

# Reading the Paintings of Judith Godwin

BY PAUL RYAN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ART

*The creative artist must work and always work — on himself and on his craft — that he may develop to the point where he can say what he has to say, and that he says this in his own language. This language is of course not always at once understood. It makes people furious when you speak your own language.*

Hans Hofmann (from his lecture of February 16, 1941 at the Riverside Museum, New York)



left: "Yellow Figure," 1953, oil on canvas, 40" x 28."

above: "Oriental Circus," oil on canvas, 50" x 126."

Installed prominently in the entrance hall of the Deming Fine Arts Building at Mary Baldwin is a large-scale, abstract painting by New York artist and MBC alumna Judith Godwin '52. Titled "Oriental Circus," it was given as a gift by the artist to the college's art department in 1992, following its exhibition in Hunt Gallery as part of a group show of work by alumnae that same year. Measuring 50 inches in height and 126 inches wide, the oil painting is a triptych consisting of three equal-sized panels of stretched canvas. Its overall composition is a structured flurry of shapes, textures, and lines which are organized in such a way that the viewer's eye is pulled from the left side of the painting to the right.

Articulated by certain forms that suggest the paraphernalia of jugglers and acrobats, this sense of energy and directed movement evokes the pleasure, anticipation, and constant flow of

activity characteristic of a circus — although, this is not to say that the painting exists as a mere signifier for a particular event. Its pictorial identity is too complex to function at this level: it contains a space that is expansive yet enclosed, and a sense of form that simultaneously suggests restriction by and freedom from the influence of gravity — all operating within a field of lyrical, Matisse-like playfulness. Like much abstract painting which is based on direct and specific experience, Godwin's "Oriental Circus" is a synthesis of personal impressions given permanent form through the raw materials of paint and canvas, and the creative processes of formal analysis and intuition. As such, it conjoins common perceptions of the viewer and artist, yet it exists simultaneously as an object of mystery evading any absolute or definitive translation.

As all serious abstraction in the modernist tradition has emerged out of particular movements and ideas in art history and/or the culture of the artist's own time, Godwin's work and style as a painter is grounded in Abstract Expressionism — an epoch in the visual arts which many critics and artists regard as the last great movement in Western painting. Embodying both the serious desire for stylistic advancement in the context of modernism's linear progression, and a heroic approach to painting that embraced the philosophical notion of the "inward turn," the originators of Abstract



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Expressionism constituted the avant-garde of the 1940s and 50s. Most of the significant work of this period reflected two points of view. The first was formalist theory which emphasized the importance of the physical materials and elements of art — the use of shape, scale, space, color, value, texture, etc. The leading critic of this approach was the formalist theorist Clement Greenberg who promoted the idea of a progressive historical narrative in culture which would culminate in works of art that were complete in their formal purity. The second important influence was a more emotionally charged artistic response to the dilemmas of the nuclear era immediately following World War II. This also had its roots in existentialism and what another prominent critic, Harold Rosenberg, referred to as "crisis content." The result was a surge of new painting and sculpture in America that was staggering in its originality and sense of urgency.

A noteworthy aspect of Godwin's connection to Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School (a more generalized description that some prefer to use because of the actual aesthetic diversity within this group of artists), is the personal association she had with several of its prominent practitioners, particularly Hans Hofmann and Franz Kline (whose Greenwich Village townhouse she acquired in 1963 and continues to reside in today). Having moved from Virginia to New York City in 1953 to study painting, Godwin was able to experience first-hand the excitement ushered in by the work and presence of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, a wave of aesthetic innovation that helped to establish New York as the international art center, thereby shifting the creative and intellectual focus from Paris to Manhattan. Simultaneously, as a student and young artist she participated in the second generation's task of building on and sometimes transforming the aesthetic practices of the New York School that had relatively quickly become canonized by the art world.

Prior to her move to New York, Godwin, a native of Suffolk, Virginia,

attended Mary Baldwin College for two years. She studied art with Elizabeth Nottingham Day and Horace Day, whose interest in contemporary art and developments in New York was shared with their students. Godwin left the college in 1950, and in 1951 enrolled at Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary (now Virginia Commonwealth University) where she was influenced by artists Theresa Pollak and Jewett Campbell. Pollak, who founded the School of the Arts at VCU, practiced and taught an aesthetic that was anchored in 20th century European modernism and the formalist theory and sense of pictorial integrity that guided American painting during the 1940s and '50s. Campbell had studied with the Abstract Expressionist painter and influential teacher Hans Hofmann (Pollak, too, would eventually do so) and he encouraged serious students to do the same — hence, Godwin's transition to New York.

