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An Abstract World That Looks Like Silence

JERSEY CITY — “What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about, we must pass over in silence.” Thus the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein summarized his first, notoriously difficult book,

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ART REVIEW

“Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.” Wittgenstein’s declaration is usually taken to mean that talk about anything metaphysical — God or gods, supernatural phenomena, mystical experience — collapses into nonsense under scrutiny. What’s less often noted is that silence itself can be powerfully expressive.

Consider, for example, the paintings of Milton Resnick (1917-2004) featured in a resonant exhibition at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City. Drawn from the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, the exhibition is in two parts. Galleries on the sixth floor present works from Resnick’s early years: the late ’30s to 1972, when he was working in an Abstraction Expressionist vein under the influence of his friend Willem de Kooning. Also on this floor are paintings from his last years: the 1990s, in which ghostly, rudimentary figures emerge from murky backgrounds, and the 2000s, when he produced a series of small, roughly geometric compositions based on cruciform shapes.

But the main attraction is a beautiful first-floor installation of the expansive, all-over abstractions that Resnick painted in the 1970s and ’80s. Except for the earliest piece here, “Debris” (1971) — a bright, summery field of green and yellow brush strokes punctuated by gestures of red, pink and blue on a 17-foot wide canvas — the other 16 works are emphatically dark and brooding. They are thickly encrusted, textured like rocky walls or the weathered sides of old ship hulls. Some are nearly black with ashy gray highlights; others veer toward deep blue-greens and purples. The brightest is the color of rusty iron. Up close, you discover multitudes of hues. Reds, oranges and yellows peek out from under the darker layers, as if fires were burning down below.

“Milton Resnick (1917-2004): Paintings and Works on Paper from the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation” runs through Aug. 8 at Mana Contemporary, 888 Newark Avenue, Jersey City; 800-330-9659, manacontemporary.com.



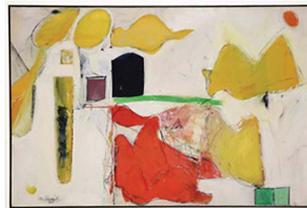
RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Milton Resnick (1917-2004) This exhibition, above at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City, features the untitled work below, from 1946, as well as works from Resnick’s last years.

The biggest picture, the majestic, appropriately titled “Elephant” (1977), measures 8½ by 18 feet. Standing in front of it, you feel enveloped. It’s not overbearing. There’s a seductive sensuality to it, like the skin of the animal it’s named after.

Despite the seemingly simple compositions, fast looking doesn’t do justice to these paintings. They benefit most from extended contemplation. As you gaze at them, they change. First, it’s all right there on the surface, just paint applied, not suavely, as in a de Kooning, but roughly, matter-of-factly and, it seems, over excruciatingly long periods of time. Yet you see how lovingly the paint is put on. You sense the painter’s absorption in the activity, a Zen-like, be-here-now state of mind. There’s something vicariously soothing about that.

With time, other aspects emerge. You begin to see ambiguous, illusory depths and distances. In some cases, it’s like



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looking at an aerial photograph of some remote, otherworldly topography. Elsewhere, the rectangle of the canvas seems to frame a fathomless void. This is the rhetoric of silence.

Born in Russia and a New Yorker from the age of 5, Resnick belonged to the last generation of Modernists — the Abstract Expressionists — for whom metaphysical intuitions still centrally mattered. But they were confounded in

their spiritual aspirations by the absence of any positive, nonkitschy vocabulary in which to invest. If there was a transcendental reality, they couldn’t picture it, not the way Medieval Christian artists or painters of Hindu myth could. Yet what they were silent about spoke volumes. If God wasn’t, as Nietzsche had it, dead, he was tragically far away, deaf to the sufferings of mere humans.

It’s interesting that Resnick produced these works after the 1960s, an adamantly anti-metaphysical decade in mainstream contemporary art. A casual glance might associate them with Minimalism and other formalist painting of the ’60s, but he was tuned to a different wavelength. He was an old-school believer in the search for something transcendent to believe in, something more than just painting, even if all he could do was paint. There’s a tamped-down sadness about the paintings.

One of the most striking pieces among the early works on Mana’s sixth floor is “Nat,” a small portrait from 1937 of a man in a coat and tie. Rendered smoothly and with softly blurred edges in shades of gray, it resembles portraits from around the same time by Arshile Gorky and de Kooning. It’s lovely. Unfortunately, there’s nothing else like it in the show. You wonder what Resnick might have wrought had he not abandoned representation.

In the 1990s, he returned to the figure in a way consistent with the abstractions of the ’70s and ’80s. A series of five, easel-size imaginary portraits from 1994, all titled “Sphinx,” is poignantly revealing. Each pictures a featureless woman from the elbows up, seen as if through a fog. It’s as if the painter had conjured her by his own yearning, as if she’d been hovering in the background during the preceding decades silently waiting to be called forth.