

# ARTFORUM

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

## Harvey Quaytman

BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

An underrecognized figure within the history of modernist abstraction, Harvey Quaytman (1937–2002) worked at the crossroads of Abstract Expressionism, constructivism, and Minimalism while developing his own deeply idiosyncratic approach that both internalized and transformed these various models. The artist's first retrospective, organized by Apsara DiQuinzio at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, is a revelation. Presenting more than seventy works, grouped according to a number of distinct phases in his oeuvre, the exhibition allows viewers to witness Quaytman's inventiveness with medium and process and to marvel at the strange, beautiful objects he produced. Long considered an "artist's artist," Quaytman was a New York painter of the kind that is now basically extinct, living and working in a rented studio on the Bowery from the early 1970s through the late '90s, occupying an artistic and social milieu vividly remembered

by his daughter, the artist R. H. Quaytman, in her moving essay for the exhibition's catalogue.

Quaytman's early explorations of drawn, painted, and poured gestural marks, represented in the show by a number of de Kooningesque works from the early '60s, soon gave way to shaped paintings, where the sense of movement is created by the arabesque contours of the canvas itself. Unlike the reductive approach of his contemporary Frank Stella, Quaytman's process led to eccentrically shaped forms (inspired by Islamic calligraphy, rocking chairs, and the flight patterns of airplanes and birds) and insistently handcrafted works (he steamed and bent the wooden stretchers himself). His so-called rocker paintings, such as *A Street Called Straight*, 1970; *Harmonica YP*, 1972; and *Araras*, 1973, consist of large rectangular canvases with curved lower edges, precariously poised upon separately constructed U-shaped platforms that resemble basins or troughs, which both contain and accentuate the back and forth motion they conjure.

For all his innovations involving shape, Quaytman made his most original contributions in the realms of color and facture. He would crush and grind pure pigment and dust it over an acrylic adhesive, which he would then rake with a large wallpaper brush, creating velvety, luminous fields of color—combinations of deep purples or cobalt blues and yellows—that glint and shimmer, as if candlelit. As they dried, the thick layers of pigment-encrusted acrylic developed fissures and craters, recalling a kind of extraterrestrial topography. He also incorporated ground glass, marble dust, sand, and wax to enhance sheen and texture—or used iron filings sprayed with water to create rusted surfaces. It is no wonder he was frequently called an alchemist.

In the '80s, Quaytman began his cruciform paintings: serial investigations of a cross shape within constructivist, rectilinear compositions that relied on a reduced palette of black, white, red, rusted iron, and metallic gold. While these paintings represented a stark departure from his previous work, Quaytman continued to pursue visual movement as he played, magician-like, with symmetry and asymmetry to keep the forms ambiguous and the viewer's eye engaged. His crosses appear and disappear, camouflaged within a gridded ground, as in *The Miller's Delight*, 1992, or impossibly lopsided, in works such as *Walnut*, *Slate*, *Clay*, 1997, and *Pegasus*, 1998. Look, and look again.

Quaytman worked iteratively and intuitively, generating incremental, stepwise solutions to particular sets of formal constraints or conventions until his solutions themselves became another set of conventions to interrogate and in turn surpass. In other words, by following the rules—by fully inhabiting them—he managed to exceed them. While he began his career at a time when painting had

been declared dead, he demonstrated that neither artistic medium nor history itself is ever so cut-and-dried. His relationship to the past was neither ironically superficial nor regressively nostalgic; rather, it was a mnemonic attempt to fully understand and acknowledge history as something still active and alive in the present—a status that his own work, thanks in part to this exhibition, has likewise achieved.

—Gwen Allen



Harvey Quaytman, *Araras*, 1973, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 87 × 87".