

GAGOSIAN

Art in America

POEMS WITHOUT WORDS

David Reed exhibited a group of work in 1975 at Susan Caldwell Gallery in New York. A traveling show reunites these Brushstroke paintings for new audiences.

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*David Reed: #64, 1974, oil on canvas, 76 by 56 inches. Goetz Collection, Munich.
All Reed paintings this article © David Reed/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.*

A Parable

At the age of twenty-nine a New York artist has his first solo show. Hanging in the clean white space are nineteen of his recent paintings: gestural abstractions striking for their stacks of bold, modular brushstrokes (mostly black on white grounds) and unusual formats (many of the canvases are exceedingly narrow and tall). Despite being critically well received—one reviewer proclaims the work to be “a new kind of painting, one that recasts the vocabulary of abstraction in a form giving rise to new precisions of feeling”—the show doesn’t do particularly well with collectors: only one painting sells.

In the years to follow the artist leaves behind the limited palette of his early work, as well as its modular compositions. Gesture remains central but his broadening palette of artificial colors and experiments with glazing and translucency gradually lead him away from the reductive strategies of his debut show. Within a decade his passion for Baroque and Mannerist painting—and

memories of Cinemascope Hollywood movies—results in highly complex structures populated with opulent cascades of ribbon brushstrokes.

Rarely reproduced and almost never exhibited, the early paintings (which disappear back into the artist's studio for years after the show) remain largely unknown outside the precincts of downtown Manhattan. Nonetheless, they manage to exert, via word of mouth and the occasional image in an exhibition catalogue or art magazine, a sub-rosa influence on subsequent painters. It's only when the artist enters his seventies that a university art museum mounts a show devoted to these elusive works, enlisting the curatorial help of a somewhat younger and greatly celebrated painter who was affected by them early in his career. The show travels to New York's most prominent gallery, where it includes a number of contextualizing works by other artists, finally returning these by now legendary works to public view in the city of their making after four decades of largely underground existence.

How to Do Things with Paint

The canvas receives a coat of white oil paint. While the paint is still thoroughly wet, a brush loaded with black oil paint is dragged horizontally in a straight line from the top left edge of the painting almost to its right edge. As soon as the stroke is made, the painter dips the brush into the black paint and paints another stroke, slightly below the first one, trying to make it as similar as possible to the preceding stroke. He continues in this way until the canvas is filled, top to bottom, with thick, evenly spaced brushstrokes. The entire process takes only a few minutes, but as he works his way down the canvas, things happen in the brush's wake. Under the force of gravity, the black paint (which he sometimes replaces with mars violet or orange-brown) begins to flow into the white undercoat. Depending on how thick the white paint is and, more important, how much paint the artist loads onto his brush, this downward seepage can be minor or catastrophic, especially along the left side, where the brush is most loaded. On occasion, the downward flow from one brushstroke pushes through the stroke below it, creating an avalanche that threatens to sweep away much of the subsequent mark. When this effect is most extreme, the painting evokes marbled paper or a stalactite-filled cavern. The only means the artist has to control the resulting turbulence is to remove the canvas from the wall and lay it flat on the floor, which he does almost immediately after completing the final brushstroke. One time, in his rush to move the canvas from wall to floor, he drops it: in the finished work a line of disruptions record this jolt, turning the painting into a kind of seismograph.

Whether the canvases are tall and narrow, leaving room only for brushstrokes less than a foot long, or wide enough to permit strokes of more than four feet in length, the number of stacked strokes averages around thirteen or fourteen. Perhaps because the brushstrokes are composed like a page of writing, the number of lines gives them a formal resemblance to a sonnet. This stanzaic quality was noted early on by Paul Auster in an essay for the first show of the Brushstroke canvases. "Each of these paintings," he wrote, "resembles a vast poem without words." In the wider paintings, which are created on abutted canvases, the evocation of poetic form is especially strong: every time the brush traverses the seam between one canvas and another there is a slight disturbance: a vertical line slicing through the stroke. (These vertical segments are also like bar lines on music staff paper.) If we think of the resulting segments as poetic feet (tetrameter, pentameter, etc.) the paintings can be scanned like poems.

