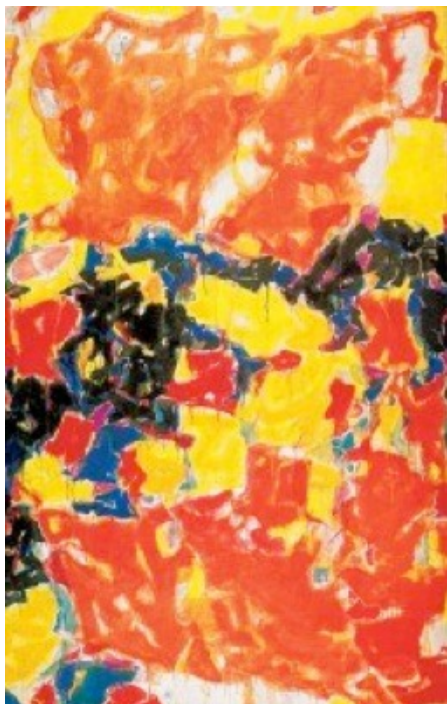


# NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Accumulation

By Marjorie Welish 10/21/09

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The New York School has done more than provide the art world with blue-chip art; its gestural aesthetics continue to sustain considerations of what painting is and what it isn't when, as now is the case, a few exhibitions revisit the era, or restage works, or react to its significant paradigm.

A test of Abstract Expressionism has been how an artist can sustain an authentic painting practice long after his reputation is secure. After all, productivity in art is not the same as fecundity, as it often yields a recycling of skill and taste to formulaic styling. It is an open secret that the productivity weighing against greatness in the career of Abstract Expressionist Sam Francis makes it imperative to judge his work on a painting-by-painting basis.

That said, the singularity of several of his compositions on canvas and on paper make "Sam Francis: 1953-1959," now at L & M Arts, a show decidedly worth a visit. Installed to advantage are early paintings that explore the possibility that Abstract Expressionism need not foreclose on joy nor put the kibosh on sensuality. Francis' mark produces a sort of vermiculation with which he composes a surface, piece by piece. Starting loosely, then going back to tighten the composition from part to part, Francis sustains an overall organic growth. *Black*, 1955, is a firm example of this.

But the painting that will have you grateful for his talent is *Red*, 1955-56. Large and opulent yet also fluid, *Red* seems to have been one of those creative miracles that resolves before the artist had a chance to rehearse and micromanage the results.

*"Sam Francis: 1953-1959" is on view at L & M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, from Oct. 15 to Dec. 12.*

IF NOT Matisse, then the team of Picasso and Braque is evidently mentoring the proponents of New York School modernity, for the obligation to integrate an American idiom into the brilliant European avant-garde is very much on the minds of artists working in New York before and after World War II. The question is, is it possible to further the cause of collage without reiterating all that Picasso and Braque put in play? At his best, Conrad Marca-Relli shows that the collage, a technique to construct a painting using actual commonplace materials, can be enlisted for expressive eloquence as well.

A retrospective of sorts, "Conrad Marca-Relli: The New York Years 1945-1967" begins with the figurative dreamscapes best considered to be informative of quasi-metaphysical tendencies in painting, as though Marca-Relli was trying to reinvest the aesthetics of de Chirico with existentialism. When, however, this artist embraces collage, something paradoxical results: The more he engages this art of surfaces, the more profound the expression.

Not that every work is good, but what is telling in this show is that strongly constructed paintings appear in each of several different approaches to the problem of collage. From 1962 are three ringers: *The Samurai #2 L-3-62*, an urgently intense yet offbeat compound of collage and mixed media that gets more interesting the closer you look; *Project F L-14-62*, an all-white

surface built of tacked-on surfaces aged and yellowing, its patina and nails relieving a homogeneity that could be too placid otherwise; Cunard L-8-62, a bold red, white and blue work that despite all odds remains without cliché.

*“Conrad Marca-Relli: The New York Years 1945-1967” remains on view at Knoedler & Company, 19 East 70 Street, through Nov. 14.*

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM CONTINUES to provide the idiom of choice for younger artists, one of whom is Mary MacDonnell. “Touch” is her aptly named show, comprised of drawn paintings on board and on paper that emphasize tactile, not optical, properties of paint.

Ms. MacDonnell has produced an ingratiating exhibition that proves her participation in the slipstream of process-oriented responses to Abstract Expressionism associated with post-Minimalism. A variety of gestural marks is evident; and in her favor is that, despite the assorted technical approaches, the work does not rely on novelty for its effect. But neither does the layering communicate process so much as a staging area for gesture.

*“Touch” is on view at James Graham & Sons, 32 East 67 Street, through Nov. 7.*

“THE LEGACY OF Jackson Pollock,” written by Allan Kaprow in 1958, two years after the artist’s death, proved Kaprow to be a kind of Virgil to the underground alternatives to Abstract Expressionism just when the style was at a dead end, or seemingly so. That and subsequent essays continue to demonstrate Kaprow’s value as an artist/theorist, and certain of his pieces remain vital after many years. Yard, originally done for the outside courtyard of the Martha Jackson Gallery (where Hauser & Wirth now stands), is one of them.

Yard is and isn’t a continuation of Abstract Expressionism. Now reinterpreted by three artists around the city—here and in two other boroughs—it reveals differing aspects of itself; in the rendering by William Pope L. inside Hauser & Wirth, tires pile up within the long, dark yet glaringly lit gallery where black plastic embalmed shapes can be almost seen, to cast the once matter-of-fact accumulation as a stagy, macabre reading of the original work.

Now, what is the etiquette for passing through the space as someone is coming at you from within the gallery? “Excuse me, Miss, I’d step aside but I’m about to be swallowed by a vortex of ghoulish inner tubes”?!?

*Yard (To Harrow), 1961/2000, at Hauser & Wirth, 32 East 69 Street, will close Oct. 24.*

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