

Smooth Around the Edges: Pollock Thrives on Paper

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No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, is an exhibition that manages two remarkable feats. It rescues Pollock the man (1912-1956) from the mythos of the hard-drinking, antisocial and self-destructive cowboy, and it liberates Pollock the artist from his worst tendencies as a painter.

Curator Susan Davidson achieves both by focusing on Pollock the draftsman. Pollock was never much of a painter, really; line was his sole strength. The frustration that defines his oeuvre can be traced to a psychological root, but it can also be seen as a reaction to the challenge of constructing pictorial space. Seven “paintings” on paper on view toward the end of the show are typical: Looping skeins of paint congest and ultimately deaden the surfaces. Pollock rarely endowed his paintings with a convincing illusion of space; instead, he strong-armed them into being. Rage and exasperation don’t equal heroic expression.

One of the unique benefits of drawing is that we instinctively read the surface of the page as “containing” space, freeing the artist from needing to compose space as he would in a painting. Pollock came to relish the freedom of drawing, though the realization did not come immediately.

Early on, he tussled—at times painfully—with the paintings of his mentor, Thomas Hart Benton. He also struggled to learn from Native American art, El Greco, Miró and Picasso—always Picasso. Round about 1943, the figurative impulses that would never completely leave Pollock’s art became engulfed in electric fields of scratchy line work. Five years later, he finally *got it*. In a trio of silvery drip pieces from 1948, we see his line discover—and thrive upon—a vital independence. It’s a revelatory moment, brilliantly underscored by the Guggenheim.

The late works on paper are Pollock’s crowning achievement. The ready space of the blank page transformed an inchoate sensibility. There’s an ease to Pollock’s automatist calligraphy—a deeply felt lyricism—but there’s discipline as well. Forget Jack the Dripper: The

pictures are resolutely composed. The tension between spontaneity and control is energizing.

The best of the bunch is an untitled ink-and-watercolor drawing from around 1951, on loan from the Menil Collection. A punchy array of recognizable markings—eyes, an arrow, numbers and the artist's name—are orchestrated within a field of swooping lines, stabbing marks, dots and dabs. The most surprising thing is the gentleness with which Pollock coaxes the elements into fruition. No pain, no strain—what an unexpectedly lovely dénouement. *No Limits, Just Edges* is far too macho a title for the lilting poise of the mature drawings. *Jackson Pollock: Happy Man*—that's more like it.

No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper is at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, until Sept. 29.

Modernish

Guy Pène du Bois (1884-1958) deserves more than a tardy mention, just as he deserves more than a gallery retrospective. Not that James Graham & Sons hasn't provided an indispensable service in mounting the second of two exhibitions dedicated to the American artist's sly and acerbic paintings. We should be grateful to the gallery for picking up the historical slack trailing from our museums.

Perhaps Pène du Bois' vexed relationship with modernism—exemplified at Graham by *Another Expulsion* (1950), in which Masaccio's Adam and Eve are given the bum's rush from a temple of art by a towering Picassoid creature—makes him seem too philistine for contemporary tastemakers. His pictures of sleek young things and arrogant capitalists have a period flavor, not only from the 1920's milieu that fed his vision, but also because of his refusal to subjugate representation, narrative and a caustic strain of moralism to the prerequisites of abstraction. He was a painter of modern life, yes—a modernist, sort of.

Pène du Bois was curious and knowledgeable about the new art, but he was never an out-and-out convert. A deft synthesis of cool sophistication and comic grotesquerie, his mature paintings are unimaginable without the pictorial innovations of modernism, but not that unimaginable. His style owes much to the damning caricatures of Honoré Daumier, the stylizations of Art Nouveau, the skewed compositions of Edgar Degas and the painterly realism of his teacher, Robert Henri.

He reveled in the hypocrisies of entitlement. The finest pictures make an acidic comedy of manners out of the foibles and follies of the well-heeled. Not that the painter himself was immune to the trappings of wealth: He was clearly taken by high fashion, particularly as it applied to women, and ready access to culture. Still, he never let himself be suckered by spectacle. Romance may filter through Pène du Bois' art, but it's always fixed with a dash of vinegar.

Well, almost always. Despite the inclusion of biting pictures like the Whitney's *Mother and Daughter* (1928) and *Father and Son* (1929), the second installment of the retrospective

shows Pène du Bois becoming a kinder, gentler artist toward the latter part of his career. The crash of 1929 reduced an income based on steady painting sales. A bit of financial independence was lost; so, too, was a degree of artistic independence. A softer, more diffuse tone took over—perhaps to appease a social strata (of potential collectors) that he'd previously lampooned.

Enigmatic narratives make up for the lack of vitriol. Is something unsavory happening in *Ace of Spades* (1945)? It's hard to tell. Still, you can't avoid pining for the witty insights and crisp paint handling of the earlier work. For that, you'll have to go to a watercolor-and-ink drawing like *The Hostess* (1930), in which the artist mocks the title figure's pretensions even as he relishes her aristocratic profile and fleshy girth. It's a moment that highlights Pène Du Bois' distinctive gift and its later, but not altogether fatal, diminishment.

Guy Pène du Bois: Painter of Modern Life—Part II: The Mature Years is at James Graham & Sons, 1014 Madison Avenue, until June 30.

More on Paper

Though you might miss it at first glance, there's an informal, almost chatty correspondence between the paintings on paper of Sasha Chermayeff and the collages of Chuck Bowdish, on display at the Sideshow gallery in Williamsburg. Ms. Chermayeff employs a roller, of all things, to create spare and billowing abstractions. Mr. Bowdish imagines distant vistas haunted by isolated figures. The two artists would seem to have little in common.

A deep-seated respect for the characteristics of paper unites them. For Ms. Chermayeff, the white of the page is an equal partner to the trailing ribbons of woodblock ink left by the artist's hand or, in this case, roller. Her broad, colorful swaths, alternately glossy and matte, unfurl across the page with an ease that points to the influence of Asian calligraphy and Willem de Kooning's late paintings. Mr. Bowdish's respect for paper is evinced, paradoxically enough, in the rough-and-tumble manner in which it is torn and reconfigured: The fragility and relative disposability of the material allow for a jarring undercurrent to enter his muffled Surrealist narratives.

Then there's the manner in which the figure asserts itself in the work. Mr. Bowdish populates his collages with characters inspired by the most profound reaches of history, including the arts of Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, Paul Gauguin, Giorgio de Chirico and, er, bondage porno. His idyllic dreamscapes are blessed by sumptuous women; sometimes a lone F.B.I. agent or a factory building marooned in space appears. It's art with curious intentions and ambitious reach, and it hits the mark.

The figurative impulse informing Ms. Chermayeff's paintings is more obscured, yet just as insistent and perhaps a bit sexier. Her forms—they're too wide to be called lines, too resilient to be bars—slope and shimmy in a way that recalls Ingres' exacting contours. Certainly Ms. Chermayeff's nuanced approach to structure and surface offers an analogue for muscle and skin. It's within specialized formats—in the compressed scale of a suite of 30

small paintings or the expansive verticality of fold-out books—that Ms. Chermayeff refines the musicality of the body’s rhythms and processes most compellingly.

Sasha and Chuck is at Sideshow, 319 Bedford Avenue, until July 17.

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