The Art Students League of New York
The American Fine Arts Society Gallery
215 West 57th Street, NYC

NEW YORK CENTRIC

Curated by

JAMES LITTLE

FOREWORD

NEW YORK–CENTRIC: A NON-COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW

"Too much is expected of Art, that it mean all kinds of things and is the solution to questions no one can answer. Art is much simpler than that. Its pretentions more modest. Art is a sign, an insignia to celebrate the faculty for invention."

Stuart Davis wrote this in 1956, but it seems newly relevant today. Over the past three decades, art has been increasingly required to "mean all kinds of things" and to offer solutions to "questions no one can answer," often at the expense of any other considerations. Today, in many prestigious art schools, students who wish to be taken seriously (and, sometimes, receive acceptable grades) are urged to make work that addresses such daunting issues as political unrest, climate change, civil rights, gender equality, animal welfare, poverty, and all the rest of it. They are trained, as well, to speak persuasively about their efforts as if works of art were effective antidotes to these perhaps insurmountable problems. It's worth noting that Davis, a committed social activist during the Depression of the 1930s, never made what could be defined as "political art," always keeping his efforts to improve society separate from his investigations in the studio, of what he called "color-space-logic." His work for social justice demanded so much of his time that it often prevented him from painting (he mainly produced drawings and works on paper in the 1930s) but it had significant results, such as getting artists classified as workers eligible for government support—hence the WPA art programs. Present day art schools usually discourage this kind of dichotomy, insisting that art have demonstrable "relevance" to the most vexed issues of the day. Wordless aesthetic and formal considerations frequently seem to be considered less important than "intentionality," as academic jargon terms it, and concepts that can be verbally explicated.

It's fortunate, given the currency of such desiderata, that artists are often contrarians who refuse to be confined to well-traveled paths. Many of the most interesting artists are often the most contrary, so no matter how prevalent or fashionable a set of values may appear to be, at a given moment, there are always talented rebels who present us with engaging alternatives. In modern times, it's not necessarily a daring vanguard that opposes the entrenched criteria of a conservative establishment, as it was in the 19th century. Sometimes the values of the vanguard become so widely accepted that they constitute a new academy and, in turn, provoke the development of alternatives. In the late 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism was increasingly acclaimed by the small art world of the time, and the meaning of authenticity, the necessity of abstraction, and the function of art as a revelation of the unseen were passionately debated in the Cedar Tavern and The Club, so many younger artists who absorbed these values strove to emulate Willem de Kooning's dense, layered paint-handling that Clement Greenberg derisively termed their approach "the Tenth Street Touch." There were equally committed established and aspiring Abstract Expressionists on the West Coast (in part because of the influence of Hans Hofmann, Clifford Still, and Mark Rothko, all of whom taught there). But denying that abstraction was the only possible approach for mid-20th century artists, a group of adventurous younger painters in San Francisco's Bay Area stubbornly insisted on making recognizable images, conjuring up brilliantly lit interiors and silhouetted bathers with the broad, juicy paint handling of both their East and West Coast peers. About the same time, back in New York, the Pop artists adopted the imagery and appearance of banal, vernacular, commercial art as a rejection of Ab Ex's emphasis on the heroic, the universal, and the angst-driven, while others, later grouped under the rubric Color Field, similarly moved away from Abstract Expressionism's unease, along with its reliance on gesture and contingency, without shifting towards representation of any kind.

The Color Field painters remained faithful to their older predecessors' conviction that abstraction was the only viable language for artists of their generation and faithful, as well, to the idea that the painter's role was to respond to inner imperatives, not reproduce the visible. Like the Abstract Expressionists, too, the Color Field painters were convinced that every canvas, no matter how much it resembled nothing but itself, encapsulated all of its author's experience. Yet instead of gestural Abstract Expressionism's dragged, wet-into-wet paint handling, and tonal modulation, the younger artists constructed their paintings with generous expanses of intense, often thin, more or less unmodulated hues, making color and the way it was applied the main carriers of emotion and meaning. Taking a cue from Jackson Pollock's pours and dripped skeins of paint, and departing from his conception of a painting as a vital, all-over expanse, (perhaps with some guidance from Claude Monet's late paintings of his lily pond) the Color Field painters created confrontational, expansive, non-representational compositions that have often been described as disembodied. These richly associative orchestrations of color, in which chance and will seemed to play equal parts, were as abstract and devoid of physicality as music. Perhaps most importantly, they were unabashedly beautiful, aiming at ravishing both the eye and the intellect with

radiant hues that often seemed to have arrived on the canvas without effort and to have become pure visual phenomena.

