

ARTIST

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SECTION II THURSDAY, MAY 29, 2008

GALLERY-GOING

Eluding the Canon

By DAVID COHEN

A late starter or a painter ahead of his time? An earnest also-ran or a prickly, enigmatic genius? Too sensual or too hermetic? Milton Resnick was a first-generation abstract expressionist fated — in his lifetime, at least — to elude the canon of that defining 20th-century American art movement.

And the legacy of this artist, who died in 2004, is still up for grabs, although if any show will persuade waverers of his sumptuous lyricism and high purpose, it is the stunning display of work from the period 1959–63 at Cheim & Read. This is the first show at this gallery since it assumed representation of his estate earlier this year.

That Resnick knew everyone yet went against the grain is a contradiction that makes sense of the heady, romantic, existentialist milieu of which he was so indicative a figure. Born in the Ukraine in 1917, he fled the Russian Civil War as a child with his family, heading to Brooklyn via Cuba, and was thrown out of his father's house when he determined to become a painter. A strikingly handsome man, eloquent, poetic, tortuously self-questioning yet fiercely critical and didactic, he could

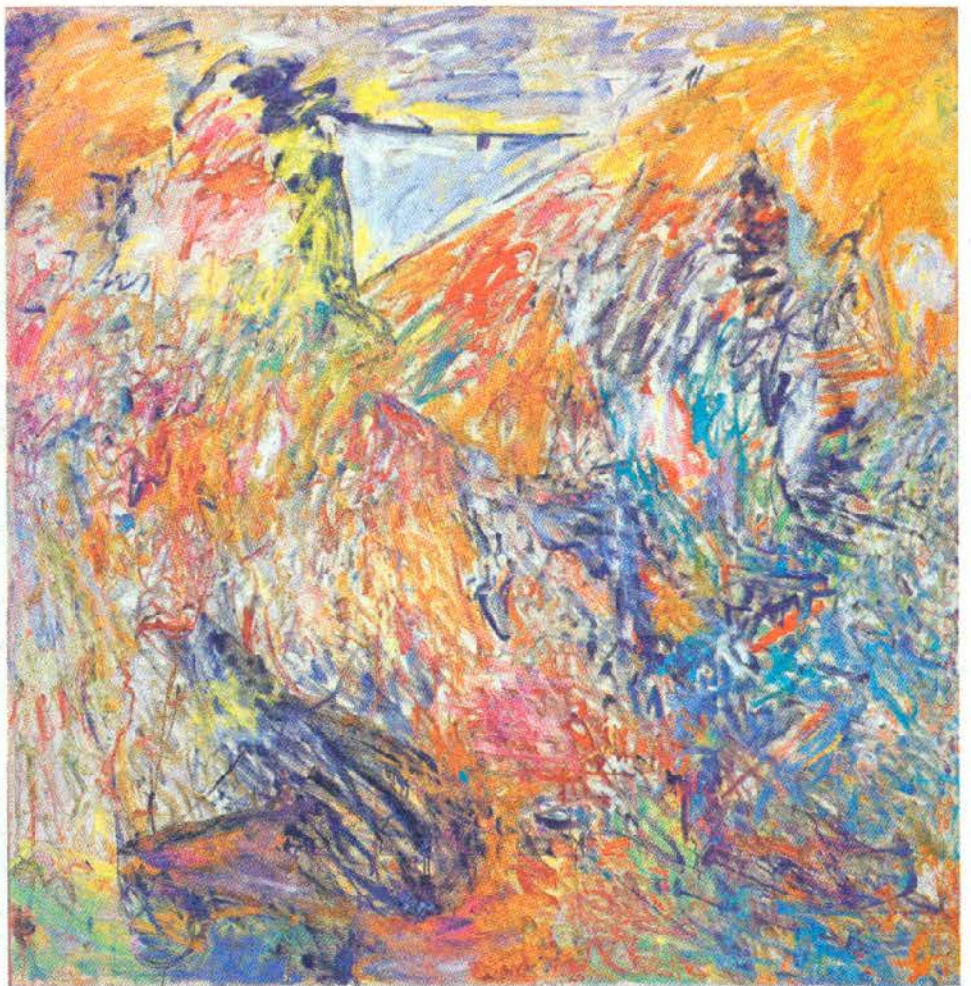
MILTON RESNICK*Cheim & Read*

have been the hero out of a Russian novel.

His career was certainly prone to bad luck — he was too poor to keep any of his Depression-era paintings; military service kept him out of New York in what were breakthrough years for his peers; he lost everything from his productive, postwar period in Paris; a dishonest dealer nixed his first solo show, which was to have been around the same time as his intimate friend Willem de Kooning's. That his debut had to wait until 1955 made him look, on paper, like a second-generation AbEx-er rather than the pioneer he actually was.

