



High Times Hard Times

New York Painting 1967-1975

Christopher Miles

WILLIAM WEGMAN'S 1970s experiments in performance, video and photography earned him a position as an exemplar of postminimalist and conceptual art's turn away from traditional media, but he started out as a painting student in the late '60s. In a later interview, Wegman joked about pursuing a painting practice at a time when an artist would call a painting a "wall piece," or lay it down and call it a "floor piece."

Wegman's jokes framed the period examined by "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975," currently at the National Academy Museum in New York. Curated by Katy Siegel with painter David Reed as advisor, the traveling exhibition explores a climate in which painting's legitimacy as a contemporary practice was being

questioned and its dominance challenged by new approaches in sculpture, installation, performance, photography, conceptual art and video. But it was also an atmosphere in which painting became highly experimental. In her essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss referred to the range of sculpture-like or sculpture-related art produced at the turn of the '60s into the '70s as a "motley of effort," so diverse that to contain it, the category of sculpture would have to become "almost infinitely malleable." With this exhibition, Siegel proposes that painting had a motley of its own, and that it too proved highly elastic, incorporating genres and practices one might have thought eclipsed it.

Siegel chronicles a scene, choosing 37 artists who lived and worked in New York during the years covered. Most were born in the '30s and early '40s, and any one of them knew a handful of the others, thus sharing a loose network of associations. The catalogue, which is so engaging and revealing as to actually feel suspenseful — a scholarly work that is also a page turner — further fleshes out this sense of scene, with memoir-like texts by Reed, who is not in the show, as well as critic Robert Pincus-Witten and Marcia Tucker, who was Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1969 to 1977, as well as statements by 17 of the artists in the show. These texts, combined with Siegel's essay proposing an alternative view of painting's



position during the period, as well as essays by Dawoud Bey and Anna Chave respectively addressing the experiences of African-American and women artists, collectively make a case for broader socio-political factors, influences, intentions and implications behind works that today might be seen largely as innocuous experiments—radical or responsive only within the field of abstract painting.

Abstract indeed. With hardly a legible word or recognizable image in sight, the forty-plus works in the exhibition wear their roots in the legacy of modernist abstraction outright, but they also aren't shy about their assorted references to gender, their tendencies toward cultural democratization that foreshadowed those of the Pattern and Decoration movement, their signals of awareness of living in an electronically and photographically mediated world, and their literalist engagement with substance and material reminiscent of New Realism and Arte Povera. Thus, without slogan or symbol or story, these works radiate with a kind of urgency and a charged and willful engagement among the turbulence that defined their time.

And as much as these works seem to shock with their insistence on moving beyond art for its own sake, they also reveal an urgency in exploring new formal territory, and in defining positions relative to painting past and present. Kenneth Showell's *Besped* (1967) is a luminescent tweaked grid—a dazzling hybrid of romanticism, modernism and Op. Guy Goodwin's *C-Swing* (1974), a brushy yet graphic composition of boldly-hued straight and curved lines that feels like a cropped close-up of a billboard painted by an expressionist, negotiates an integration of Abstract expressionism, hard-edged abstraction and Pop. A 1969 work by Mary Corse exemplifies how the artist used glass microspheres embedded in paint to move beyond the vestigial atmospheric illusionism still found in color field painting and reconcile luminism with pure, flat surface. A simply breathtaking composition in stained and torn canvas by Al Loving is an elegantly raw synthesis of influences ranging from Art Brut to push-pull abstraction to folk quilts. Jo Baer's 1970, *V. Speculum*, a boxy canvas with an open field of creamy white flanked by bars of grey and black hugging its corners, pushes precisely into the territory of category-defying 'specific objects' postured by Donald Judd and other minimalist artists with

whom Baer found herself in debate about painting's status, but the work pulls itself, and in hindsight threatens to pull much of minimalism, back across the line into painting.

Pulling works back across the line is of course part of the curatorial agenda of this exhibition, and in some instances Siegel could be accused of playing a categorical shell game. Carolee Schneemann's 1967 *Body Collage* performance, Harmony Hammond's 1973 partly-painted hooked-rag-rug bull's-eye of autumn colors, Lynda Benglis' 1969 *Blatt*, a congealed flow of rainbow marbled latex, or Alan Shields' geodesic structure skinned in patchworked colored canvas to create a kind of vagabond minimalist object: none of these are any less than compelling works, and all use painting as both a backdrop and a departure point, but one wonders if the departure isn't rather complete. The awkwardness of Siegel's task is that in order to demonstrate the transgression or stretching of painting's boundaries, she has first to re-establish them. But while one might quibble as to which of these works still belong within the temple of painting, and which have left the building, the excitement of this show is in seeing how many artists were hovering around the threshold.

When on view at the American University Museum in Washington, DC last fall, the exhibition occupied rooms one accesses via a stairwell containing a work by artist Sam Gilliam. Viewers unfamiliar with Gilliam likely would have thought his massive cascade of rippling, twisted canvas bathed in fluid color to be a work from the "High Times Hard Times" exhibition, but it wasn't, which points to a limitation of Siegel's curatorial approach. Gilliam, who is of the same generation as the artists in the exhibition, and whose career-long devotion to experimental painting is chronicled in a retrospective organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and currently on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, would have been a shoe-in for this show were it not for the fact that he has spent his career in Washington D.C.

Every exhibition has its parameters, and Siegel's choice to limit this one to nine years in one city—a place and time of concentrated exploration of painting's potential in a changing art scene that made for both an incubator and a pressure cooker—seems a reasonable enough decision. But it's a disappointment that the exhibition catalog, which

works hard at placing the art in a global context including the Mai Lai massacre, the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination, the first footprint on the moon, The Watergate break-in, Roe V. Wade, and the fall of Saigon, makes no mention of Gilliam, or of Californians Tom Wudl, Karen Carson and Richard Jackson, who experimented respectively with paintings on perforated paper, fabric panels that could be reconfigured via the use of zippers, and structures and installations that incorporated stretched canvases as both painting tools and building blocks.

Nor are the early paintings of Judy Chicago, the already under-discussed painting experiments that were part of Womanhouse, or the bicoastal emergence of the Pattern and Decoration movement addressed. The high times and hard times for painting were in fact global; after all, those wall and floor pieces Wegman joked about were in central Illinois. With its sights set on connecting a city scene and a group of artists who hung out at Max's Kansas City to the whole world while omitting any real discussion of the art of that world, the catalog, terrific as it is, winds up engaging in the same sort of mythologizing that has reduced the global phenomenon of mid-twentieth-century gestural abstraction to the "New York School" and the Cedar Tavern crowd. That noted, the efforts of this show and catalog remain bold first steps in scholarly and organizational work that should have begun long ago. This is one of those small but major exhibitions that reminds the larger institutions they need to their homework. ■

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ALAN SHIELDS, Whirling Dervish, 1968/70. Acrylic and thread on canvas over wood, 272 x 272 x 96 cm. Estate of Alan Shields.

Opposite clockwise from top left: **KENNETH SHOWELL, Besped, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 274 x 228 cm. Courtesy Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin; MICHAEL VENEZIA, Untitled, 1971. Aluminum pigments and carbon black enamel on canvas, 226 x 190 cm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Rolf Hengesbach, Cologne; CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, Body Collage, 1967. Black-and-white video, 3 mins. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York; RALPH HUMPHREY, Untitled, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 142 x 335 cm. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.**

