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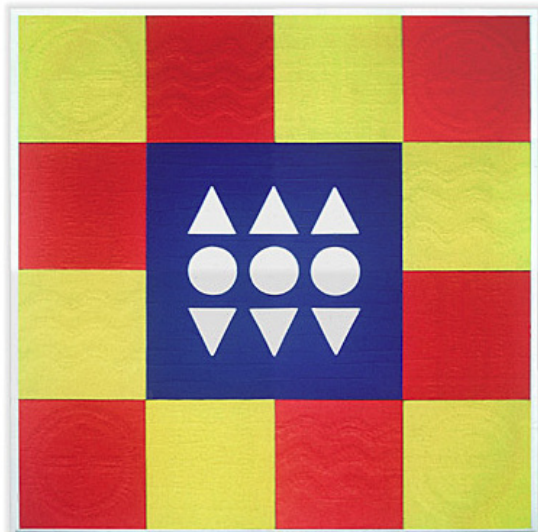
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ART IN REVIEW

George Ortman: Constructions: 1949-2011

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Tales of Love, 1959

The main reason to see this 62-year, 15-work survey of George Ortman's work is the radiant relief painting "Tales of Love," a lost masterpiece six feet on a side whose checkered composition centers on one large blue square that is punctuated with six white triangles and three white circles, and framed by a dozen smaller squares of blazing red or yellow. The result has a subtly asymmetrical, all-American bluntness that combines elements of game board, flag and quilt. The quilt analogy is especially enhanced by little bits of canvas collaged to the red and yellow squares, adding ghostly suggestions of circles and crosses that resemble top-stitched motifs.

Dating from 1959, this work was the centerpiece of Mr. Ortman's 1960 exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York. It pushes the innovations of Jasper Johns's flag paintings toward greater literalness. (The little bits of canvas are more robust versions of the little strips of newsprint with which Mr. Johns used to collage his works.) It also served as an inspiration for the reliefs with which artists like Donald Judd and Dan Flavin would soon start edging their way from two into three dimensions and toward the glories, such as they were, of Minimalism.

The other painted and constructed reliefs here are not quite on a par with "Tales of Love." Some are close, especially "Soundings" of 2001 and the prescient "Beginnings" of 1949. But nearly all tend to be busier, and relatively brittle and less organically whole in appearance.

Also worth attending to is the gallery's news statement, in which the redoubtable Mitchell Albus, quoting Judd's writings of the early 1960s and making points of his own, lays out the argument for the importance of Mr. Ortman's work and especially for "Tales of Love" as an historic turning point that has not received its due.