Subsequent generations of ambitious New York abstract painters have built on this complex, multivalent legacy, constructing conceptions of what a painting can be that, among other things, pay homage to their predecessors and argue with their assumptions, frequently at the same time, in unpredictable and diverse ways. This exhibition, *New York-Centric*, can be described as an overview of the work of some of these artists, made over roughly the past five decades, from the 1970s to the present. The show presents twenty painters, from different generations, all of whom obviously admire the audacity and independence of the Abstract Expressionists, as well as the innovations of the Color Field painters, but have issued their own challenges to their distinguished forerunners while continuing to believe in the potency and flexibility of abstraction. Their work depends upon the essential raw materials of painting—color both in itself and in combination, inflections of surface and touch, conversations among shapes, and the physicality of paint in all its possible manifestations—and proceeds from the assumption that these elements can stir us deeply, without resorting to words, to trigger countless enriching associations. What's very significant is that all of these painters have refused to put their art into the service of anything other than aesthetic concerns, no matter how deeply they themselves felt about the current state of society and the environment. They explore, in their work, an impressively wide range of individual, often surprising, notions of what an abstract painting can be and, in doing so, enlarge the expressive possibilities for non-literal image making.

New York-Centric is by no means a comprehensive, all-encompassing selection, nor is it intended to be. Rather, it is an engagingly individual and idiosyncratic survey, a reflection of personal experience and predilection, chosen by James Little, a dedicated painter whose own work could be described as stemming from the same convictions as that of the artists he has included. In a general sense, the shared aesthetic beliefs of the twenty painters in *New York-Centric* are evident, especially on first acquaintance, but despite these commonalities, the longer we spend with the works in the show, the more aware we become of the notable differences among them. The selection includes works posited on the expressive possibilities of rational, clear-headed geometry and planning, as well as others that depend on improvisation and alertness to suggestions that arise in the course of making the painting, as well as many works whose character lies between these polarities—or somewhere else entirely. The paintings on view range from Robert Swain's meticulous codification of color relationships to Larry Poons's explosive tangle of unstable, unnamable hues; from Al Loving's illusionistic demonstration of how chroma and texture can disrupt even the most lucid geometry, to Stanley Boxer's affirmation of the materiality of paint itself; from Gabriele Evertz's disciplined array of colored bands to Ed Clark's apparently spontaneous, over-scaled swipes of modulated hues; and much, much more. Variousness, in fact, is the main unifying characteristic of this exhibition, after abstractness and a celebration of the power of color.

It's not surprising, given the diversity of the ages, backgrounds, formations, and ethnicity of the selected artists, that they should have very different conceptions and very different ways of making a picture, their common faith in the importance of abstraction and their enthusiasm for the way color can communicate notwithstanding. Any exhibition that includes work by both Alma Thomas, born at the end of the 19th century, and Margaret Neill, born more than half a century later, is bound to demonstrate both evolving ideas about painting and ways of embodying them. Yet both of these women make work that is about luminous, intense color deployed in ways that implies movement, while evoking our experience of the natural world with its changing hues and intensities of light.

The late art historian Eugene Goossens was fond of saying "No movements. Only artists." It was his way of reminding us of the dangers of relying on broad generalizations and neat categories in order to come to terms with works of art, instead of paying attention to the special, often unruly, even unclassifiable qualities of the things made by special, perhaps unruly, unclassifiable individuals. It's helpful to remember Goossens' admonition when we encounter the compelling, highly personal, wide-ranging, albeit somehow related works in *New York-Centric*.

