

## SOLO SHOWS

# David Diao: Deconstructing Modernism

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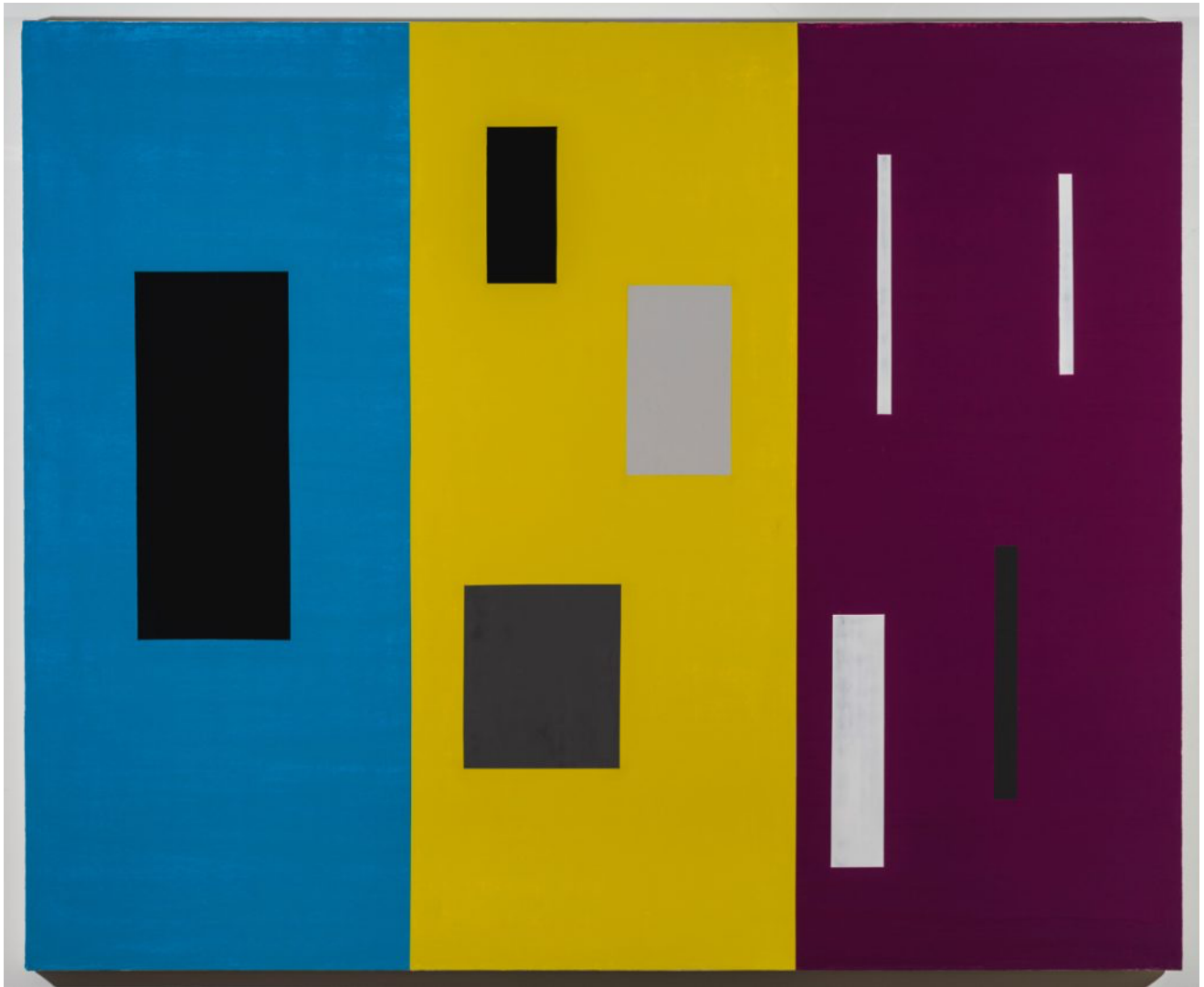


David Diao, installation view

Contributed by Sharon Butler / What conceptual painter hasn't looked at an Ikea how-to diagram and at least fleetingly thought it would make a fine subject for a painting? **David Diao** has gone farther, deconstructing a **Gerrit Rietveld** chair and using the shapes and colors as the subjects for a new series of paintings, on view at Postmasters through March 12. The paintings, which continue Diao's polemical approach to European Modernism, have everything I look for in abstraction: a compelling surface, a wry sense of humor, an understanding of art history, and a good back story.

