

SAN ANTONIO

Judith Godwin

McNAY ART MUSEUM

When Judith Godwin moved to New York in 1953, making abstract paintings was still risky, both professionally and personally. The measure of serious abstraction had only recently been established by first-generation Abstract Expressionists. If the younger artists who emulated them did not fully grasp the relationship between formal strategies and feeling, then their work would merely standardize Abstract Expressionism's stylistic features. When genuine spontaneity was replaced by what Clement Greenberg called the "Tenth Street touch," the insidious effect was to weaken the audience's, and the artist's, ability to discern the differences between them. Greenberg noted in 1948 that abstraction demands "a heightening of consciousness so that the artist will know when he is being truly spontaneous and when he is working only mechanically."

Had he been writing a decade later, Greenberg might have specified "she," for the second generation included a number of female artists. "Judith Godwin: Early Abstractions" let viewers assess the work of one of them. René Paul Barilleaux, the McNay's Curator of Art after 1945, brought together twenty-eight paintings from 1950 to 1976 in a vigorous yet coherent presentation of an artist confronting head-on the problem of authenticity and expression in abstract painting.

The earliest works show an investigatory approach to the past, betraying diverse and sometimes incongruous sources. *Nucleus II*, 1950, for example, locks the warps of Naum Gabo's constructions into a cubistic design; the visual blast of *Provincetown Summer*, 1953, conjures Kandinsky; and *Woman*, 1954, evokes the machine-human hybrids of Dada. Later works demonstrate the continuing viability of Abstract Expressionism for artists who, like Godwin, took it seriously. Feeling, or what Godwin calls the "elusive centers of directness and spontaneity," was paramount. *Martha Graham—Lamentation*, 1956, for instance, employs a patient layering of surface effects to evoke a sense of memory and loss. In *Longing*, 1958, carefully arranged gestural areas jostle for position laterally, eventually establishing equilibrium; the borders of these seemingly discrete areas are compromised by small interfusions of colors and varying paint viscosities. Here Godwin is attentive without seeming obsessive, and conveys the sense that some meaningful interaction is taking place; we see reciprocity rather than repetition.

It is hard to resist narratives of development when artistic careers are concerned, especially when the artist in question is a woman whose professional practice took shape within frames of reference established predominantly by men. This exhibition raised the question of just how we should evaluate Godwin's practice within that masculine frame. Should we see her work as a feminist critique of Abstract Expressionism just because she is a woman? If so, in what specific ways do her paintings constitute either a transformation or a cancellation of its formal strategies? It might be that only on such formal grounds will a comparative assessment of Godwin's work be

convincing. Her paintings, in technique and tenor, often sympathize with Abstract Expressionism. Still, there is room for difference. In her work, for instance, the picture plane often remains emphatically intact. Unlike Hans Hofmann's forms that sometimes float free of the surface, allowing the viewer to project imaginative spaces, Godwin's broad shapes slam up against it, making passage into pictorial space difficult. Does this formal feature of Godwin's work thus constitute a feminist "critique"? Or merely a formal critique? Are they inseparable? Answering such questions—no simple task—would require a case-by-case engagement with the paintings, and would help us to revise the criteria according to which we customarily (and uncritically) assign values to the particular qualities of abstract paintings.

—Michael Schreyach



Judith Godwin,
The Chief, 1953, oil
on canvas, 38 x 30".