Bill Welu

July 11 – October 25, 2015
William “Bill” Welu was born in Dubuque, Iowa in 1943. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in art from Loras College in Dubuque in 1965. After completing his Master of Arts degree at Notre Dame University in 1966, he joined the faculty of the art department at Briar Cliff University. While beginning his college teaching career, Welu continued his education, returning to Notre Dame University to complete a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1968.

Upon leaving Loras College and entering Notre Dame University, Welu planned to pursue sculpture as his focus. By the time he reached Briar Cliff at the age of 23, he could teach not only sculpture, but printmaking, drawing, and a host of other disciplines. Welu emerged from his second stint at Notre Dame with his artwork as a self-described combination of the collaged imagery of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns with the dynamic painting of Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. His style of collage-based expressionism was a long way from the very academically inspired realism that had defined his work just a few years before.

However, his collage work would itself become a thing of the past as Welu continued to search for what he calls his “core sensibility.” A visit to New York in the early 1970s brought to Welu’s mind the idea that each successful artist is guided by a sensibility that is unique and yet intertwined with those of other artists. He found this connection as he visited gallery after gallery throughout the Metropolitan Museum of Art, each gallery representing a time and place in art history. Additional thought about what he discovered led him to conclude that the entirety of artistic production from the earliest efforts to the present is guided by an overarching core sensibility, tying together the work of all artists throughout history.

The key for Welu was to find his own sensibility. An opening emerged unexpectedly one day as he prepared a series of canvases by applying a layer of white gesso. As he looked at the empty canvases that were waiting to be filled, he found something appealing in the unpainted surfaces. Though he had not yet added any of the figures or paint of his typical finished artworks at the time, Welu found that the “apparent blankness” provided a great opportunity for a profound, aesthetic experience.

As a scholar of art history as well as of art, Welu recognized that white or nearly white paintings had a history dating back to the 1918 works by Russian artist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). When Malevich’s White on White painting was exhibited in 1919, he said, “I have overcome the lining of the colored sky...Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you.” American Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) painted a series of white canvases in 1951, intending them to be so anonymous and formulaic to the point that he had studio assistants occasionally repaint them to keep them as white as possible. What Rauschenberg’s intentions were remains a bit of a mystery. However, in 1968 they were presented in a gallery exhibition that was designed to establish Rauschenberg’s White Paintings as forerunners to both Minimalism and Conceptualism.
By this time, artists such as Agnes Martin (1912-2004) and Robert Ryman (b. 1930) had begun using white paintings for altogether new purposes. Martin’s square canvases contained visible brushstrokes and graphite that created subtle lines, rectangular shapes, or grids. Martin intended in part for the visual impact from these often barely visible lines to reflect spiritual goals as much as formal artistic ones, saying, “My paintings are not about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in the mind.” Ryman’s square canvases also have had quite minimal additions beyond the color white. However, Ryman has explored the color in a variety of scales, materials, and textures, and stayed true to his commitment that he “didn’t want anything in the paintings that didn’t need to be there.”

As Welu began to think of shifting his paintings away from all imagery, his process was based on a combination of contemplation and formation. Though he was adept at working in many styles and with many different materials, he began focusing his efforts more clearly on a formalist basis for creating art. Essentially, he resolved to make paintings that contained only what was necessary to create a beautiful form. The white from the unpainted canvases led the way.

His paintings are balanced in many ways. They are intended to be enjoyed for both the visual, material qualities of the paint and canvas. They are also intended to stimulate our minds. A phrase by French philosopher Jacques Maritain that Welu read early in his career was that beauty, and therefore art, should be “well-proportioned for the intellect”.

This means that artists should not be overly subjective, emotional, or expressive in order to allow viewers a clear opportunity for a purely aesthetic experience.

What should you expect in terms of this aesthetic experience when faced with a single painting created by varying layers of the same color paint and an internal square shape? There is no single or clear answer beyond seeing what is in front of you. Because the painting depicts no objects and takes no point of view, each viewer will undoubtedly have a different encounter with the painting. Perhaps you will come away with something similar to artist Frank Stella’s 1964 remark about his paintings, “What you see is what you see.” On the other hand, perhaps you will discover great passionate feeling in the painting, as Malevich did when finding infinity in his white paintings. The nature of your encounter with Bill Welu is personal as well as formal.

The exhibition Bill Welu is a presentation of one 45-inch square acrylic on canvas painting within a space created by four movable walls and one bench.