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Bay Area painter Cornelia Schulz perches upon her palette for a bird's-eye view of SFMOMA's Richard Tuttle exhibition

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic

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"I'm glad that there are pieces I don't like," Bay Area painter Cornelia Schulz said as we left the Richard Tuttle retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "It means that I have a chance of being in the same game."

Some of Schulz's abstract paintings bring early works by Tuttle to mind. In her pieces, small, separately stretched, eccentrically shaped canvases interlock, and areas of poured and brushed-on color collide. Like Tuttle, she considers not only the interior of an object she makes, but its immediate surroundings.

Tuttle first drew critical notice with doughy abstract silhouettes in wood, individually painted in dense, powdery hues.

Schulz, 68, remembers first seeing Tuttle's early work in reproduction decades ago. But its physicality explains the affinity she feels for it today.

"He looks at everything," Schulz said, eyeing Tuttle's "Sum Confluence" (1964), which looks something like an abstracted sprig. "The form, the shape, the shadows, the wall -- everything matters. The physicality of the shape, its thickness, its weight in relation to the space it's in."

The exhibition's rough chronology has Tuttle's work diverging quite quickly from obvious resemblances to Schulz's, but she tends to admire most things he has done, very unlike what she makes.

"He's an artist of incredible range, that's what impresses me most, and he has such a willingness to trust it all," Schulz said.

Schulz brings wide experience of her own to her take on Tuttle. Trained at the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles (when it was the Los Angeles County Art Institute) and at the San Francisco Art Institute, Schulz was the first woman appointed to the art faculty at UC Davis. She became professor emeritus in 2002.

As we looked around a roomful of Tuttle's stretcherless dyed canvas pieces, Schulz said, "He's really, to my mind, a mystic, which means he's seeing in the material world the great mystery that it is. I tend to feel that the more you get down to these simple forms, the more you move toward reality, that representation moves away from reality. In works such as the canvas pieces, there's the opportunity to see a form as it is and meet the quality of the phenomenal world."

Seemingly contradictory qualities in Tuttle's work impress Schulz equally: its sensitivity and its audacity.

"I'm aware of having been a girl growing up in the '40s and '50s, trained to a kind of timidity about just going ahead. That's why I get so enamored of someone who just goes ahead and does it, whatever it is. That's one reason why I like Julian Schnabel so much," an artist who has always tended to blare while Tuttle whispers, Schulz said.

Tuttle's audacity in designing and building his own vitrines and folding screens to hold drawings impressed Schulz more than his flagrantly ambitious floor works of the late '80s. She found the floor constructions lacking in the sensitivity to scale that marks Tuttle's small works.

Despite her enchantment with numerous small pieces by Tuttle, from early watercolors to the delicate constructions of paper, graphite and paint on the wall, she regards his "Wire Pieces," some of his most admired work, with skepticism.

Each "Wire Piece," which Tuttle trusts only himself to install, is an interplay of wire fastened to a white wall, the shadows it casts and connected graphite lines.

"These pieces begin to approach preciousness," Schulz said of the wire works. "Often I feel from the work that he really has moved beyond ego. But here the question arises because, let's face it, all of us are still walking egos, no matter how enlightened we've become. I begin to feel here some identification with the Richard Tuttle ego, I'm not sure why. I think that little bit of identification with ego begins to move them into preciousness."

As we moved through the show, Schulz repeatedly paralleled the line Tuttle walks between ego and egolessness and his work's teetering between preciousness and objective, unforced delicacy.

She paused at his "Rope Piece" (1974), a bit of white rope, its ends frayed, impaled on a single nail on a white wall about knee height.

It inflamed critics and the public when he first showed it at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Schulz saw in it the simplest, most effective possible exhortation to stop and look.

"If we're willing to stay with him," she said, "he can point us to the phenomena of the material world in such a special way, in a way that we usually just dismiss. In that dismissing, we disconnect, but he brings us back into connection with just the bare essence of the stuff."

The room beyond the rope piece contains a number of very busy constructions in humble materials such as wood and cardboard, plastic bubble wrap, discarded tin cans and glue.

"I'm glad to see he's got these territories where he wasn't so effective," Schulz said, "because sometimes in a place like that, where the pieces themselves aren't so great, there can still be something that serves the person's creative process once they get beyond that particular group. Some of these are really exercises in being outrageous. This piece" -- "Two or More XII" (1984) -- "almost walks itself into the dump, trash doing a classical dance with a bit of the Las Vegas stripper thrown in. It's just the wackiest piece. Sometimes you just want to say, 'For heavens sake, you've got to be kidding me.'"

In a subdued sequence of works titled "How It Goes Around the Corner" (1996), which does span a corner, Schulz saw a very dark mood. It consists of what looks like miniature bolts of blank canvas squeezed within tight, thick, unpainted frames.

"It's almost like he has the capacity to walk into the world of psychosis and explore it," Schulz said, when she studied these pieces. "And he seems to be able to return undamaged."

Schulz turned with relief to a complex two-wall, floor-to-ceiling installation near the end of the show. "It's almost like we're back with Richard Tuttle now," she said, after a carnivalesque and, to her, unconvincing series of works with electric light.

Recent pieces, especially the "Waferboards," pleased Schulz and reminded her of Tuttle's remark about having to work a piece until it looks like it was easy, whether it was or not.

For Schulz, the pieces that end the show stop short of that condition. "They're like Richard Tuttle wannabes," she said. But she'll "allow him that," Schulz said, "because I recognize that as an artist, you go through various phases to be able to investigate the full spectrum of what you might have to produce."

Artists on art

Part of a continuing series in which Bay Area artists walk through museum exhibitions and talk about what they see.

The Art of Richard Tuttle: Paintings, sculpture, drawings and installation works. Through Oct. 16. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. (415) 357-4000, www.sfmoma.org.

E-mail Kenneth Baker at kennethbaker@sfchronicle.com.