After a brief period of study at the Art Students' League in New York in 1953, Godwin enrolled in Hofmann's school in Provincetown, Massachusetts that summer. She continued to study with him at his New York school in the fall, and did so again in 1954. The impact of Hofmann on Godwin's development as a painter perhaps cannot be emphasized enough. As a teacher, Hofmann was legendary for his ability to drive students to stretch their potential, but also for remaining as an authoritative influence in their work. For example, in discussing Hofmann's teaching with me several years ago, Theresa Pollak, who studied with him in 1958 (the year he closed his school after 43 consecutive years of teaching), mentioned that it took her several years to emerge from his strong presence and opinionated voice. Yet, she, like Judith Godwin, adhered to some of his tenets throughout her painting career.

Strong-minded and vigorous in spirit, Hofmann believed in the profundity of the creative life. Indeed, he regarded painting as a metaphor for the forces at work in the universe and the existential struggles that spring from the human experience. Born in

Germany in 1880 and later emigrating to the United States in 1931, Hofmann's early years in Europe afforded a clear understanding of the important issues generated in the early 20th century by Fauvism (with its innovations in color) and Cubism (with its fracturing and distortion of space and form). His articulation of these matters provided a strong theoretical and practical foundation for the artistic development of his American students.

In an essay that accompanied a major retrospective exhibition of Hofmann's work in 1990, organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the prominent art historian and critic Irving Sandler states that Hofmann "was the greatest art teacher of the twentieth century, that is, if a teacher's stature is measured by the number of students who achieve national and international renown in their own right." Sandler goes on to say that Hofmann "had the strongest influence on two generations of advanced American artists, the geometric abstractionists of the 1930s and the younger painters of the New York School who matured in the 1950s."

Recognizing Godwin's significant, though quiet, role in American art since 1950, in the fall of 1997 the Art Museum of Western Virginia (located in Roanoke) mounted a retrospective exhibition that spanned Godwin's life as a painter. Co-curated by Mark Scala, chief curator at the Museum, and Ann Gibson, associate professor of art at Stony Brook University in New York, the retrospective not only reflected a renewed interest by art historians in the artists of Godwin's generation working in New York during the 1950s, but, it is also an acknowledgment of the depth of intellect and feeling contained in her work. Consisting of 24 paintings, the show included representative work from different phases of her career. The early paintings from the years she studied with Hofmann display an intense physicality that shortly would dissolve into forms and spaces of a more ephemeral nature. Work from 1955 through the mid-sixties reveals the achievement of a distinct language by

Godwin marked by the dialectical elements of openness/spontaneity and structure/definition — a language which also demonstrates the dependence of genuine innovation upon tradition. Finally, several paintings from the mid-seventies through 1995 sometimes reflect slight stylistic shifts (especially regarding her palette), but never succumb to fashionableness and always assert the relevance of sincerity and meaning in an era of increasing cynicism and doubt.

In his article "Talking at Pomona," the poet and critic David Antin discusses how the importance of a work of art is determined. He asserts that, assuming aesthetic integrity is a given, importance is mostly a matter of the quality of ideas, or of an idea, that the work embraces. That is to say, that the critical value of a work of art is in proportion to "...the degree that it is a modification [or advance] of the preceding [important] work..." For example, briefly put, one of the reasons Jackson Pollock is considered an important painter resides in the fact that his all-over poured paintings of the 1940s and '50s played a major role in removing Modernist painting from the constraints of Cubist space. Pollock's work is considered an "advance" in the lineage of Modernist painting, and has become an icon for American-type painting of the 20th century. In the context of this type of art historical and critical criteria for determining importance as it relates to the work of Judith Godwin, it can be said that her significance largely, though not completely, lies in her success in moving beyond what had become conventions of Abstract Expressionist painting. In the catalog essay, "Judith Godwin: Style and Grace," Ann Gibson outlines Godwin's path in this achievement, describing how the artist "mined [Abstract Expressionism] as a language whose rich potential had only begun to be tapped — if only one could avoid its clichés and renovate the presuppositions entwined with its conventions."

To build on what has come before, yet to avoid the clichés, has always been a major task and goal for the

artist. And at mid-century in New York City the notion of originality was an ideal — an integral component of the avant-garde in its self-established mission to keep culture moving forward. The first generation of Abstract Expressionists had succeeded in moving beyond European modernism; Godwin's teacher, Hans Hofmann, in an original language of expressionistic urgency and jubilation had combined the color theories of Cezanne and the Fauves with Cubist drawing (eventually escaping the grips of Cubist space); and Godwin, as represented by her paintings from 1955-1960, began to speak relatively early in her own voice. A synthesis of multiple aesthetic and personal influences, her paintings stylistically embrace a sense of pictorial structure achieved by Franz Kline, Hofmann's theories regarding pictorial depth and the inherent flatness of the medium, and the Zen-like approach to space and form of the painter Kenzo Okada. Following the dictum of Hofmann that the artist say what she has to say in her own language, Judith Godwin has distinguished herself within the tradition of the New York School.

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