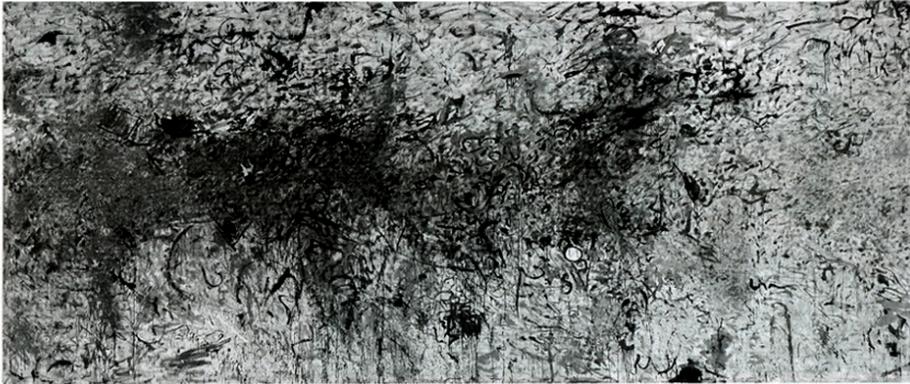


Milton Resnick *A Question of Seeing*
 Cheim & Read May 1 – June 20, 2008



Milton Resnick, "Swan" (1961). Oil on canvas. 116 3/4" x 273 5/8". Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

You don't so much look at a Milton Resnick painting as step into it, like an elevator shaft. Unmoored from the formal constraints of space and form, Resnick's picture plane vaporizes into an arena of agitated indeterminacy—a nebulous interlacing of strokes darting with the incessant motion of acute anxiety.

More than a painter's painter, Resnick (1917-2004) was an artist's artist whose radical aesthetic drove him to extremes of spiritual purity in his work and genuine indifference, even hostility, to the makings of a career. As the youngest member of the original Abstract Expressionist vanguard, he has often been overlooked as a part of that generation—most recently, and inexplicably, by the current *Action/Abstraction* show at the Jewish Museum—even though he belonged to the 8th Street Club and worked in close contact with Willem de Kooning, Philip Pavia, Franz Kline and others during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The works at Cheim & Read document the most crucial and difficult years of Resnick's development, when his long involvement with the extended brushstroke came to an end and he shifted to a startling new approach. This change took place after a hiatus in Paris, where his wife, the painter Pat Passlof, pursued her art while he concentrated on his poetry. Curiously, it was during this same period (1959-1961) that Sonny Rollins halted his public performances and took his famous sabbatical under the Williamsburg Bridge, but more pertinently, Resnick's crisis came soon after Jackson Pollock's untimely death in 1956 and Ad Reinhardt's 1957 manifesto, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," which demanded a radical cleansing of painting, with "No texture / No brushwork / No drawing / No forms..." Reinhardt's madcap militancy never inhabited Resnick's work, but the manifesto reflected the urgency felt by that generation of artists, at that moment in time, to remake their art from the ground up. Upon returning to New York, Resnick commenced working on his breakthrough painting, the mammoth, all-white "New Bride" (1961-1963), now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

Eight of the nine pictures on display precede "New Bride," and one, "Wedding" (1962), was painted while it was in progress. Viewed a half-century after their creation, divorced from the style was raging at the time (Jasper

Johns' "Flag" and Frank Stella's "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" were already part of the conversation), a fundamental difference becomes apparent between Resnick's achievement and that of his AbEx peers. His paintings never reach a point of classical resolution (like de Kooning, Rothko or Newman) or a sensation of release (like Pollock, Kline or Still); rather, they feel suspended in a condition of precarious vulnerability. Their embrace of instability and their undertow of harrowing randomness (even at their most joyously colored) feel as contemporary as the Deconstructivist designs of Coop Himmelb(l)au and Peter Eisenman. The first artist I thought of when I saw the epic "Swan" (1961; from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth) was not de Kooning, Pollock or Kline, but Mark Bradford, who was born the year it was painted.