Process into Image

I came out of “Painting Paintings (David Reed) 1975” at Gagosian, where I saw this exhibition, thinking that Reed’s Brushstroke paintings were possibly the single most impressive achievement of mid-1970s New York abstraction. This may seem like an audacious claim given that the likes of Brice Marden, Elizabeth Murray, and Frank Stella were also producing memorable paintings at the same time, but Reed’s canvases embody that moment in art history with unique clarity and power. Their strength depends in part on the sheer graphic drama of the brushstrokes as they confront the inescapable facts of gravity and turbulence. Like many other artworks of the 1970s, they narrate their own making. But in contrast to artists such as Dorothea Rockburne or Robert Ryman, who used low-key, oblique strategies, Reed pursued self-referentiality through immediately striking images. In a similar way, he drew painterly motifs out of the entropy-obsessed realm of process art. Reed’s influences include seeing John McLaughlin’s stripped-down paintings as a young man in California, studying at the New York Studio School with the intense Milton Resnick, and inhabiting a gritty New York poised on the verge of the punk era. In his catalogue essay, Richard Hell evokes how musicians and painters worked in “an atmosphere of indifference.” By the time of his first show, which was held in 1975 at Susan Caldwell Gallery, Reed was able to synthesize the reductivist, materialist legacy of everything that had happened to abstract painting since Minimalism and use it to reopen the medium (at a moment when it was widely denigrated) to sensuality, expressivity, and performative presence, to the “new precisions of feeling” noted by Peter Schjeldahl. In other words, he was making not last paintings but first paintings.

The contextualizing works assembled by Katy Siegel and Christopher Wool go some way toward conveying the influences and dialogues swirling around the Brushstroke paintings, but I would have preferred to see fuller representation of the artists Reed was looking at and talking to in the mid-1970s. Of the artists Siegel names in the catalogue as important to Reed at the time including Resnick, Joan Snyder, Jack Whitten, Ree Morton, Murray, Alan Shields, Al Loving, Mary Heilmann, and Guy Goodwin, only one (Whitten, with a great striated abstraction from 1975) was in the show. Paintings by Snyder, Heilmann, and Goodwin (or Michael Venezia, Ralph Humphrey, and Ron Gorchov, whom Reed has cited) would have been more illuminating than the pieces by Dieter Roth and Charles Ray, which seemed only tangentially related. Similarly, one of Philip Guston’s mid-1960s brush-heavy paintings (or even one of the 1970s figurative paintings, with their flurries of dirty, wet-into-wet brushstrokes) would have been preferable to the Cy Twombly on view, especially since Reed encountered Guston at the Studio School.

I also could have done without a small, smudged 2006 painting by Josh Smith. In a conversation with Siegel published in the catalogue, Wool argues that it is Smith’s rejection of all formal issues, his favoring of process over picture-making, that links him to Reed. This seems to me a misreading of Reed, who even at his most process-driven never abdicated the challenge of form, as Smith appears to do. A far more effective selection was Barry Le Va’s shattered-glass floor piece from 1968–71 that underlined Reed’s debt to procedure-based sculpture. The presence of compelling black-and-white paintings by Wool and Joyce Pensato effectively attested to the impact of the New York Studio School, which both artists attended a few years after Reed studied there.

What Is No Longer There

The 1975 Whitney Biennial included only one of the Brushstroke paintings, #48 (1974). In the book accompanying “Painting Paintings,” Reed recounts how he became dissatisfied with this particular canvas, which his “friends, colleagues, supporters” urged him to have removed from the show in favor of a different Brushstroke painting, and how he destroyed it after it came back from the Whitney, a decision he regrets because he now thinks that it may have been his “strongest statement” from that time. Looking at reproductions of #48 it’s clear that Reed was trying something different: on a pair of canvases hung side by side, he has repeated a composition of stacked short horizontal strokes flanked by a long, slightly angled vertical one. The painting is an anomaly on two counts: its doubleness and its heterogeneous structure combining horizontal and vertical strokes. Historically, it looks back to Rauschenberg’s Factum I and Factum II, and ahead to French painter Bernard Piffaretti’s decades-long pursuit of twinned compositions, but it lacks the coherence (visual and conceptual) of the other Brushstroke paintings. Interestingly, marks very similar to the 1970s Brushstroke paintings showed up in Reed’s exhibition of recent work at Peter Blum Gallery in New York in 2016. In an email to me, Reed described how he “wanted to physically reenact the making of those marks” from the 1970s, without setting out “to do something that looked similar.”

Reed’s #48 is not the only vanished component of the 1975 Biennial, which included approximately 130 artists, many of whom, rightly or wrongly, spark little recognition forty-two years on, even in someone like me who devours back issues of art magazines and collects catalogues of long-forgotten exhibitions. Leafing through the ’75 Biennial catalogue—as I have done numerous times, often with great curiosity about the work (seen in black-and-white photographs, usually poorly lit) of artists whose names were previously unknown to me—is a powerful reminder how steep the odds are against any artist’s work winning serious public attention, and how unlikely it was that Reed’s Brushstroke paintings would be remembered and brought back into public view. Perhaps the most effective way to convey this is simply to transcribe the names of all 135 artists. Here is the list, with some random annotations:

Domingo Barreres

W.B. Bearman

Tony Bechara

Gene Beery (one of my favorite artists!)

