

HYPERALLERGIC

Stephen Maine

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2018

Bringing Milton Resnick Back into the Picture

For some months now, visitors to Manhattan's Lower East Side have been stopping in at 87 Eldridge Street for a sneak preview of the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation's sleek new headquarters, housed in the disused synagogue that was Resnick's home and studio for two and a half decades. The not-for-profit Foundation was established in 2015; opening celebrations, including tours of the building and a reception, are scheduled for today and tomorrow. Beautifully framed by the restoration work of Ryall Sheridan Architects, the inaugural exhibition, *Milton Resnick: Paintings 1937–1987*, will remain on view through December. For Resnick enthusiasts, the show and the site are must-sees, of course, and to viewers still unfamiliar with this chronically unheralded painter, the Foundation offers an opportunity for a revelation.

Born in Bratslav, Ukraine, in 1917, Resnick might have entered his family's thriving construction business but for the Russian Revolution and its bloody aftermath, which prompted Resnick's parents to decamp to the US in 1922 (joining a wave of immigrants whose influx of talent, skill, and creative energy contributed immeasurably to this country). Following a period of training — in drafting at the Hebrew Technical School, and in what was then called “commercial art” at Pratt — Resnick enrolled in the American Artists School in 1933. By the late '30s, while working on the WPA, he'd befriended Willem de Kooning and met many other denizens of the downtown art world.

A period of personal and professional disruption followed. Resnick was drafted into the Army in 1940 and served until 1945. After the war he returned to Europe and painted in Paris for two years. Partly due to his age (born five years after Jackson Pollock, he's considered the youngest member of the group), and partly because wider recognition eluded him until a well-received solo show at Howard Wise Gallery in 1960, Resnick isn't often considered among the most prominent figures of the first generation of the Abstract Expressionists. The present exhibition, which emphasizes Resnick's most productive years and most formally radical painting, makes a strong case for his unique contribution to Postwar American art.

By the late 1950s, with works such as “Boston” (1959, 50 x 40 inches; all works oil on canvas) and “Whelan” (1959, 70 x 50 inches), Resnick had arrived at a distinctive approach to his generation's existential confrontation with the void of the canvas — an insistent, fluttering brushstroke sustained across the entire visual field, shifting dramatically in hue but not by much in scale. Figure/ground relationships are indistinct when they exist at all; ruptures in pictorial space are avoided in favor of a relentlessly present mark-making, a polychrome monsoon that seems a descendant of Turner's “tinted steam.” In a beautiful passage from *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School*, Geoffrey Dorfman's engrossing volume of interviews and lectures, the artist describes his motivation in a vocabulary of pure intuition:

“I go and put some paint there and at a certain moment it is like I am buoyant. It has an expanded height, a quality in which I feel I'm lifted. I say, “Now I have to hold on to this

feeling.” So I walk around and say, “Have I got this feeling?” and I put some paint down and say, “No, I haven’t quite got it.” I put it here and I put it there and suddenly I hit it again and that reinforces the feeling and then it goes on. It’s like a day spent with futility. And then that grows and the months and days and pounds grow at the same time ‘til I feel as if I can actually hang by the emotion of applying paint to where it is missing, where it needs more or where it needs to be taken away. I don’t know why it should weigh four hundred pounds or more; I didn’t deliberately make it heavy. It grows heavy because at a certain moment I think, “Where is the end of this silly, crazy thing I’m doing? How far do I have to go before it is so dense, so compact, nothing will escape?”

Indeed, from the early 1960s through 1985 or thereabouts, whatever atmospheric quality the earlier paintings possessed was squeezed out, banished.

Resnick implies in the same interview with Dorfman that his interest in the physicality of paint as a *substance*, of which color is not necessarily the most important or even the most interesting quality, might be traced back to the artist’s encounter with the dense all-over abstractions being done by his friend Max Schnitzler in the late 1930s... sometimes it takes a while to process these things. That compositional strategy emerged in Resnick’s work at a time when he was trying to figure out how to make large paintings in a small studio. Again from Dorfman’s book: “As I worked I began to realize that it is not so much getting back to look at it as how you work when you can’t see it—how to stay with the picture so you can keep working—work from where you are.”

The somber, delicately grayed-out “Winter X” (1975, 90 x 80 inches) dates from that chapter in Resnick’s life; a few years later, the even more enormous paintings he was doing in the capacious Eldridge Street space, such as “Elephant” (1979, 109 x 210 inches) and “Veil of Isis” (1985, 75 x 124 inches), fully realize the weird potential of a procedure that obviates the need to step back and survey the work in progress. “Veil of Isis” is truly encrusted and seems to sag under the weight of a skin of paint the color of iron, mahogany, peat, and ashes; “Elephant” is similar (perhaps cooler) in coloration, its surface slightly translucent in places and, while also outrageously tactile, more open to the play of light across its surface.

The Foundation is preparing to house yet another elephantine painting, “New Bride” (1963, 109 x 210 inches), which has been at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and will soon be seen on Eldridge Street on extended loan. It will be fascinating to measure this painting’s pale, whitish palette and blue underpainting against the later, more visually massive canvases. Presumably, Resnick’s late, figurative work will be the subject of a future exhibition; at

present, the artist’s last studio, a closet-like space on the building’s third floor, is preserved as it was at his death in 2004. A major exhibition of Pat Passlof’s work is slated for 2019. The Foundation’s [website](#) features superb images of the works on view, as well as information on this weekend’s events and future programming. There is every reason to believe that the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation will become a fixture on the Manhattan gallery-goer’s circuit.

Milton Resnick: Paintings 1937–1987 continues at the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation (87 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through the end of December.