KAREN WILKIN
New York, 2019

NEW YORK–CENTRIC

Organized and Curated by

JAMES LITTLE

New York, 2019

I organized this exhibition with the following requirements in mind: the work should be abstract, produced in or around New York during the latter half of the 20th or beginning of the 21st century, and it must be painting. My decision was to bring together exemplary work and ideas that addressed issues in contemporary American abstract painting.

I sought out work that I felt had a conceptual and radical emphasis on the paint and its properties, that investigated and experimented with color and, to some extent, color theory and design, and expressionism. I considered a variety of artists and sensibilities. The common threads are the dialogues the artists have with the medium and the relationships they have developed within their work and to the art of the past.

Among the artists, some are well-known. Others are underknown, and unknown. The most noticeable, discernable, and outstanding features of this exhibition are clarity, quality and deftness of hand. Fundamentally, this exhibition harks back to why artists choose paint as a medium, what they do with it, and how it remains relevant. This, at a time when contemporary art trends address critical issues of the day—politics, gender identity, race, social inequality, war and terrorism and the environment. Abstract painting doesn't appear to have a voice in the conversation. But nothing could be further from the truth. Throughout history, painting, in its ongoing transformation, has served humanity and provided for its mental, social and spiritual health. In doing so, painting has helped shape opinions and attitudes, and societal norms, and it continues to do so today. The artists in this exhibition represent that tradition through abstraction.

I curated this exhibition because I felt an urgency for renewed focus and attention to abstract painting and to the contributions that these artists, in particular, have made and continue to offer to the art historical cannon. At this time in our culture, I organized this show because it needed to be done.

On November 27, 2018, art historian Horace Brockington visited James Little at The Art Students League of New York to talk about his upcoming exhibition, *New York-Centric*, the importance of teaching, and his pursuit of pure abstract painting.

JAMES LITTLE:
I'm not talking about trends—I'm talking about a type of purity, a type of unadorned art. I'm doing something that people think is archaic: I've taken work that I think has been overlooked and unappreciated. The big stars may not even know these artists, but they should.

HORACE BROCKINGTON:
The group that you put together—the ones who may have seemed like they did not survive the canon—how do you deal with this?

LITTLE:
The canon is not finite. You can't close the door. Artists go in and out of fashion, you can't measure it that way… I'm trying to show a momentum, an attitude that these paintings are draped in.

BROCKINGTON:
So, New York is not a place per se—it's a state of mind, a sensibility?

LITTLE:
Exactly. But let me tell you one thing: there is a distinct difference between work produced here in New York and Los Angeles.
It's heroic painting.

BROCKINGTON:
New York has always been a hub to embrace everything, and everything that those artists threw into those works came from someplace else.

LITTLE:
I see certain patterns of making that can only happen in this city; New York City is porous, and it demands a certain confidence and decision making. People may say abstract art is out of fashion, but I'm not done with it yet.

BROCKINGTON:
If the paintings are not there to entertain, what are they there to do?

LITTLE:
TEACH.
I want people to know that no art ever truly gets pushed out.

