

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Out of the Box: Al Loving's Great Achievement

by John Yau December 16, 2012



*Untitled (c. 1975)*

Al Loving (1935–2005) was born in Detroit and studied art at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and the University of Michigan. Like many art students then and now, he kept up with what was going on in New York through art magazines. In 1968, when he moved to New York City, he was fully versed in the hard-edged abstraction and shaped canvases of Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. This is how April Kingsley, in an essay for *Al Loving: Color Constructs*, an exhibition at the Neuberger Museum (1998–1999), described Loving's first years in New York:

Loving soon developed the image with which he became identified, an illusionary cube made out of prismatic color planes in dark, middle, and light values, edged with narrow, zinging, separating, black or white lines. The original inspiration was Josef Albers' square, but Loving turned it into more of a crystalline structure. Less than a year after arriving in New York, the Whitney Museum gave him a solo exhibition and his career was launched: his paintings began selling so well he had to get assistants to help him paint them, and he was receiving major commissions. But it didn't feel right. There was no room for personal expression. "I felt stuck inside that box," he said. "I mean, this was 1968 — the Democratic convention, this was the war — and I'm doing these pictures. The contradiction between my life at that time and these pictures."

Loving was in his mid-30s. He got what most artists dream of — a solo exhibition at a prestigious New York City museum. In fact, he was the first African American artist to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. And yet, what says the most about Loving as an artist is that he walked away from his early signature work because he felt "stuck inside that box" of his own making. In doing so, Loving recognized that there is nothing inevitable about art; that all the paradigms about the progress of art are a repressive fiction, a treacherous minefield that one has to negotiate.

*Al Loving: Torn Canvas* at Garth Greenan Gallery (November 1–December 22, 2012) is the first exhibition of the artist's work since his death in 2005. It is accompanied by a catalog with an insightful essay, "Self-Made Painting", by Katy Siegel. Made of strips of colored cloth that have been sewn together, and hang down from the wall, the torn canvas paintings are what Loving did to get outside of the box. He literally cut up his own work. Sometimes a change requires an artist to destroy earlier work, to cut it apart or cover it over, as Less Krasner and Philip Guston did. The five torn canvases in this exhibition were done between 1973 and '75. A selection of collages made between 1976 and 1990 rounds out the show. Writing about the work Loving did after his illusionary cubes, Siegel observes:

The thrill for Loving was personal; these new paintings showed him a way out of the prison — self-fashioned, with the help of critics, curators, and dealers — of his then signature style.

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Even now, four decades after Loving walked away from what brought him his initial fame — at a level he would never attain again in his lifetime — the torn canvas paintings look incredibly fresh and uncategorizable, while his illusionary cubes look increasingly like period pieces. Moreover, the change Loving made early in his career strikes me as radical a rupture as one can make in one's history. Alfred Leslie, Guston, and Krasner are among the few others that I can think of who initiated a comparable break in their work. It is also worth noting that Philip Guston turned his back on his Abstract Expressionist paintings around the same time as Loving rejected his early efforts, and for many of the same reasons.

So there we have it, a young African American artist at the beginning of his career making a sudden, fundamental and in some ways inexplicable change, and a highly revered, middle-aged Jewish artist going from a mandarin to a stumblebum, as Hilton Kramer famously characterized the change that Guston's work underwent.

I don't think we can underestimate the drastic step that Loving took and seemed to have never regretted. Although he never said this, in his geometric paintings Loving had effectively learned to speak (make paintings) in the language of the oppressor, that this was the box he wanted to get out of. When he changed, he didn't choose the obvious options, which would have been to speak (paint) in a vernacular style or become a storyteller, which might have ingratiated him to the mainstream establishment. Instead, he made a bolder, riskier choice, and always said that it came about because of an accident. Loving was not one to mythologize himself.

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According to Siegel,

... when discussing at length the way these paintings came about, the beginning of the dyeing, tearing, cutting, and sewing in 1972, Loving tells a prosaic tale of accidents and incidents, including his daughter spilling paint in the studio and then washing it off a canvas, and his own decision to cut out the "good" passage of an unsuccessful painting rather than throw the whole thing out.

Once he hit upon this idea, he began amassing a storehouse of canvas pieces of different tones and colors. He began dying canvas in Tintex. He learned to sew and began stitching the strips together. He had to teach himself everything because there was no instruction manual for what he was doing, and that I would argue was Loving's liberation. He became his own man and he knew it:

It just blew my mind. There were no boxes; just this dyed fabric sewn up. I didn't know what that was. It thrilled me to death. I made it and I was out of those boxes. I had gotten completely out of jail.

The torn canvas paintings hang down, like muted streamers for a celebration long past and no longer remembered. They are at once remnants and regenerations, something worn and something never seen before. They are on the opposite end of the spectrum of Stella's aesthetic assertion: what you see is what you see. For an African American, Stella's remark ignores the prejudices one brings to the act of looking, which can never be pure.

“Self-Portrait #23” (c. 1973) is both figural and abstract — a giant robe for a larger-than-life being and an irregularly shaped piece of cloth made from strips that have been completely or partially dyed in shades of blue, copper, yellow, green, and even pink, and then sewn together and arranged in overlapping and intersecting diagonals. The layering suggests that not everything is visible and that we will never quite know the piece’s exact configuration.

“Self-Portrait #23” is draped from a bar attached to the wall. Wider at the top than at the bottom, it tapers down, becoming triangular in shape, suggesting an idealized torso. This view is reinforced by the separate piece that circles down from the far right of the bar to the right side of the larger triangular piece, suggesting a sleeve. It is subliminal, as I don’t think Loving was trying to be overtly figurative. At the same time, the pose that is evoked is rather dandyish and elegant.

If Loving did do twenty-two earlier self-portraits, I think an exhibition of them is in order.

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Within the few years covered by the paintings in this exhibition Loving moved in lots of different directions and seemed intent on not repeating a configuration or, to use his own terminology, getting stuck in a box. Critics have rightfully associated the torn canvas paintings with Loving’s autobiography (his mother sewed quilts), and his dissatisfaction with illusionism and geometric abstraction. They have also been connected to African textile traditions and to various independent figures, such as Alan Shield, Richard Van Buren, and Joe Overstreet. The stained paintings of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis have also been mentioned. But as much as these viewpoints illuminate us about the torn canvases and what went into them, they don’t explain them. This is Loving’s great achievement — through a radical shift in his art he escaped the box that America reserved for a black man and a black artist. That, I would say, is about as good as it gets. This is the due the mainstream art world has thus far failed to give Loving and the reasons for that seem obvious.