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Man Out of Time: Milton Resnick at Mana Contemporary

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Milton Resnick (1917-2004): Paintings and Works on Paper from the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation at Mana Contemporary

May 10 to August 1, 2014

888 Newark Avenue (at Senate Place)

Jersey City, 1 800 842 4945

Installation view, “Milton Resnick (1917-2004): Paintings and Works on Paper from the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Collection,” 2014, Mana Contemporary. Courtesy of Mana Contemporary.

Milton Resnick deserves recognition greater than what he has received until now. This large show of work covering his entire career, presented in immaculate galleries at the epic-sized Mana Contemporary arts complex in Jersey City, goes a considerable distance to recognizing Resnick’s contributions. From the start to the end, he was a painter of high courage and integrity — someone who belonged to the first generation of Abstract Expressionists but who never quite found the validation he is worthy of. At this fine show we have much of his *oeuvre* in a single place, where his contribution can be assessed from the vista of his entire career for the first time. Photos of his pictures cannot do justice to the rough but exquisite surfaces he came to paint over the decades of his efforts; there exists within the body of Resnick’s art a vision that promises to be seen not as tangential but rather central to the New York School’s early history. In fact, the Mana show makes it clear that we have missed integrating Resnick’s art into the accomplishments of the New York School’s first generation. His gifts, from the early colorful efforts to the final depressive, but marvelously rough paintings accompanied by simple figures, clearly need to be organized within a revised understanding of the art of his time.

It is surprising to see Resnick as a somewhat neglected painter, in large part because he was so much in the thick of things in New York. Born in 1917 in Bratslav, Ukraine, Resnick immigrated to New York in 1922 with his parents, where the family took up residence in Brooklyn. He took art classes at Hebrew Technical Institute, Pratt and the American Artist’s School between 1929 and 1934. Unfortunately, his father disapproved of his studies in art and forced him to leave the family’s home. He began a relationship with Elaine Fried around 1935, but she left him for Willem de Kooning in 1938. During the Depression he worked for the WPA and he served in the US Army during the Second World War. Afterward, he became a founding member of the Artist’s Club and was friendly with Franz Kline, Arshile Gorky and de Kooning himself.

In 1948, Resnick met and later married Pat Passlof, a fellow painter, and traveled to Europe, but he was unable to paint there due to emotional difficulties. He returned to New York and in 1951 he helped organize the noted “Ninth Street Show.” At the

beginning of the 1970s, Passlof and Resnick separated, with Resnick living in the upstate New York town Rifton. Max Hutchison Galley began showing his work in 1972, and continued to through the early '80s. In 1975, he and Passlof reconciled. In 1984, after decades of abstraction, he started to incorporate figurative imagery in his work. By 2000, Resnick had begun suffering from arthritis, which made it impossible for him to stand and paint, though he continued to work on paper. Then, in March 2004, distressed over his illness and his difficulties working, he took his life at home in New York. Resnick was recognized by the New York art world, but never to the extent to which his contemporaries gained fame.

Resnick's art realized a considerable amount, both graphically in the overall gestalt of the painting and, as he developed, texturally in the surface of his art. Even early paintings by Resnick display great perspicacity. An untitled oil on board from 1946 nicely demonstrates how sophisticated a painter he was even before turning 30. In this small work, we see some of de Kooning's influence, his organic forms echoed in Resnick's work of this time. Biomorph yellow, purple, black and red forms, along with two small, green squares, embellish an off-white ground, communicating a lyric experience to Resnick's audience. This poetic tone never entirely leaves; it remains even when he starts to paint according to a darker vision.

Resnick's art throughout evinces a thorough interest in surface; and this becomes clearer as time goes on. During the 1970s and '80s he began making exceptionally rough, striated exteriors, nearly minimal in appearance. In a very large (more than 10 feet long), untitled work of 1975, the application of paint is deliriously thick, building up and off the canvas to the point of low relief. The color of this horizontal painting, an olive green with hints of yellow underneath, shows us that his gifts included experimentation with color in highly original ways. Here Resnick exhibits his talent for understated color, as well as his penchant for an impasto surface. Melancholy in feeling, the painting's muted hues bear an ongoing, and deeply moving, emotional stance. *Straws in the Wind II* (1981), another big, horizontal painting, continues the artist's interest in a heavy build-up in paint; its color, a dark charcoal listing toward black, is dense with excrescences, adds a heightened tangibility to its roughened surface.

One finds these works embracing gloominess in the 1980s, and the emotional register of his work remains substantially the same for the rest of his career, being oriented toward a dark, emotional palette. The show also makes it clear that the figure entered into Resnick's paintings late in his career. In one 30-by-40-inch canvas from 1989 we see him playing with imagistic art: two dark, blue and flesh-colored figurative forms occupy the middle of the painting. However, they could equally be read as abstractions in the midst of a highly original, sharply idiosyncratic black ground. One seeks, mostly unsuccessfully, an outlet enabling escape from the gravitas of the picture, which offers a relentless surface and small room for egress. The painting's bleak mood would be repeated again and again in the late paintings Resnick made.

Likely the most pertinent fact about Resnick is his emotional intensity. But even as his pictures communicate his drift into depression, you can see him working hard on a tangible surface that remains a statement about art rather than a personal treatment of his psychology. The paintings, both early and late, are so consistently high in their achievement, they must be seen as representative of a major artist.

One hesitates to ascribe too much of a psychological reading on seeing a body of work by a man whose tragic end is difficult to accept; however, such an interpretation might well describe the general tenor of his output, difficult as it is. One has to weigh the melancholy of these final paintings against the tragedy of Resnick's suicide. Clearly, they

communicate a more and more isolated psychological state; the artist's viewers are reminded throughout of his death to come as they contemplate his morose art. Resnick lived his artistic life under the shadow of more famous painters, but that fact should not be allowed to diminish his ambition and his reach. Indeed, his accomplishments are not to be denied; his paintings expand the spectrum of the Abstract Expressionists who used paint as a physical entity, artists such as Pollock and de Kooning. In the thicket of his surfaces, we see the AbEx demand that we look at paint simply as paint, so that the surface is neither given to narration nor to intellectual content. It is what it is. At the same time, we do not do justice to Resnick if we walk away from some sense of a personal presence in his pictures. The emotional depth of his abstraction is highly impressive, and must be seen that way. In a way, he survives because his art communicates negative feeling in magisterial ways — a bit of a contradiction, perhaps, but one that asserts the truth of his career.