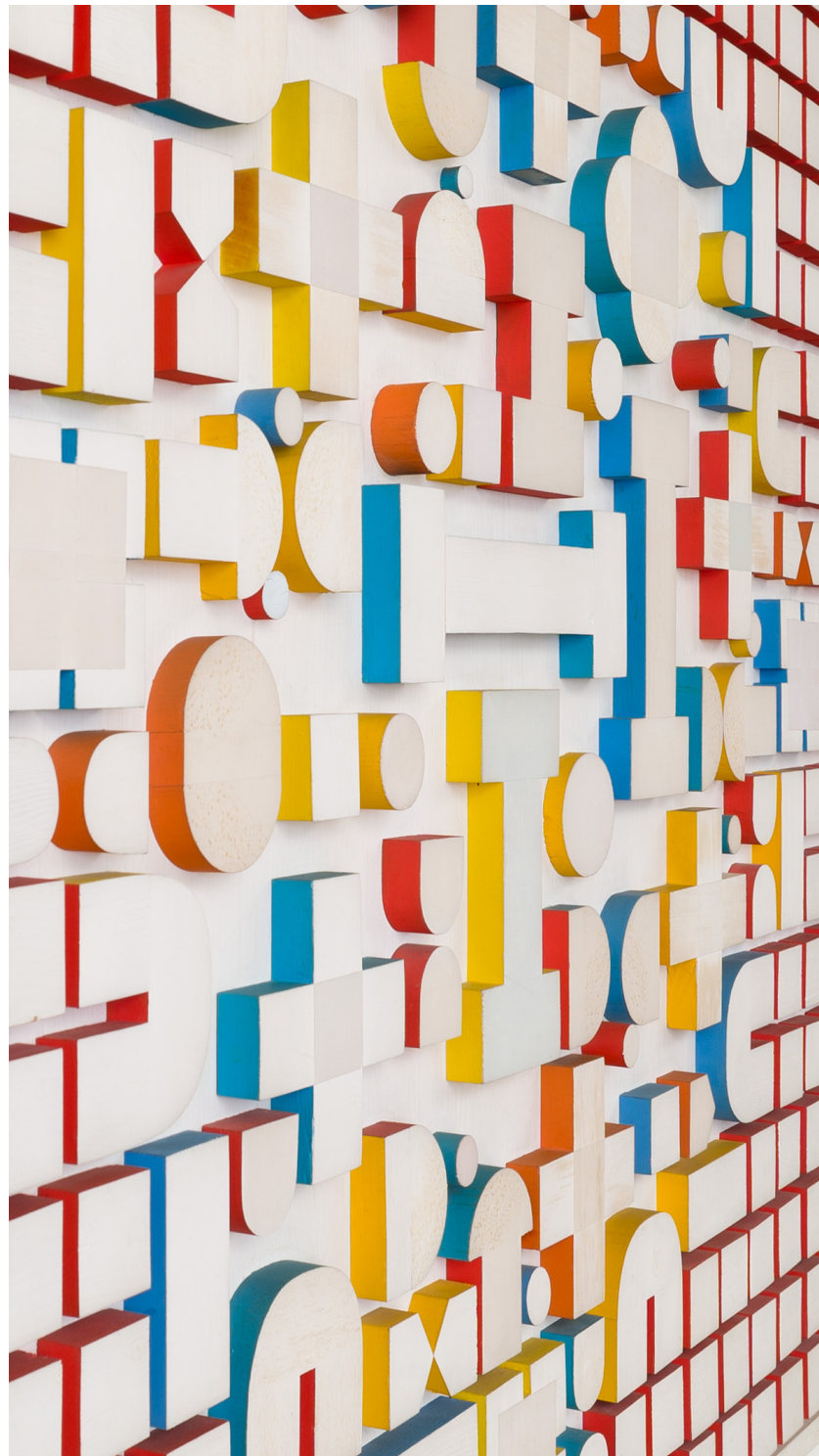
Irwin Rubin made his constructions for scarcely six years, and only a handful are known to exist today. It remains unclear why he did not continue to make these compact, compelling objects. His wife and children think he became disillusioned with the art world, for whatever reasons, before extricating himself from it. His focus shifted to antiques and miniatures, and to his cultivation of actual flowers in the gardens he maintained in Brooklyn and at the family's home in Westchester. While Josef Albers experimented exhaustively with his squares for decades, Rubin made his art in a short, exuberant burst before moving on to other pursuits. He left the rest to his generations of students, working in every possible style, to consider color as optical, material, and even delicious.



