

# Paintings of George McNeil stimulate vision and memory

George McNeil: The Past Twenty Years, through Dec. 31 at the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, 426 E. Las Olas Blvd. Telephone 463-5184.

Turn to almost any text surveying the major movements in American art during the past 40 years and you'll find the same roster of names associated with the so-called Abstract Expressionists: Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell.

The list is certainly prestigious when one traces the visual accomplishments and aesthetic motivations evoked by this illustrious band of formal non-conformists. These are the superstars of contemporary painting, a cast of characters who stimulated the critics and provoked the public.

The name George McNeil is most always absent from such photoplay salutes to the origins and encampments of 20th century American painting. And though a contemporary of such giants as Hans Hofmann, from whom, McNeil once stated, he formulated "an idea about abstract art," this less conspicuous painter has remained seemingly content in his role as a supporting player.

That McNeil was born in New York City in 1908 and had his first one-man show in 1941 seems to be the most frequent dialogue.

The much used and much abused designation of Abstract Expressionism was coined in the 1950s to describe the work of non-geometric painters. But the impetus of a generally non-representational mode in painting was actually formulated decades earlier, back to the art of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, who worked mostly in Germany, and in America during the teens and 1920s with the abstractions of Arthur G. Dove and the youthful Georgia O'Keeffe. A movement of artists with similar formalistic temperaments became more distinct during the 1940s with Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock and extended to many of the New York painters of the day even at a time when Abstract Expressionism *per se* was neither wholly abstract — as with the work of de Kooning and Gottlieb — nor decidedly expressionistic — witness Rothko and Kline at the outset.

Modernist critic Harold Rosenberg disliked the term and proposed an alternative designation "action painting." For Rosenberg, the physical act of applying paint was the prime consideration for

these artists. Subject matter or the lack of it, in effect, enabled these artists to find satisfaction and make a visual statement through the act of creating rather than by the finished product itself.

Gradually, this new orthodoxy in painting progressed into many diverse formulations under the umbrella label of Abstract Expressionism. Yet, certain features remain relatively constant: an aggressive application of paint, feeling of automatism and spontaneity of process, and essentially imageless subject matter to stimulate the senses of the viewer.

Abstract Expressionism was born as a post-war rebellion to established visual purviews, an anti-formal method of painting where artists tried to express and solve their dilemmas in the range of complexities encountered in contemporary life.

For five decades George McNeil has never ventured far from the heartbeat of American abstraction. In the 1920s, McNeil began looking to the School of Paris for inspiration. Picasso and Matisse were his principal beacons, as well as the Americans Stuart Davis and John Graham. Immigrant German painter Hans Hofmann provided the connection between the schools of Paris and New York for McNeil when the latter was a student at the Art Students League.

According to critic Carter Ratcliff, it was not until McNeil "... began to generate figures that the world of his art became the challenging, trance-filled realm it is today. A long intense struggle led McNeil away from recognizable objects to spontaneous, non-figurative gesture, and then back again ..."

George McNeil: The Last Twenty Years, currently at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, is therefore one of those rare and welcomed period retrospectives which pays homage to a living master through the revelations of mature work.

This display of nearly 40 canvases succeeds in blitzing the spectator with a raw energy, a joyous frenzy of colors, activated forms and glossary of ostensibly primordial forms. But the titles the artist chooses, such as *Large Punk Rock*, *East Hampton Beautiful Person* and *Joey Loves Milly*, belie misconceptions of a "final phase" in the art of George McNeil. He is definitely here and now.

At age 74, McNeil surveys the phenomenon of punk rock musical performers without suspicion or



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ridicule, but as reflections of the current cultural scene. The figures in the large canvas of 1980 presents looming, glowering heads with opened, rubbery mouths. Huge fingers clutch microphones (labeled as such) while muddled shades of green and blue become vibrating complexions encased in a contour of smeary yellow. One is certainly reminded of the grinning earth-mother images de Kooning used to paint — specifically his dashing, full-lipped portrayal in oozing paint entitled *Marilyn Monroe*.

We may compare the effect of cult images to be sure, but McNeil has taken the figural theme somewhat farther. And if the impact of the artist's throbbing pigments reminds us of CoBrA art or the emotional forays of the turn-of-the-century German Expressionists, so be it. The taint is actually quite minimal.

McNeil's art exudes a resounding confidence, not only in the dynamics of execution, but also the attitudes of his globular figures. The playful imp in the brownie's hat of *Penitente* (1975), the hulking presence of *Shouter* (1972), and lithe resilience of *Pompeian Figure* (1973) are McNeil's performers. Besides their pictorial context as representation, the figures serve the formal directives of the surface they reside in. *Red Shoe Dancer* (1980), for example, divides the composition in bold diagonals, divided by shots of red and deep green. The power of color juxtapositions is sparked by the activity of these undulating figures. Similarly, the richly hued compartments of *Threesome* (1980), where blocks of color are reminiscent of Hans Hofmann's chromatic walls, is to McNeil an arrangement of humanoid forms drifting like spacemen across a murky void.

True to the dictums on non-figural Abstract Expressionism, McNeil's paintings have no vanishing points. Landscapes do not exist. Instead, these mute beings cavort within fields of color as symbols of both social observance and media bombardment, and McNeil is often the explosive spokesman for this selective parade. A massive hand thrusts one swirling *Passing Beauty* (1981) to the forefront. A specta-

tor ogles at a large exposed breast. In another, the figure in *Asking* (1980) is framed between the legs of a female dancer, a spotted bow tie anchoring his imploring look. The sexual imagery here is clear in sync with the pictorials of an open and permissive society. But McNeil makes no judgments as he records.

The "Shaman" figures found in the earliest pieces in the show are in many ways the key to McNeil's pictorial schemes, and these witch doctors and provocateurs are at the root of all later excursions. The distance between this 20-year cycle is not so great, however, as to disguise new roles. When large and iconic, as in *Salome Figure No. 3* (1978), these goggle-eyed faces are the structural supports of a tight composition. But when incorporated into scenes like *Shaman and Magic Birds* (1980), the feeling is one of frolic and ambiguous narrative — qualities absent from the points of view of other Abstract Expressionists.

Besides microphones, a zooming jet liner wafts across *Kinsoko Bird* (1981), disturbing a bejeweled stork. These are the same angular birds found in McNeil's New Mexico fantasy painted in 1981, which posture like erect tribal totems or attain the decorative merit of sensuous stained glass design. But always the heavy, often violent impact of paints brings surface textures into the maze of sight and action. How else would the startling *Devil's Party* (1981) grab us with its lusty masks and mayhem of exotic feathers?

The art of George McNeil will be a discovery in emotion and sensibilities for most, though you may need blinders to consider these aggressively colored paintings piece to piece. The effects are enveloping and the monumentality of the figures and creatures do antagonize the eye. George McNeil reveals to us that day to day stimuli and "points without the least hesitation at the pleasures and terrors of an entire lifetime," as stated by Carter Ratcliff.

George McNeil paints to stimulate the vision and the memory, not to gratify the precepts of established good taste.



*Pere Ubu and Friends* (1982), acrylic on canvas by George McNeil.



*Joey Loves Milly* is an oil on canvas McNeil painted in 1967.