



Artist George McNeil in his Brooklyn studio in 1992.

Courtesy of Jonathon Santlofer

McNeil's mastery

Hyde exhibit focusing on the artist's late paintings

By Stacey Morris
Staff Writer

GLENS FALLS — The Hyde Collection will showcase the late paintings of George McNeil in an exhibition opening Sunday in the Charles R. Wood Gallery.

"George McNeil: The Late Paintings 1980-1995" will be on view through Aug. 22.

The exhibit is curated by Hyde Executive Director Kathleen Monaghan, who said the 17 major paintings on display will focus on the last 15 years of the 60-year career of the prolific artist and master colorist's work.

The painter, who lived well into his 90s, had a career so extensive, Monaghan said, it would be impossible for the museum to do a full retrospective on his work.

"McNeil never got the attention I feel he deserved," she said. "The integrity of his work was even throughout his lifetime, unlike other artists who had 'good' decades."

The New Criterion critic Mario Naves said in 1998 that McNeil "is a better artist than (Jackson) Pollock ever was."

"The Late Paintings 1980-1995" highlights the works executed while McNeil was in his 70s and 80s and examines a fundamental shift in McNeil's approach to space and the overall dynamic of the canvas.

Abstract figuration, which crept into McNeil's work in the late '50s, continues to mark the work from 1980 to 1995 but moves toward what the artist described as a cohesive, explosive atmosphere.

Monaghan described the essence of abstract expressionism as the breaking down of form in an active and emotional way.

"McNeil's paintings are active psychological studies," she said. "Some of them are derived from nature but not taken from nature. ... They're about what he feels,

not what he sees."

The pieces during this 15-year period are vibrant, narrative gestures of urban attitude. The canvases dance with sophisticated outbursts of rich color and the jangling drama of contemporary life: streets, discos, traffic, people and rhythm.

Both painterly and playful, Monaghan said, the imagined works respond genuinely to the hipness of the New York City scene surrounding him — leaping beyond the walls of the same Brooklyn studio this solitary artist kept for 47 years.

Born in Brooklyn, George McNeil (1908-1995) is one of the first generation of American artists to continuously work in a modern tradition. He was educated at the Pratt Institute, the Art Students League and Columbia University Teachers College.

McNeil also studied under German Expressionist artist Hans Hoffman (1880-1966), whom McNeil credits with teaching him "the big ideas about space." He joined the WPA in the 1930s and served on the Federal Art Project with Willem de Kooning.

In 1936, McNeil was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists, a group of painters guided by geometry and European abstraction in reaction to the rejection of this contemporary art movement by museums and galleries. AAA published brochures defending abstract art and organized annual exhibitions of works by its members. Also at this time, McNeil was producing what he described as "carefully shaped abstractions."

In the '50s, during the height of the abstract expressionist era, McNeil's work flourished. Working with the canvas on the floor, the artist would approach the piece from all sides, a technique he continued to use throughout the rest of his life.

During this period, McNeil served as director of the evening school at Pratt Institute, where he maintained a teaching post from 1948 to 1980. It was his ability as

an instructor of painting and of art history that secured his reputation as an extraordinary teacher and human being.

The neo-expressionism of the '80s brought renewed attention to McNeil and his work. The seventysomething artist, who referred to himself as an "unreconstructed expressionist," found it amusing to become a prominent figure amongst the emerging young artists of that decade.

Monaghan said, "Once you've seen a George McNeil, it's easy to understand why he's such a compelling artist."

In addition to the 17 paintings, the exhibit features six works on paper selected from public and private collections. The fully illustrated catalog has essays by well-known art critic and lecturer Eleanor Heartney as well as former graduate assistant to George McNeil, artist, teacher and writer Jonathan Santlofer. The exhibition also includes a video interview with the artist.

"George McNeil: The Late Paintings 1980-1995" was organized at The Hyde Collection and will travel to the North Dakota Museum of Art in September.

The exhibition, catalog and video production are made possible through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts; Niagara Mohawk Foundation; Finch, Pruyn & Co. Inc.; Glens Falls Cement Co.; and the Glens Falls National Bank and Trust Co. George McNeil is represented by Hirschl and Adler Galleries, New York.

The Hyde Collection art museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday and Thursday evenings until 7 p.m. The museum is closed national holidays. Admission is free. For information, call 792-1761.

On the cover: George McNeil's 1991 oil on canvas, "Tillance Place." From the collection of Richard Shebairo.