

JUDITH GODWIN: Paintings

FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II, a new American school of painting, dubbed "Abstract Expressionism," emerged on the international scene. The initial generation of artists associated with this movement created works that were diverse in style, ranging from the color-field canvases of Mark Rothko to the gestural abstractions of Jackson Pollock. While not exactly similar in their approach to painting, all of the artists shared an interest in large works that incorporated the ideas of European modernism (Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism) together with a kind of "American" bravura. Many of the artists knew the ideas of the German painter, Hans Hofmann, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1932 and opened his own school where he espoused the views of Matisse and Picasso. By the 1950s, the new movement became the dominant mode of expression within the high art world of New York, even spreading its sphere of influence far beyond the shores of this country.

It was to this heady cultural atmosphere that Judith Godwin came from her native Virginia, studying with Hofmann and with Will Barnet at the Art Students League, and exhibiting her work at such important galleries as Betty Parsons Section Eleven.¹ She became aligned with Abstract Expressionism in its "second generation," and since her move to New York in the early 1950s, has remained a prolific artist, continuing to build upon her initial experiments with gestural abstraction.²

Godwin has made important contributions to American Art. Born and raised in the South, she attended college there before coming north to study. Two important influences affected her art process throughout her career: a close association with nature and gardening, to which she was introduced by her parents, Judith Brewer Godwin and Frank Whitney Godwin, and the teachings of Hofmann, of which she first learned while studying with Jewett Campbell in 1951 at the Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary.³ She studied with Hofmann himself from 1953-1955, initially at his school in Provincetown, Massachusetts and then at his 8th Street School in New York City.

She also attended the Art Students' League in New York where she studied with Vaclav Vytil, as well as with Barnet. Her work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions from the 1950s to the present and is a part of many important collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and The Art Institute of Chicago.

In addition to Godwin's career as a professional artist, she worked as a designer, directing and implementing structural projects, gardens, and architectural renovations. Her father, who was not only an avid gardener but an amateur architect as well, also first introduced her to this field. In fact, he wanted her to become an architect.⁵ Her work with structure in composition paralleled her work with architectural structure in her daily job in building construction and restoration. Godwin desired her paintings to appear strong, not delicate, and to have a real presence and power, which she achieved

through an interest in balance and movement.⁵ She believed that color could have strength and movement, a concept to which she still holds. She sees the new work, the pieces in this show, as more emotive and feels her painting process and intuits her imagery. In this regard, her paintings fit within an expressionist vocabulary. She states that because of her emotive approach to art, she finds it difficult to articulate her vision in words.⁶ Nonetheless, she is quite articulate on this topic, stating:

I usually stretch and prime my own canvas. This is, to me, part of my craft. I most often begin to paint by envisioning form and space in nature and then interpret my ideas and feelings into planes of color on the canvas. When I recognize an emerging form, I respond intuitively by evolving complementary sub-forms in colors and applications which feel supportive and foster development. In studying color and its behavior, I have learned to trust my intuition. I have a strong belief in my work and pursue it constantly.⁷

She describes the act of painting as a spiritual experience and one that sweeps her away while doing it.⁸ Godwin's works are powerful paintings whose gestural forms also have a lyrical elegance with allusions to nature. In this way, her ideas fit very well into the Abstract Expressionist belief in the vital importance of abstraction as a vocabulary of contemporary life and in the desire for an art of significant content. Godwin's paintings depict a vast scale and make reference to the universe. There are no boundaries and the implication is that the forms extend beyond the frame, and allude to the vastness of the universe. This understanding, a belief in the spiritual aspects of painting, especially as connected to nature, underlies much of American Abstract painting and places Godwin in a strong tradition of American artists and recalls the images of Arthur Dove, and even beyond, to the nineteenth century and the epic paintings of Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church.⁹

Although Godwin's images are comprised of deceptively simple designs that depend upon a careful structuring of the forms in order to maintain their compositional balance, they also refer to the larger issues of spirituality and nature. She achieves this balance of content and form through an understanding of the painting process and the structure of the two-dimensional surface. Large, powerful configurations move across the surfaces of the images, causing forceful movement. Throughout her career, her interest in bold color and dynamic compositions has continued to inform and activate the images. In more recent years, she has also become interested in collage, often applying unusual materials to the surfaces of her canvases, like steel wool, wood veneer, and fabric. This is accomplished subtly, so that the composition retains a sense of unity and wholeness. In some cases, the additions of these materials, which often float within the composition, help to eliminate the grid of Cubism, which played such an important role in her earlier work. However, structure remains seminal, only now dynamic movement of color forms make up the formal language.