In a way, however, the artist's attitude

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Milton Resnick, 'AS.2' (1959).

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toward the art scene was as decisive as any career quirks. He was genuinely more concerned with authentic discovery than producing a look, conforming to the ethics of "action painting" while dismissing the term and the intentions of the critic who coined it, Harold Rosenberg. That neither his personality nor his stance lent themselves to critical champions accounts for, perhaps, though does not excuse his exclusion from "Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976," now at the Jewish Museum.

Resnick was equally ambivalent about "abstract expressionism," even while titling a 1959 canvas "Abstract Expression." When commercial and institutional success started to gather around his circle, he left New York for a teaching stint in California. It was indeed only in the 1960s and '70s that Resnick discovered his characteristic idiom in near-monochrome, all-over, often very dark, heavily impastoed canvases — formal qualities that again distanced him from the gestural and figural origins of abstract expressionism.

The Cheim & Read show homes in upon a crucial, transitional phase in Resnick's development, a frenetic prelude to the contained energies of his mature style, the latter signaled by his seminal "Wedding" (1962), on loan from the Metropolitan Museum. His work from 1945, when he was demobilized, through the next 10 years struggled to find its way around the influence of Arshile Gorky and de Kooning, though the pieces are forceful, gutsy, muscular, and sometimes wilfully awkward. "Burning Bush" (1959) is a key work, lent by the Museum of Modern Art to this show, that signals a distinctive touch and attitude. It is a swirling, romantic composition, physically and chromatically dense. The surface is turbulent but seems built up from

slow, determined agitations rather than grandiloquent gestures.

This painterliness is at once a departure from his peers and a reminder of the heritage of European easel painting from Rembrandt to Soutine, figures who often come to mind in Resnick's late work with its return to primitive, schematic representation. The sumptuous distress of "Burning Bush" is also strongly redolent of the resurgent expressionism of the 1980s, of painters like Per Kirkeby, John Walker, and Thérèse Oulton.

Resnick's agitated brush indicates both his radicalism and his conservatism in relation to his AbEx peers — conservative because a sensuality and an awareness of the nuance of painterliness ground him within European tradition. Agitation has the effect of complicating the picture surface and undermining big, macho mark making and trademark composition building. In a funny way, it relates to the fiddly, fussy "noodling" of Jasper Johns at the same historic moment, without that artist's deconstructive intent. Similarly, when Resnick moved into monochrome in a landmark painting — the monumental, 17-1/2-foot-wide greenish-white "New Bride" (1963), now in the Smithsonian (reproduced in the catalog though it is not in the show, and discussed by Nathan Kernan in his perceptive essay there) — his handling *looked* like, though occupying a different painting culture, work by Robert Ryman from around the same time.

"AS.2" (1959) is a 6-and-a-half-foot square canvas, made from fiercely scribbled brushmarks of varying bright colors, thickness, and degrees of wet or dry. The white of the primed canvas shows through these loose, almost autonomous marks, but there is more of a sense of texture than line in these nervous, frenetic marks. There is an unusually strong sense of landscape structure to this image, and its voluptuous stress, like that of "Tilt to the Land" of the same year,

recalls late work by Pierre Bonnard.

The gallery is dominated by a truly monumental canvas, "Swan" (1961), that is a bewildering fusion of detail and whole, built from a lexicon of jolts, dabs, drips, and swirls that sweep across a canvas almost 23 feet wide. Its energy is in tune with the agitated painterliness of the 1959 canvases with which it shares the show, but its all-overness and state of near monochrome, dispatched in purplish blues and near-blacks on a forcefully represented white ground, anticipate the impasto of the mature works that would soon follow.

"Swan" bears comparison with the art of Henri Michaux, whose work Resnick might have known during his Paris period, and Wols, Resnick's German painter friend there, much more than it does the obvious point of reference, Jackson Pollock. This is because although there are calligraphic and notational elements to some of the marks in this amazing painting, line is not granted autonomy or presented in a dichotomy with the ground. As was said of Pollock, so could be said of this work by Resnick, that it is "energy made visible."

There is a weird sense of a form searing its way through the canvas, from left to right, an accumulation of atomic energy boiling up the space it penetrates, making it a Monet for the nuclear age. It almost becomes tempting to read the image in cartoon-like graphic terms, or like a Futurist depiction of movement, despite its resolute abstraction. Doing so helps bridge the divide between this romantic abstractionist and a Pop artist such as James Rosenquist (no stranger he to scale, decenteredness, and distilled energy). This surprising admirer of Resnick's said of him, in 1982, that "His work is fierce, poetic, and full of energy. In fact, he's one of those who's turned energy into an ethical human value."

Until June 7 (547 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-242-7727).