On a superficial level, the flurry of brush marks in a work like "Swan" or "Tilt to the Land" (1959) bears some parallels to what Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) was doing around the same time, but with Mitchell there's always the sense that the last stroke has been applied, that the chaos has been contained. This doesn't happen with Resnick. A painting like "Genie" (1959; borrowed from the Whitney) is all electricity, with bars of energy rising diagonally from intimate pinks and dusky purples to converge in an explosion of acidic blues and dirty yellows. The volatility coursing through the brushstrokes doesn't concede finality; the surface feels unlocked and exposed to any new mark, any further shift of direction. It's as if the artist, having blown past the safe haven of pictorial logic to the outer reaches of open-endedness, has brought the painting process to a close only after its aesthetic irresolution has properly addressed his state of emotional upheaval.

Until his temporary break with painting, Resnick kept his art on the move, from elegantly scalloped shapes to thickly outlined impasto blocks to the blizzard of brushstrokes covering the canvases in this show. But even within the exhibition's narrow timeframe, the work varies wildly. "Y + R" (1958) and "Burning Bush" (1959; from the Museum of Modern Art) are both dark, heavy collisions of moldering greens and smoldering cadmiums, while "AS.2" (also 1959) is spring-like and airy, a tangle of lightly brushed, vibrant colors with an odd, pearl-white triangle jutting down from the top. Two more

works from '59, both untitled, seem to struggle against the tyranny of pictorial allusion (as does "Burning Bush" with its Soutine-wobbly smears evoking a vortex of flame and what could be a stone—or a cowering Moses—in the lower right) while glorying in the inspiration of nature.

"Tilt to the Land" and "Swan" face off across the gallery's main room like a rivalry of titans. These paintings are immense—104 1/4 x 190 1/4 inches for "Land" and 116 3/4 x 273 5/8 inches for "Swan." In "Tilt to the Land," teeming strokes of red, green, yellow and blue cluster into patches of exuberant sunlight and rosy shadow, while "Swan" is dominated by a stripped-down palette of blacks and grays, spreading like an immense plume of smoke over the white ground. In this painting more than any other, Resnick employs an extreme heterogeneity of mark-making—squiggles, smudges, circles, curlicues, blots, drips and spatters—in dazzling rhythms that lash the surface in a hyperkinetic frenzy. After a few moments' gaze, a series of sharp cerulean dashes materializes out of the achromatic tumult, followed by scrubbed washes of terra verde and yellow-green; once you notice them, their break with the overriding scheme becomes the most important part of the work—like the soprano solo in the last movement of Mahler's Fourth—simultaneously bold and nuanced, improbable and predestined, Parnassian and humane.

"Wedding" is the last piece in the show. An aggressively unbroken surface swarming with jewel-like encrustations of red, yellow, orange, and blue over a dense, unnamable cast of violet-green, this painting is such an astonishing departure that to compare it with a prior work like "Genie" does little to contextualize it—in fact, it creates even greater distance. Resnick's abandonment of the self-contained linear stroke comes across as neither a repudiation of, nor liberation from, a longstanding practice; rather, it conveys an acceptance of the inevitable at the risk of the incomprehensible. The painting's ethereal presence seems to suggest that, after years of painful struggle, the artist no longer saw the point of the oppositional paradigm embedded in most Western painting (distilled to the "push / pull" maxim of Hans Hofmann, in whose classes Resnick was nominally enrolled under the G.I. Bill) and struck all of it, the boundaries and the contrasts, from his formal vocabulary, leaving nothing on the canvas but the tragic ecstasy of his stubborn, solitary vision.

Despite its rigorously paired-down means, Resnick's rupture with Abstract Expressionism is not a party to Minimalism's insistent materiality. Space is not denied but severely compressed. You still step into the painting, but its energy has altered from discordant flux to dynamic stasis. As with "Swan," colors appear and retreat over time, but the effect is so condensed, so sensuous and compelling, that it hurts to tear your eyes away. The seemingly permeable surface—a cloudlike slab of pigment, texture and touch—exerts a pull that, in the subtlety of its seduction, can be felt only in the presence of the work. At the inception of a decade in which critical thinking embraced mechanical reproduction and the dematerialization of art, Resnick's paintings became inseparable from their aura, as thick as asphalt and ineffable as smoke.

—Thomas Michelli