

# The New Criterion

Art October 2017

## Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

*On three exhibitions at Paul Kasmin Gallery, “Mel Kendrick: Woodblock Drawings” at David Nolan Gallery, “The Thing Unseen” at the New York Studio School Gallery, “Christopher Wilmarth” at Betty Cunningham Gallery, “Eric Brown: Punctuate” at Theodore:Art, “Brenda Goodman: In a New Space” at David&Schweitzer Contemporary, and “Meg Hitchcock: 10,000 Mantras” at Studio 10.*

Following its summer aestivation, the New York gallery scene returned with strong openings all September. Galleries are the new museums—places where art can still speak for itself. But galleries are also a dying breed—dying not for our sins but our distractions. These days any gallery that finds a way to survive into another season seems like a triumph in adversity. Some still triumph mightily.

Consider the three-show, three-venue lineup at Chelsea’s Paul Kasmin, which continues through October. At the gallery’s 293 Tenth Avenue location, “Robert Motherwell: Early Paintings” examines the lesser-known, experimental abstractions of the artist’s pre-“Elegy” years.<sup>1</sup> Around the corner at Kasmin’s 515 West Twenty-seventh Street venue, “Caro & Olitski: 1965–1968, Painted Sculptures and the Bennington Sprays” looks to the personal friendship and creative dialogue between sculptor and painter.<sup>2</sup> And finally, up the block at the gallery’s 297 Tenth Avenue address, in “The Enormity of the Possible,” the independent curator Priscilla Vail Caldwell brings the first generation of American modernists together with some of the later Abstract Expressionists—Milton Avery, Oscar Bluemner, Charles Burchfield, Stuart Davis, John Marin, Elie Nadelman, and Helen Torr, among others, with Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko.<sup>3</sup>



Robert Motherwell, *The Hotel Corridor*, 1950, Oil on masonite, Paul Kasmin Gallery

Judging from the examples in “Early Paintings,” Robert Motherwell displayed graphic confidence and innovative range from the very start. In the early 1940s, Motherwell was encouraged out of the classroom and into the studio by Meyer Schapiro, his doctoral advisor at Columbia University. He visited the painter Roberto Matta in Mexico City and, back in New York, saw Piet Mondrian’s first solo exhibition at the Valentine Gallery. Both were influential. By his mid-twenties, where this exhibition begins, a dual sense for narrative mood and pictorial space already infused his work, with geometry often concealing and imprisoning the forms underneath.

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*The Spanish Prison (Window)*, from 1943–44, explores the ominous undertones of abstract line and form, in a work that Motherwell later said was the first of his “Spanish Elegies.” The paintings that follow here, through the early 1950s, further distill this abstract mood, with formal structure evolving into ever-

more-expressive deployments of color and paint-handling—the siren flash of *Orange Personage* (1947), the blood and bones of *The Hotel Corridor* (1950).

“Caro & Olitski: 1965–1968, Painted Sculptures and the Bennington Sprays” is a revelatory exhibition for the many resonances it finds between the British sculptor and the American painter,

who each joined the art department of Vermont's Bennington College in 1963.

Both artists famously explored the abstract potential of industrial tools and materials— Caro's oxyacetylene welding equipment; Olitski's spray guns. They also thought similarly of color and line, exploring not only new materials but also the new shapes they found in their painted and sculpted forms. The lines at the edges of Olitski's paintings frame the airy voids of his sprays, while the welded metal of Caro's sculptures traces out shapes in space. Their shared sense for seamless industrial texture, with Caro's toothy enamels and Olitski's cloud-like sprays, makes this a perfectly paired show.



*Installation view of "Caro & Olitski: 1965–1968, Painted Sculptures and the Bennington Sprays" at Paul Kasmin Gallery*

There may be no greater joy than seeing the first generation of American modernists in Chelsea, where anything made before 1945 is pre-history, and the American modernists are the neglected Old Masters. "The Enormity of the Possible" gathers the best of them—the haunted forms of Elie Nadelman, the jazz syncopations of Stuart Davis, the moody mountainscapes of Milton Avery.