construction #4, 1960
painted wood
18.25 x 24.25 x 1.25 in.
estate of irwin rubin



untitled construction, 1964
 painted wood and collage, framed behind glass
 20.5 x 49.5 x 2.25 in.
 estate of irvin rubin



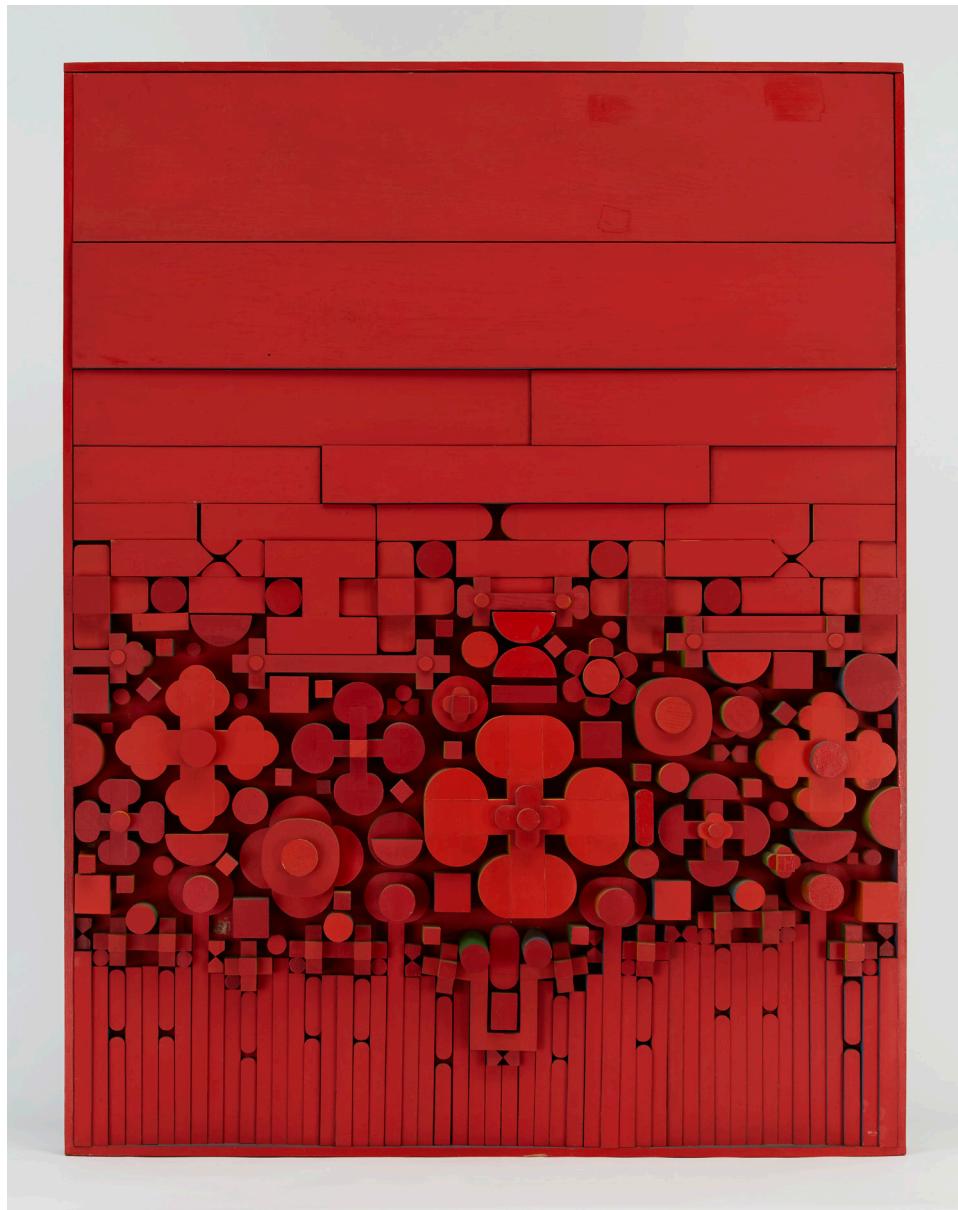
construction #23, 1962
painted wood
19.25 x 19.25 x 1.75 in.
estate of irvin rubin

construction #21, 1961
painted wood
24.75 x 24.75 x 1.5 in.
estate of irvin rubin

