

# ARTFORUM

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Having been included in William C. Seitz's Museum of Modern Art exhibition "The Art of Assemblage" in 1961, and with a solo debut at the Leo Castelli Gallery the following year, Robert Moskowitz has maintained a quiet but persistent presence on the New York scene for more than half a century. Quiet persistence has been a characteristic quality of his art as much as of his career. That tenacity pays off was demonstrated by his recent exhibition of six paintings, some of which were probably among his best, and, for that matter, are among the best anyone is making today.

Observers have always struggled to pigeonhole Moskowitz's work or to sort out its affinities and affiliations. Early on, he was seen as a fellow traveler of Pop; later, as the godfather of the New Image painting of the late 1970s (Susan Rothenberg, Lois Lane, Joe Zucker et al.). Today, I'd think of Ellsworth Kelly as a close relation. But mainly Moskowitz just seems to have gone his own way, somehow imbibing various influences and influencing others in turn while following his own path. Among the first works he showed were

collages made of window shades; since then, while eventually eschewing the use of found objects, he has continued to be fascinated by the visual form of quotidian things—and particularly things that are part of the built environment. At the same time, he has usually depicted those things—if *depicted* is even the right word—with the eye of an abstractionist, even a kind of small-*m* minimalist, a parer-down rather than an elaborator. The fewer forms and the fewer colors his paintings employ, the more it seems he can do with them.

His latest works have eliminated color altogether: They use only black and white. All are in the same elongated, almost scroll-like format he has been working with for some time: Five of the works were verticals measuring roughly seventy-eight-by-twenty-five-inches, while the sixth was a twenty-eight-by-seventy-eight-inch horizontal. At least since 1975, when Moskowitz painted Chicago's Wrigley Building, architecture has been one of his recurrent subjects—but he has rarely accorded much respect to buildings' upright posture: He showed the Wrigley Building's towers as nearly horizontal. Likewise, today, the blocky rectilinear silhouettes that compose the paintings are tilted, so that while they still might suggest the severe forms of modernist architecture, they provide at best an oblique view of it. Most of the paintings, in fact, are fundamentally hard-edge abstractions, their sources in daily life of no more moment to the final result than are those of Kelly, who also often derived his geometries from observation.

A couple of the paintings here were franker about their subject matter, however, even in their titles. *Empire State*, 2016, clearly depicts the renowned pinnacle of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon's 1931 masterpiece, while *Flatiron*, 2016, renders its subject recognizable thanks to its curved prow. By contrast, the four *Untitled* works, all 2017, keep their referents tacit. Although one of them, with paired black forms, might well allude to the Twin Towers, felled in 2001, they could just as easily be imagined as any two modernist blocks seen side by side. In any case, the strength of these purely geometrical configurations is that their emphasis falls more squarely on the taut, almost physical thereness of the forms as such, and on the artist's measurement of the compositional weight of the black shapes and the white ones, a kind of equivalence in difference, the interchangeability of positive and negative in form and space. The results are as elusive as they are implacably present, like persistent ghosts.

—Barry Schwabsky