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Drawings by Diller

The Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has organized a lovely show of small, unprepossessing drawings done in graphite, crayon and, here and there, tempera by the American painter Burgoyne Diller (1906-1965). A follower of Mondrian, Diller put his own individual stamp on the Dutch master's brand of geometric abstraction, yet how that individuality was wrested from such seemingly finite means can be baffling. Diller's pictorial rudiments—the black scaffolding, the forceful but by no means empty white spaces, the punchy arrangements of primary colors—are inconceivable without Mondrian's example. A casual observer, told that two or three (or 10) of the drawings were Mondrians, would likely accept it as fact.

A closer inspection, though, reveals that Diller was less of an absolutist—and not just because the drawings are loose-limbed and impromptu. Whether drawing or painting (though not in making sculpture), Diller explored uncertainty, continuity and flux. The open-ended planes and shifting architecture evince a restless and questioning spirit. The pictures hold tight, but not at the expense of flexibility or doubt. Mondrian, God bless him, wanted the last word; for Diller, the conversation wasn't over by a long shot. That doesn't make him a better artist than Mondrian. It does make Diller an artist more deserving of your attention than you might at first grant.

Burgoyne Diller: Twenty-Five on Paper is at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, until Nov. 5.