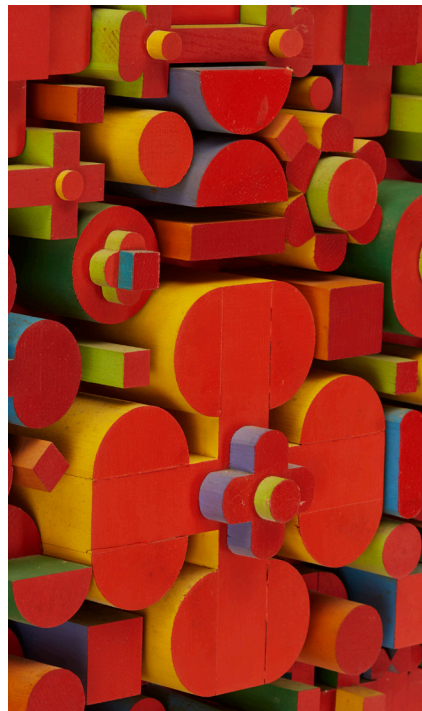


untitled construction, 1965
painted wood
42 x 42 x 2 in.
collection of carmelle safdie





untitled construction, 1966
 painted wood
 49 x 37.75 x 2.5 in.
 estate of irwin rubin



untitled construction, 1966
 painted wood
 54.5 x 39.5 x 2.75 in.
 estate of irwin rubin





UNTITLED COLLAGE, 1961
mixed media in painted wood frame
4.75 x 4 x 1 in.
estate of irvin rubin



UNTITLED COLLAGE, n.d. (c. 1960–1966)
mixed media with pressed leaves in painted wood frame
3.5 x 2.25 x 0.75 in.
estate of irvin rubin

UNTITLED SCULPTURE, 1965
painted wood
7.25 x 5 x 3.75 in.
estate of irvin rubin

COLLAGE #6, 1966
mixed media in painted wood frame
8 x 7.25 x 1 in.
green-wood historic fund collections

construction #7, 1966
painted wood and collage
8 × 3.25 × 1 in.
estate of irwin rubin

construction #8, 1964
painted wood
10.75 × 6 × 1.25 in.
estate of irwin rubin



EXHIBITION CATALOG

Irwin Rubin:
Construction #4, 1960
painted wood
18.25 × 24.25 × 1.25 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Collage, 1960
mixed media in painted wood frame
4.5 × 3 × 1 in.
Estate of Anne Brody

Untitled Collage, 1961
mixed media in painted wood frame
4.75 × 4 × 1 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Collage, n.d. (c. 1960–1966)
mixed media with pressed leaves in
painted wood frame
3.5 × 2.25 × 0.75 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Collage, 1961
mixed media in painted wood frame
7 × 4.75 × 1 in.
Collection of Jeanne Kramer-Smyth

Construction #21, 1961
painted wood
24.75 × 24.75 × 1.5 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Construction #23, 1962
painted wood
19.25 × 19.25 × 1.75 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Collage, 1963
mixed media in painted wood frame
6.75 × 5 × 1 in.
Collection of Jeanne Kramer-Smyth

Collage #7, 1963
mixed media with lace
3.25 × 3.75 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Construction #8, 1964
painted wood
10.75 × 6 × 1.25 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Construction #31, 1964
painted wood
11.5 × 5.75 × 1.25 in.
Green-Wood Historic Fund
Collections

Untitled Construction, 1964
painted wood and collage, framed
behind glass
20.5 × 49.5 × 2.25 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Construction, 1965
painted wood
42 × 42 × 2 in.
Collection of Carmelle Safdie

Untitled Construction, 1965
painted wood
46 × 61 × 2 in.
Collection of Jeanne Kramer-Smyth

Construction (For Y-A), 1965
painted wood
11.75 × 11 × 2 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Sculpture, 1965
painted wood
7.25 × 5 × 3.75 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Construction #7, 1966
painted wood and collage
8 × 3.25 × 1 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Collage #6, 1966
mixed media in painted wood frame
8 × 7.25 × 1 in.
Green-Wood Historic Fund
Collections

Untitled Construction, 1966
painted wood
49 × 37.75 × 2.5 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Untitled Construction, 1966
painted wood
54.5 × 39.5 × 2.75 in.
Estate of Irwin Rubin

Ben DuVall:
HTML/CSS Painting (after Rubin), 2024
HTML and CSS files viewed on internet
browser
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

october 1 – october 24, 2024

sva flatiron project space
133 w 21 st. nyc



construction #31, 1964
painted wood
11.5 x 5.75 x 1.25 in.
green-wood historic fund collections