Charles Burchfield never painted a bad picture, and *Lilacs No. 2* (ca. 1939–63) must rank among the best of them, as flowers, trees, and house all reveal animating forces in a living, breathing verdure.

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Many of the individual works here sing, but as a whole the exhibition is overhung and overthought, taking on more than the storefront space might allow with a show that

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wants to spread out, and with fewer lines than one might wish drawn between the generations. The installation feels like the booth at an art fair, and perhaps in a way it is—a cubicle of American art history on display, for too short a time, on a corner of contemporary Chelsea.



*Charles Burchfield, Lilacs No. 2, 1963, Watercolor on pieced paper, Paul Kasmin Gallery*

Mel Kendrick has staked his career on exploring the positive and the negative in drawing, printmaking, photography, and sculpture. With the eye of a photographic plate, he finds the black in the white, the projection in the emulsion, the print in the press, and the shape in the void. Most known for his sculptures carved out of blocks that form their own pedestals, Kendrick has a varied studio practice that may find his stamps turned into sculptures turned into photographs, all in a flipping, tumbling performance of process and materials.

Now at Chelsea's David Nolan Gallery, "Mel Kendrick: Woodblock Drawings" reassembles a series of large-scale woodblock prints created in 1992 and 1993 along with a single spidery wooden construction.<sup>4</sup> What from far away resemble surrealist drawings are revealed, upon closer inspection, to be enormous paper sheets printed with equally enormous plywood stamps. Closer still and the manufacturing of these stamped objects becomes apparent, with the swirling jigsaw cuts and metal hardware, down to the Phillips-head screws, that must have held the stamps together. In the paper print of this wooden matrix, cuts become lines and woodgrain becomes shading, with the wood's textural variations now transformed into the stark contrast of a black

print on white paper. Kendrick calls these prints “drawings,” and in the silky lines of the woodgrain they draw out a startling impression.

**I**n his long and remarkably productive life, Nicolas Carone (1917–2010) worked through the full history of American modernism. In the 1940s and '50s, as a young man he painted and sculpted on the cusp of modernist invention. In the 2000s, into his nineties, he created some of the most striking pictures of his career. This amazing range is now on display at the gallery of the New York Studio School, where he was a founding member of the faculty, in “The Thing Unseen: A Centennial Celebration of Nicolas Carone.”<sup>5</sup>

A classically trained artist who studied at age eleven in the Leonardo da Vinci Art School, the same atelier that Isamu Noguchi attended, which was created for New York’s working poor in Alphabet City, Carone went on to become a member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. Along the way Carone never gave up on the figure. His work oscillated between abstraction and figuration, drawing equally on the push–pull lessons of Hans Hofmann and the classical faces he found in Italy while painting there on a Fulbright after the war.



*Christopher Wilmarth, Macquette for "Days on Blue", ca. 1974, Glass and steel, Betty Cunningham Gallery*

Curated by Ro Lohin, "The Thing Unseen" itself oscillates between periods and styles. The exhibition shows the breadth of Carone's work while also revealing his non-linear progression, with classical charcoal studies and fragmentary portraiture mixed in among abstract lines and forms. Most arresting, and illuminating, are the large black-and-white paintings that face each other across the show's two rooms. *Shadow Dance* and *Sound of Blue Light* are each aggressive confrontations of marks and drips—paintings that belong in major museums—in which fugitive figures emerge and disappear in an abstract fog. Separated by fifty years, these two paintings, from 2007 and 1957, remain unified in Carone's timeless vision.

