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Kishio Suga

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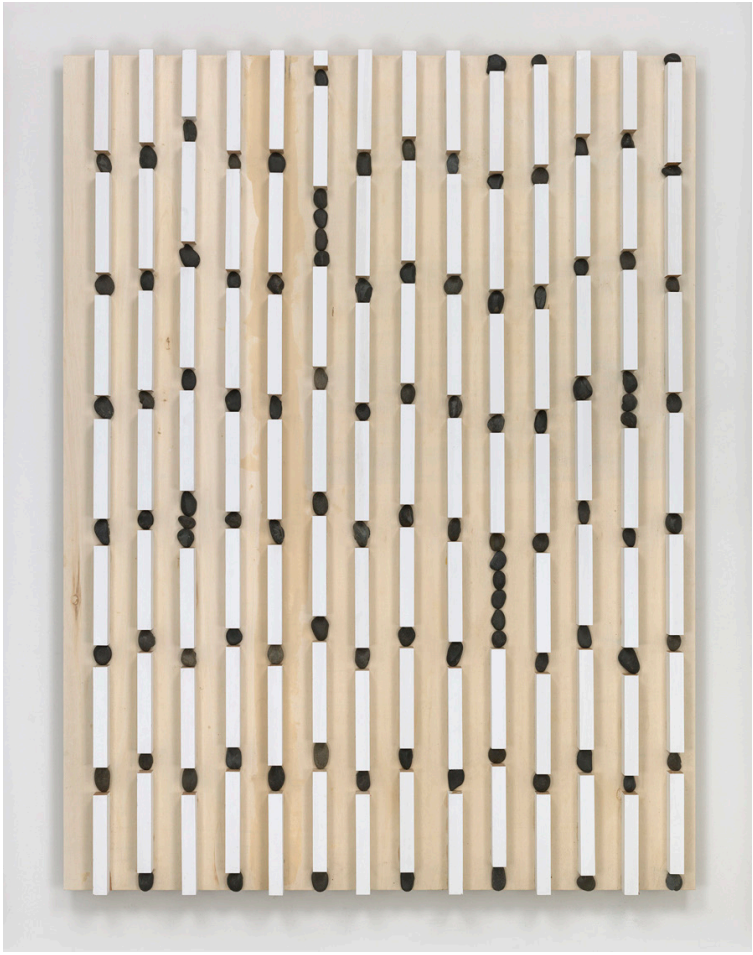
"I constantly think about how to confuse or distort the typical order of things," artist Kishio Suga wrote for a 2005 essay anthologized in Kishio Suga's *Work from a Zen Perspective* (2008). "Viewers would be rendered speechless before an artwork of this kind. In a matter of seconds or minutes, their thoughts would shift from established orders to new ones." One might expect such an endeavor to require the use of jarring force or violence—anything other than the sanguine grace that permeated Suga's latest show at Blum & Poe. But like an expert tour guide, Suga led the way down various side streets of abstraction that had thus far gone unexplored, and left one wondering how other artists had managed to pass them by.



Kishio Suga, *Nature of Elapsing Sites*, 2017, wood, paint, stones, 71 7/8 x 54 3/8 x 3 1/2".

The practices of Suga and other Mono-haartists famously evolved in indirect correlation with 1960s Minimalist and post-Minimalist movements outside of Japan, and Suga's recent works have the expected markers of inventive simplicity, via arrangements of wood, paint, metal, and stone that neither strove for the sheen of a precise finish nor adopted a strained affect of impoverishment. Each exhibited workpiece was small enough to register from afar as a discrete object, but large enough to slip just beyond one's peripheral vision when seen from several feet away. Suga's wall assemblages often appear to converge upon a crucial unknown, carefully sequestered from all adjacent chaos. Take his *Nature of Elapsing Sites*, 2017, which consists of vertical bars composed of thin blocks of white wood interspersed with one or more black pebbles, together looking like matchsticks laid head to tail. The work's irregular groupings of stones seem to pose a single, enigmatic question, brought into focus by the restricted color palette and consistently spaced wooden slats.

The Mono-ha movement—and Suga's output—bears a particular resonance in the United States now, in light of the recent post–Parkland, Florida, student movement as well as a resurgence of political art. In 1960s Japan, Suga and other artists affiliated with Mono-ha were accused of apoliticism by fellow classmates caught up in the era's turbulent student protests (catalyzed, in part, by a renewal of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960). Yet art historian Tatehata Akira has observed that the group's thinking "coincided perfectly with the radical student movement's call to 'deny the modern in oneself.'" If Mono-ha artists could cast aside received conceptual and perceptual systems underpinning Western modernism, their artworks could exist apart from that tradition without being defined merely as its counterpoint.

In their efforts to deny modernity, Mono-ha artists sought to transcend the divide between the natural and the man-made. It is worth noting that the latter category now includes digital systems, too. More than ever, encoded data take the form of visual noise; our brains go into overdrive by reflexively seeking out the information systems concealed in patterns. Contemporary art has also responded in kind, with every other exhibition of late seeming to feature a beaded curtain whose baubles record the flux of ocean temperatures or a hand-soldered circuit board representing a family tree. Suga's gridded geometries offer a fresh kind of relief. Wherever the works' high-contrast colors—black, white, blues, and reds—or their regular geometric arrangements suggest utility or industriousness, material imperfections volley back a sense of innocence and warmth. Drips of paint bulge over the heads of nails; elsewhere, a splinter dangles off a plank. Meanwhile, the white wood monochrome *Segmented Zones and Peaks*, 2017, offers a bird's-eye view into something resembling the maquette of a square courtyard, hung sideways. It was tempting to imagine the piece as an archaeological or architectural model: a document of a form's bygone or future functionality. But each of the enclosure's four walls is shaped like the silhouette of a terraced pyramid, and riddled with rectangular perforations. When illuminated, the protruding forms cast blazes of light and strange, zigzagging shadows across the work's barren central surface as well as its surroundings. Together, these elements resolutely interrupted baseless imaginings and returned one's attention to the Mono, or "things," on hand.