Allen Edward Bertoldi

Gary Beydler

Ross Bleckner (nothing like the work that would bring him limited success in the 1980s)

Cheryl Bowers

Robin Bruch

Scott Burton

Barry Buxkamper

Sam Cady

Cristiano Camacho

Larry Ray Camp

Sarah Anne Canright

Mel Casas (cool-looking painting titled Anatomy of a White Dog, likely inspired by Romain Gary's book about US racism, White Dog)

Thomas Chimes (a great portrait of Antonin Artaud)

Joseph Clower (smart comic-book-influenced painting)

Phil Douglas Davis

John Dickson (gnarly symmetrical assemblage of cut-up canvases, Richard Jackson meets Al Loving)

Joe Di Giorgio

Paul Dillon

John E. Dowell Jr.

Carol Eckman

William Fares

Frank Faulkner

Kathleen Ferguson

Carole Fisher

John Ford

Kent Foster

Charles F. Gaines

Charles Garabedian

Richard George

Abigail Gerd

Roland Ginzel

Ron Gorchov (who would have looked great in the Gagosian show)

John S. Gordon (wire, glass, and scrawled word tabletop setup)

George Green

Tom Green

Dominick Guida

Leonard L. Hunter III

Miyoko Ito

Jack Jefferson

Pamela Jenrette (bumpy acrylic abstraction that looks like a décollage; the website of Artists Space, where she had a show, notes that she gave up art to “pursue a successful career as a freelance makeup and hair stylist”)

Virginia Johnson

David Jones

Judy Pfaff (a wall and floor scatter piece that counters Reed’s constraint with a kind of dissociative formalism— every time I see a photo of one of Pfaff’s forever vanished early installations, I have to catch my breath)

Tomaso Puliafito

Jerry Jones

Salvatore J. La Rosa

Patricia Lay

Marilyn Lenkowsky

Alvin Light

Carol Lindsley

Kim Robert MacConnel

David Mackenzie

William E. Mahan

Allan McCollum (way before the “Surrogates”: a big funky grid painting)

Jan Lee McComas

Todd McKie

George Miller

Judith Suzanne Miller

Scott Miller

Rudolph Montanez

Philip Mullen

Hiroshi Murata

Hass Murphy

Paula Nees

Stuart Nielson

Rob Roy Norton Jr.

Mary McLean Obering

Carl Palazzolo

Cherie Raciti

Kaare Rafoss

David Reed (notes that Reed lived on lower Broadway in New York City, which, rather amazingly, he still does in 2017)

Roland Reiss

Gregg Renfrow

Philip Renteria

Bill Richards

Judy Rifka (a painting on plywood featuring two irregular geometric shapes; Reed and Rifka were married to each other at the time)

John Scott Roloff

Edward Ross

Barbara Rossi (an acrylic on plexiglass, like those seen last year in her New Museum show)

Barbara Quinn Roth

Edwin Rothfarb (sparse wall-to-floor arrangement with rocks and patterning)

Paul Rotterdam

Ursula Schneider

John Schnell

Barbara Schwartz

Samuel Scott

Rudy Serra (large beautifully proportioned, artfully skewed drywall installation)

Charles Simonds (you can still see his contribution to the Biennial in the stairwell of the Met Breuer)

Alexis Smith (reproduction so sketchy it's impossible to get any idea of the work)

Andrew Spence

Earl Staley (big painting Skull with Landscape features one of the best lists of materials I have ever seen: "acrylic, dirt, glitter"; now in collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)

Barbara Strasen

Gene Sturman

Susanna Tanger

Robert Thiele

Richard Thompson

Ken Tisa

Alan Turner (one of the few straightforwardly figurative paintings; Turner shows with Mitchell Albus)

Alan Uglow (given a posthumous show in 2013 at David Zwirner)

Carolynn Umlauf (aka sculptor Lynn Umlauf)

Thomas M. Uttech

Mary Warner

Robert J. Warrens (outrageous comic-grotesque painting of some sort of warthog or boar by a vigorous New Orleans painter new to me)

Sibyl L. Weil

John Wenger

Wanda Westcoast (née Mary Janet Hansen, 1933–2011, involved with Womanhouse)

Mark Christian Wethli

Edward R. Whiteman

Andrew Wilf

Donald Roller Wilson

Connie Zehr

Elyn Zimmerman

Followed by a separate cohort of “video artists”:

Billy Adler

John Arvanites

George Bolling

Jim Byrne

Juan Downey

Terry Fox

Hermine Freed

Frank Gillette

Joel Glassman

Beryl Korot

Paul Kos

Andy Mann

John Margolies

Anthony Ramone

Allen Ruppertsberg

Ilene Segalove

John Sturgeon

Bill Viola (a description on the Electronic Arts Intermix website for Viola's contribution, a 1973 video titled Information, sounds like it could be describing one of Reed's paintings: "a disintegrating and self-interrupting signal that perpetually reiterates itself")