**D**on't be surprised if you walk into Betty Cunningham's Lower East Side gallery, looking for the sculptures of Christopher Wilmarth, and find Tibor de Nagy's exhibition of Larry Rivers instead. I expect we will see much more consolidation of New York galleries—especially the best ones—as the serious business of art gives way to name brands and celebrity culture. Midtown's historic Tibor de Nagy has now joined Betty Cunningham downtown to share resources on

Rivington Street, alternating between Cunningham's main gallery and the project space next door. It is here that we find Wilmarth (1943–1987), the minimalist sculptor of the maximal.<sup>6</sup>

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It was Wilmarth's great innovation to find the spiritual dimension in metal's hard edge. In the 1970s, using etched glass, he filled the spaces of his metal sculptures with an ineffable, cloudy mist. Wilmarth set out to "make sculptures that evoke a spiritual disembodied state close to that of reverie; the

kind of perfection that I have found during my 'revelations' or 'epiphanies,' " as he said in 1980. In the early 1980s, inspired by seven poems by Mallarmé, in a translation by Frederick Morgan, Wilmarth furthered this exploration of glass and air in a series called "Breath." The minimalist angles of the 1970s and the breath-filled curves of the 1980s are both on display at Cunningham in sculptural maquettes and works on paper. The artist's suicide in 1987, at the age of forty-four, still haunts the show, as it does all of Wilmarth's somber and emotive work.



*Eric Brown, White Triangle, 2017, Oil on linen, Theodore:Art*

Finally, a word on Bushwick, Brooklyn. The neighborhood hosted its eleventh Open Studios weekend in late September. It also continues to display a vital energy in the face of Manhattan's retrenchment. I suspect the fifteen-month shutdown of the L Train in 2019 may put an end to that, but for now the galleries of 56 Bogart Street alone, off the Morgan Street stop, continue to outdo themselves.



At Theodore:Art, Eric Brown, in “Punctuate,” examines the tension of figure and ground in paintings that are fun and funny—caprices of 1960s Color Field art.<sup>7</sup> At David&Schweitzer, the esteemed Brenda Goodman finds expression in the working and reworking of her materials, with etched-over abstractions that read as psychological portraiture.<sup>8</sup>



*Meg Hitchcock, King of Prayers, 2017, Mixed media, Studio 10*

Meanwhile, in “10,000 Mantras,” at Studio 10, Meg Hitchcock continues to use collage as a meditative practice through the reformulation of cut letters taken from holy (and not-so-holy) books.<sup>9</sup> Here, the flat shapes of earlier work give way to increasingly complex stacks of letters. Incense sticks are used to burn holes in grids, ten thousand at a time, increasing the dimensions of her works on paper. Undoubtedly, the moma crowd would prefer to see Dadaist nonsense in such recombinations, not spiritual yearning. But the intensity of the work speaks to the intensity of her pursuit. Here is art that is serious and unabashed, finding a way to exist.

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<sup>1</sup> “Robert Motherwell: Early Paintings” opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 293 Tenth Avenue, New York, on September 7 and remains on view through October 28, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Caro & Olitski: 1965–1968, Painted Sculptures and the Bennington Sprays” opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, New York, on September 7 and remains on view through October 25, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “The Enormity of the Possible” opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 297 Tenth Avenue, New York, on September 7 and remains on view through October 28, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “Mel Kendrick: Woodblock Drawings” opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on September 7 and remains on view through October 28, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “The Thing Unseen: A Centennial Celebration of Nicolas Carone” opened at the New York Studio School Gallery, New York, on September 5 and remains on view through October 15, 2017.



6 “Christopher Wilmarth” opened at Betty Cuninghams Gallery, New York, on September 6 and remains on view through October 29, 2017.

7 “Eric Brown: Punctuate” opened at Theodore:Art, Brooklyn, on September 8 and remains on view through October 22, 2017.

8 “Brenda Goodman: In a New Space” opened at David&Schweitzer Contemporary, Brooklyn, on September 8 and remains on view through October 1, 2017.

9 “Meg Hitchcock: 10,000 Mantras” opened at Studio 10, Brooklyn, on September 8 and remains on view through October 8, 2017.

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