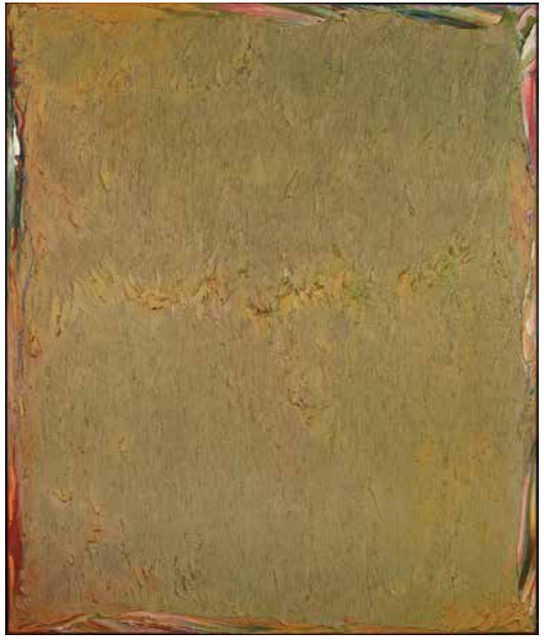
REMARKS

New York-Centric inaugurates the regeneration of the Gallery of the American Fine Arts Society. The new Gallery is at its core an idea: the exhibition space as an extension of the artist's studio—thereby creating a direct and potent current between the public and the methods and intelligence of artists. In a robust selection of abstract paintings, curator, artist, and instructor James Little suggests that the rigid parameters of the art historical canon have deterred viewers from appreciating the kind of work that artists look at to solve pictorial problems. The artists in *New York-Centric* are those who have influenced James's work and to whom James refers in teaching his students. Appropriately, James's classroom studio is next door to the exhibition space.

MICHAEL RIPS
Executive Director

STANLEY BOXER (1926–2000)

***Attentionscleavedharvestsofpast*, 1977**
Oil on linen
65 x 55 inches
Courtesy of Estate of Stanley Boxer and Berry Campbell Gallery, N.Y.



DAN CHRISTENSEN (1942–2007)

***Jarrito*, 1997**
Acrylic on canvas
78 x 61 inches
Courtesy of Estate of Dan Christensen and Berry Campbell Gallery, N.Y.

ED CLARK (1926–)

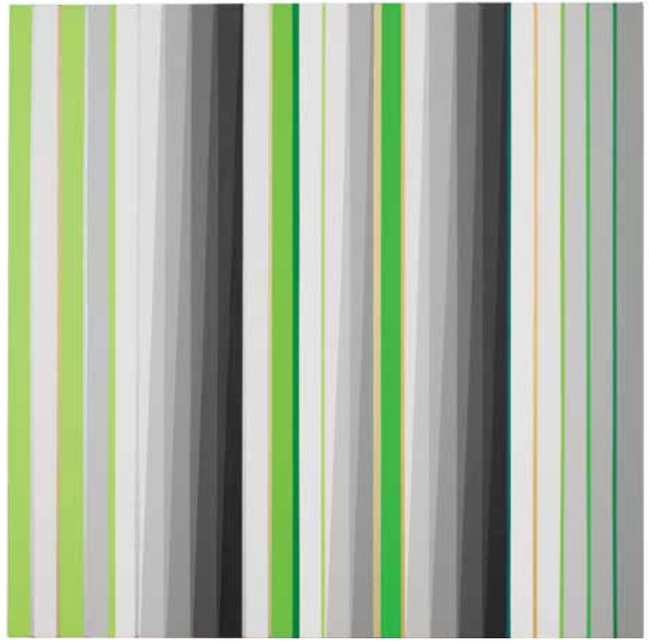
***Bastille*, 1991**
Acrylic on canvas
56 x 44 inches
Private Collection

TOM EVANS (1943–)

Untitled, 1973
Mixed metallic substances on canvas
82 x 64 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

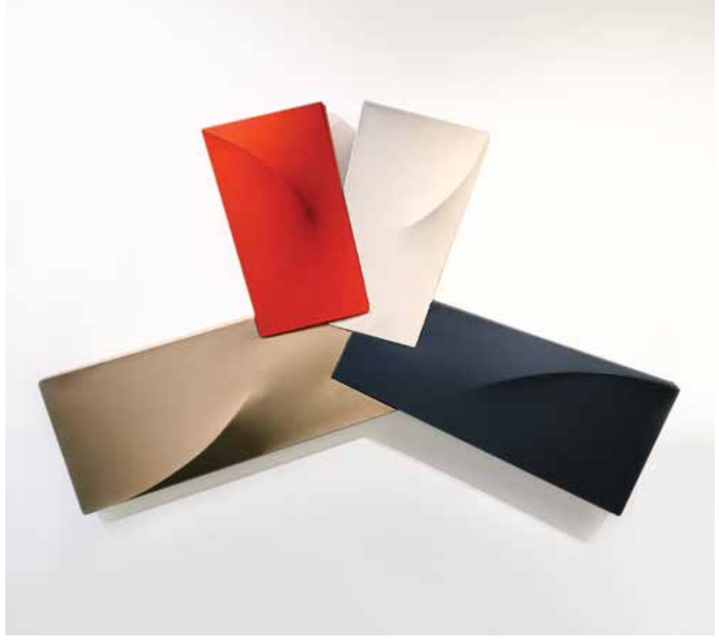
GABRIELE EVERTZ (1945–)