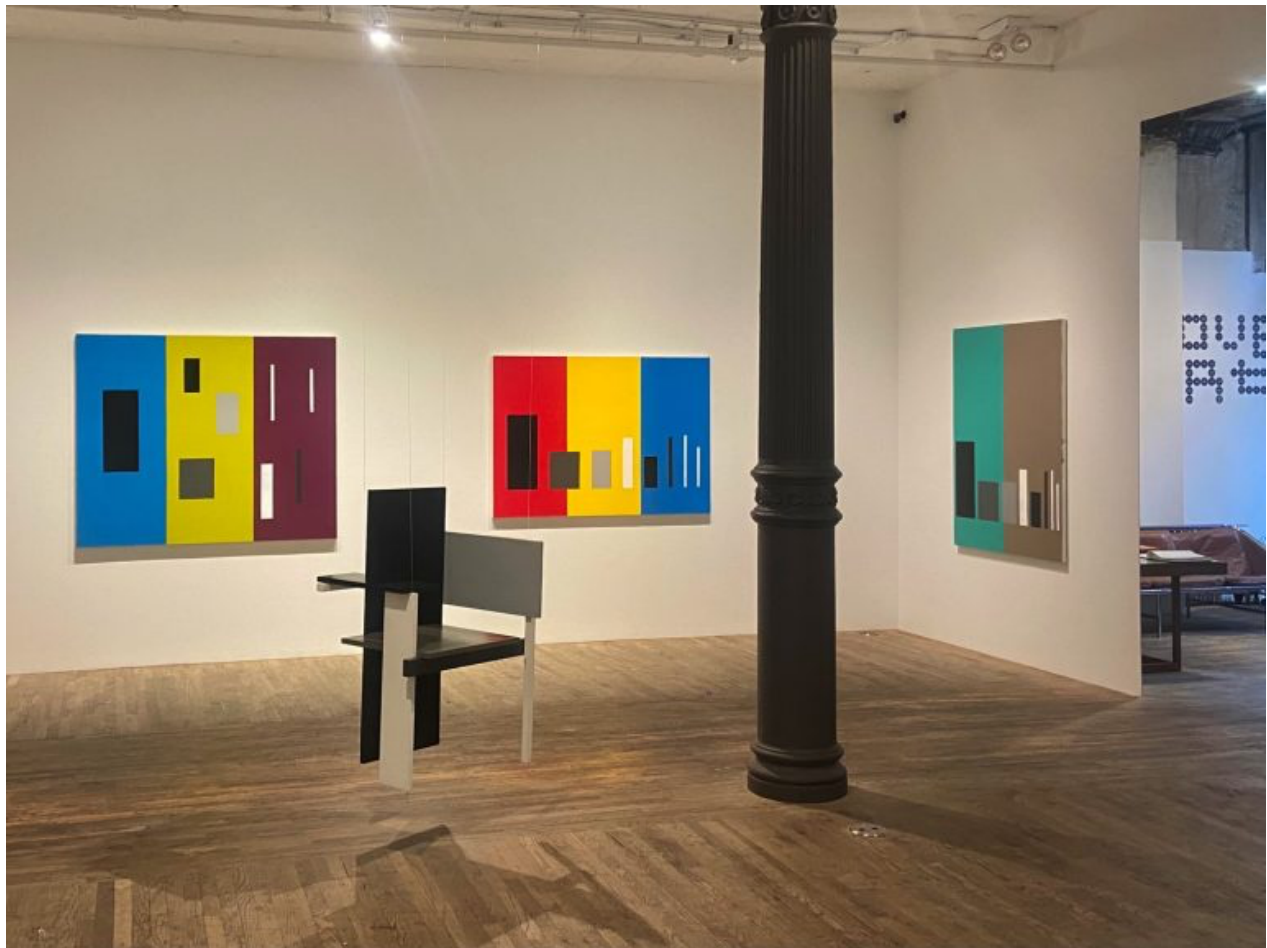


*David Diao, Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts on a 2 color ground – Green and Tan, 2021*



David Diao, *Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts on 3 color ground – Vertical*, 2021

Diao, who was born in 1943 in China and moved to New York in 1964, considers Rietveld's Red/Blue Chair iconic – a classic of modernist design that has come to symbolize the entire De Stijl movement. For this series, though, it was the Berlin Chair of 1923 that commanded his attention. The chair is built from eight simple pieces of wood. Two are painted black, one dark grey, one medium grey, one light grey, and three white. Diao uses the original colors for each painted shape, which is a wry nod to the Bauhaus principles form and contrast that students are still taught in foundation art classes.



*David Diao, Installation view. In the center of the gallery a Rietveld Berlin Chair is suspended from the ceiling.*

He begins each painting with a palette knife, using it to apply several coats of paint to build the surface into a waxy-looking, uninflected monochrome. Once the paint is dry, he arranges templates of the chair parts and draws their outlines on the canvas with a pencil. After taping the shapes off, he applies layers of paint, again with a large palette knife. When the tape comes off, the pencil lines are still visible outside the shapes, and Diao leaves them untouched. The result is a beautiful surface devoid of brush marks yet clearly manifesting the artist's touch.



David Diao, *Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts in one layer – Orange*, 2021

Diao's idea from the outset has been to add complexity to the formalism of Modernist painting. "Without being told, one would not know that these paintings refer to the Berlin Chair; they could be just abstract geometric hard-edge paintings," he said in a December 2021 interview. "Since 1985, if not earlier, I have sought to question that abstract painting has no referent other than itself. Almost all my work has a back story." Thus, he gently continues to deconstruct the Modernist conceit to make way for new narratives.

In this series, he has taken a less overtly personal direction than he has in previous work. Here Diao focuses directly on the roots and assumptions of art history, rather than his own story, suggesting that it may be time for a more radical departure. All the same, he does not lose the thread of his previous work. Some of the new pieces, for instance, add the chair shapes to his earlier *Tricolor* paintings. Has he ruined the old work or made it more relevant? The latter, I think decisively.

**"David Diao: Berlin Chair in Pieces"** Postmasters, 54 Franklin Street, New York, NY. Through March 12, 2022.