

GESTURE THEN AND NOW: THE LEGACY OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

DAVID RICHARD GALLERY
554 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

THE SEEDS WERE FIRST SOWN IN ARSHILE GORKY'S GARDEN IN SOCHI.

Abstract Expressionism was the hybrid fruit of Gorky's synthetic efforts, as Irving Sandler wrote, to "fuse Synthetic Cubist structure with Surrealist atmosphere and biomorphism." From the lyric, dark grisaille of Gorky's inner landscapes it grew to epic stature: In 1952 art critic Harold Rosenberg observed that "at a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act, rather than as a space in which to ... 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." And as early as 1943 the principal tenet that was to distinguish the new abstraction from earlier, pre-war abstract art was clearly formed, as evidenced in a brief "manifesto" of the rising movement crafted by Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman for *The New York Times* in response to a negative review of the new style: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial, and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless."

Tragic and timeless. Since its hegemony in the 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism has retired from the arena to the salon, with a concomitant reduction of its monumental canvases to the scale of easel painting. I doubt that any work done since in the AbEx style has matched the Sturm und Drang of its creators. Nor should it. A testament to AbEx's authentic import is the organic structure and metamorphic power of its original aesthetic. The AbEx movement itself evolved from the rite-of-spring tremors of Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* and the epic stasis of Rothko's floating cubes and Newman's mythic *Vir Heroicus*, to attain its epilogue in the purest melancholy of Agnes Martin's grid paintings.

What followed the founders would have to find its own truths. Much of what followed since their heyday hasn't: A tour of galleries on Canyon Road will turn up a potpourri of paintings in the AbEx mode, many of them a kind of karaoke of brushstroke bravado and tube-paste primaries that only mimic in their very attempt to emulate. What marks the success

of David Richard Gallery's recent group-show homage to the AbEx tradition is the pervasive choice by the show's painters to pursue their own course.

Few of the dozen or so artists in *Gesture Then and Now* would identify with the original AbEx aesthetic, apart from a stylistic resemblance stressed in the show's reference to AbEx gesture. The "gesture" in the show's title is shorthand for the term Action Painting, coined by Rosenberg to describe the calligraphic brushstrokes—and, by extension, the existential angst—of AbEx's embryonic phase in the early 1940s. Action Painting was supplanted by the more art-historical "Abstract Expressionism," embracing its later, color-field phase as well. Yet its characterization as gesture still captures the intensely personal and cryptic economy at the movement's emotive core. As such, it is a helpful device to unify the gallery's case for the AbEx legacy.

The show's oil-on-canvas paintings from the late 1940s and 1950s demonstrate the wide reach of the New York School—works by Jack Jefferson, Deborah

Remington, Ward Jackson, Louis Ribak, Lilly Fenichel, and Bea Mandelman—reprised here by the recent mythic narratives (2013) of Eugene Newmann. Phillis Ideal's acrylic-on-canvas *Zowie* (2008-13) and her black-and-white archival pigment prints recall Roy Lichtenstein's large-scale *Big Painting* series of blown-up brushstrokes, a Pop tongue-in-cheek parody of AbEx bombast. And the quasi-ritual, transparent rendering of gestural abstraction in Gerhard Richter's neo-expressionist paintings from the mid 1970s resonate in the show's later work by Michio Takayama (1987), Jean-Marie Haessle (2004), and Fenichel (2013). Perhaps the most ironic, yet poignant evocation of AbEx postwar abstraction is *Yellow Experiment*, by Louis Ribak, dating from the later 1950s. A Lithuanian Jew born in 1902, Ribak immigrated with his family to New York City at age ten, at almost the same time as Mark Rothko (born 1903) arrived with his family, Jews from neighboring Latvia. Louis Ribak was a Social Realist who became reconciled to the new abstraction in the years after he left New York in 1944 and moved to Taos, New Mexico.

Gesture Then and Now is less about AbEx's legacy than it is about its unique place at a particular point in time. Much of the movement's formal approaches to line, form, and color have entered the repertoire of contemporary art, as seen in the accomplished work in this group show. But if its aesthetic deals with subject matter that is "tragic and timeless," that subject matter was unique to its times—the holocaust, threat of nuclear annihilation, the subsequent search for meaning. In that sense, perhaps the abiding legacy of Abstract Expressionism is not simply how it looked but what Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman intended it to be from the outset: "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks. This world of imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense." That's a legacy to live by.

—RICHARD TOBIN



Louis Ribak, *Yellow Experiment*, oil on canvas, 50" x 40", 1950-1960