***Chromatics + Metallics (Green)*, 2014**
Acrylic on canvas over birch panel
24 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Minus Space



CHARLES HINMAN (1932–)

***Runner,* 1986**
Oil on canvas
26 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



STEWART HITCH (1940–2002)

Untitled, 1980
Oil stick on paper
30 x 22 inches
Private Collection

BILL HUTSON (1936–)

***Let's Call It This (Study For The Black Painting)*, 1970**
Oil on canvas
32 x 26 15/16 inches
Courtesy of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

RONNIE LANDFIELD (1947–)

***Radical Light*, 1996**
Acrylic on canvas
24 1/2 x 65 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

JAMES LITTLE (1952–)

Royal Blood, 2018
Raw pigment on canvas
32 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and June Kelly Gallery, N.Y.

AL LOVING (1935–2005)

***New Hexagon*, 1996**
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 41 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Alvin D. Loving and Garth Greenan Gallery, N.Y.

JAMES AUSTIN MURRAY (1969–)

***Evolution Class*, 2015**
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Lyons Wier Gallery, N.Y.

MARGARET NEILL (1956–)

***Pilot*, 2018**
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

DOUGLAS OHLSON (1936–2010)

***Marker/Tight D'arc*, 1987**
Oil on canvas
62 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Douglas Ohlson

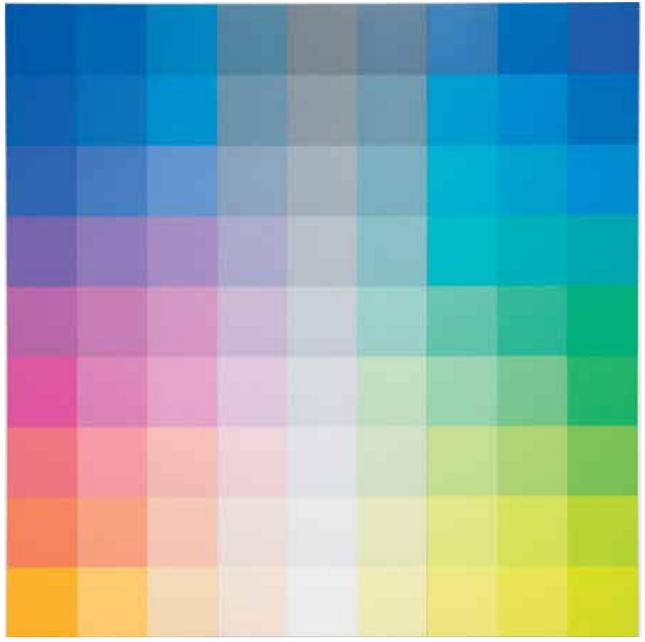
LARRY POONS (1937–)

***Came and Went*, 2017**
Acrylic on canvas
63 1/2 x 34 inches
Courtest of Yares Art, N.Y.

PETER REGINATO (1945–)

***More Blues*, 2018**
Enamel on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Findlay Gallery

ROBERT SWAIN (1940–)



Untitled, Study for 9x9-4A, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

ALMA THOMAS (1891–1978)

Untitled, ca. 1971
Acrylic on paper
12 x 9 inches
Private Collection

THORNTON WILLIS (1936–)

***Downtown*, 2012**
Oil on canvas
61 x 52 inches
Courtesy of the Artist; Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery, N.Y.

MARK ZIMMERMANN (1967–)

***The Eagle Has Landed*, 2018**
Acrylic on canvas in artist's frame
20 x 20 inches / 22 x 22 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the Artist and Lyons Wier Gallery, N.Y.