

*High Times, Hard Times, National Academy of Art, New York City*

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by Janet Goleas

The 1960s was a time defined by contradiction. America simmered in a stew of civil rights, anti-war protests and the dawn of feminism, and the world as we knew it was in a state of upheaval. New York had become the epicenter of the art world, displacing Paris after World War II. But the artists who flocked to New York in the late 1960s inherited a city nearly felled by power blackouts, urban sprawl and escalating crime rates. As New York City entered the 1970s it faced almost certain bankruptcy. Many artists sought refuge in the East End where they could escape the daily exhaustions of urban life. The heroics of Abstract Expressionism began to fade away, and what remained in New York was the raw nerve of radicalism, both in politics and in art. This, more than anything, is borne out in *High Times, Hard Times New York Painting 1967 – 1975*, on view at New York City's National Academy of Art through April 22nd.

It took a lot of courage to be a painter then. The artists working through this period mounted the equivalent of an aesthetic insurrection, ultimately stretching both the meaning and the potential of painting to its furthest extremes. "At first it seemed there was no future for painting", said artist David Reed, who spends time at his home in Southold. Mr. Reed, who acted as advisor to guest curator and art historian, Katy Siegel, commented on the sense of optimism and experimentation that erupted in SoHo. In his catalogue essay "Streets and Studios", Mr. Reed reminisced about favorite watering holes like Fanelli's and Max's Kansas City, about Canal Street shopping and living on the fringes of popular culture. "...At its core was freedom – the right to be equal and different," he wrote, "Insights and perceptions could be turned into new ways of seeing and living in the world".

The exhibition moves from the conventions of painting, tweaked by shaped canvases and the advent of acrylic paint, to its myriad mediums and techniques. Artists dabbled with elaborate means of paint application, seeking to address the surface without leaving a trace of the artist's hand. Spray guns, aluminum pigments, crushed glass, stains and tape lines yielded myriad results and, like the video art that emerged in tandem, the outcome was as much about process itself as it was about the final creation. Optical illusion often took the place of traditional imagery, and Color Field painting and Minimalism also had starring roles. Paint was raked across surfaces, hung from ceilings and stenciled on walls; the canvas was pierced and sutured, ripped and knotted, freestanding and absent altogether; and imagery itself was variously shoved to the margins or erased completely. Artists traded in their expensive oil paints for acrylics, house paints and building supplies that could be fetched on busy Canal Street.

As women began to dig out from the machismo of the first half of the century, early feminism would pave the way toward greater inclusiveness in the art world. Dorothea Rockburne's massive *Intersection*, (1971) lay directly on the floor. The artist squeezed crude oil between sheets of clear plastic and newspaper. The resulting square footage, unfurled into flatness here, moved the idea of painting into the arena of industrialism, leaving behind the often lyric sensibilities of abstraction. Mary Heilmann, who restored a barn on her Bridgehampton property to serve as a studio, turned the canvas support into book form with her improvisational *Book of Night*, (1970). Its floppy "pages" were huge sheets of black canvas bound together by a common spine. At puncture spots in

the canvas, Ms. Heilmann's poetic stars of silver paint were revealed to be constellations as the pages were turned.

Painting also began to absorb qualities of television and film, performance and sound art. Sculptor Lynda Benglis, longtime resident of East Hampton, was a political force during this period, as well as a pioneer of video art. Here, the camera in *Enclosure*, (1973) darted across the artist's studio shifting between the ambient sounds of a television hockey game the basketball court on the street below. Ms. Benglis's explorations also led her to reinvent the very concept of what a painting could be. She poured huge buckets of latex paint on the floor, reinvigorating Jackson Pollack's revolutionary drips and splatters. Vivid and multi-colored, the paint eventually hardened resulting works such as *Blatt*, (1969), both a pure object and a pure relic of the painting process.

Drawing on the folk art he knew as a child in Kansas, former Shelter Island resident and beloved ferry captain, Alan Shields used acrylic stained fabrics, cotton belting, beadwork and sewing techniques to shift painting off the wall. Creating a vast web of diamond shaped strands, Mr. Shields hung *Put a Name on it Please*, (1972) from the ceiling, bisecting the gallery cube at a diagonal. An admirer of the iconoclastic architect Buckminster Fuller, Mr. Shields had a special interest in creating works that would function within a geodesic dome, a popular housing concept for the alternative lifestyle. *Whirling Dervish*, (1968 -70) would have worked well in such a setting. The artist covered a six-sided pyramid with a busy patchwork of canvas that was variously sewn, stained, splashed and collaged.

The late Al Loving also returned to boyhood and his grandmother's quilt-making to develop the collaged and constructed paintings for which he became so well known. Loving, the first Black artist awarded a solo exhibition (1969) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, was a resident of Sag Harbor and a member of the Eastville Artists, an art association comprised largely of mainstream African-Americans. The 1970s saw an unprecedented artistic presence in the Black community that was echoed in the Hamptons. Abstract Expressionism had provided a universal language that absorbed the power and flexibility of the jazz world and the ability to communicate complex moods, emotions and histories without political agendas.

The exhibition progressed with artists such as Howardena Pindell and Harmony Hammond who responded to the form and format of painting. Artists Cesar Paternosto and Jo Baer focused their attentions strictly on the edges of the canvas rectangle and Joe Overstreet's *Purple Flight*, (1971) flew off the stretcher bars entirely, held upright by guide wires stretching some 30 feet across the academy's famed Beaux-Arts staircase.

As the exhibition wound to a close, installed by itself in the final gallery stood an immense Dan Christensen titled *Pavo*, (1968). Surrounded by elaborate 19th century woodwork, ornate terrazzo floors and taffeta window treatments, the mood in the gallery was both buoyant and elegiac. Mr. Christensen, who lived and worked in Springs until his death earlier this year, wielded tremendous influence in the years

he painted here. His works were uncommonly lucid, fluid and masterful. In *Pavo*, the artist whirled across a vast expanse of canvas – some eleven feet in length – with his characteristic loopy, sweeping helixes of sprayed paint. As for the artist's hand, in this case it seemed holey reinvented, as if the hand of Goliath made the gigantic swaths that danced across its shimmering surface. Nearly 40 years later, the stunning clarity and newness of *Pavo*, like so much of the work from this brief renaissance, was breathtaking.