This show represents Godwin's work of the last sixteen years and demonstrates an opening up and experimentation with the expressionist vocabulary. Her palette gradually becomes more limited to blues, pinks, and greens in delicate shades as the decade of the 90s moves forward. Forms are now more open and in some works they even seem biomorphic. Spatial illusion is quite different with paintings like *Moonbeams* more architectural and *Gentle Giant* following the floating biomorphic type. Yet, *Moonbeams* too has a kind of airiness and elegance, accentuated by its metallic, aluminum paint. Even the composition of *Run From Evil*, the smallest work in the show, extends beyond its borders establishing a grand sense of scale.

In *On Target*, Godwin uses the diptych format to achieve broad sweeping movements. There is a great deal of unpainted canvas and the balance of the parts is carefully conceived with an understanding of the contrast between rectilinear and curving forms. The tightness of the triangle of white, which floats across the surface, contrasts with the more

painterly, broad black patch on the left and brings about a dynamic tension. Hard edges compete with more painterly forms. Silhouettes march across the surface while a single red line establishes a dialogue with the contrasting white forms. It is an abstract composition; it is the earth's horizon, a satellite out in space, a landscape.

In *The Ring*, Godwin employs tremendous movement across the surface and contrasts gestural marks with broad areas of atmospheric delicacy. Sections with dense application of paint contrast with areas of thin application or no paint. Spatial illusions abound. Overlapping of forms and delicately painted atmospheric sections establish seemingly deep space, but broad areas of unpainted canvas work as both background and foreground, setting up complex spatial relationships. There is a sense of mystery and the magical through much of the work where the viewer enters into the painter's universe.

Blue Arrow and *Desert Kahn* connect in their complexity of composition and in their intensity of color. The first contrasts turquoise with red and includes collage and texture. The applied elements integrate on the surface in both. *Lily Pond* makes use of the dried paint from the top of the can. Drips of thick paint and gestural marks are distinct from open areas. The palette is lighter and more ethereal than earlier work and there is no grid. Movement comes from the color as much as from the gesture with brushstroke, drip, and stain equally important. Rusting steel wool adds a new dimension to another work, *Seasquall*, whose seemingly narrative title and forms allude to landscape and seascape, wind, storm, clouds and sky.

So many of these works operate on both abstract and narrative levels. For instance, *Gentle Giant*, continues the sense of openness and atmospheric delicacy. Its bleeding and dripping paint evokes a certain sadness while *Moonbeams* really looks like its namesake. Duality contributes to the richness of image with the surface both elegant and rough, the image both abstract and narrative at the same time.

Judith Godwin is a serious artist who has devoted her life to her chosen profession. She remains active and continues to pursue her interests in gardening and painting. She brings these two interests together in dynamic works of great movement and color that demonstrate a belief in the primacy and spirituality of art-making and the role of the observer as participant.

J. Susan Isaacs
Consulting Curator

1. It was not easy for a woman to succeed in the New York art world of the 1950s. Indeed not everyone saw being an artist as a seemly profession for a woman. Godwin said of her father's reaction to the upcoming show with the Betty Parsons' Gallery: "My father wrote of Betty Parsons giving me a show that he didn't necessarily believe that she would and not to worry if it did not happen, as I could come home and teach." Interview by author with Judith Godwin, April 13, 2002.
2. Godwin has always maintained a residence in her native Virginia as well.
3. Mark Scala, "Judith Godwin and the New York School," *Judith Godwin: Style and Grace*, exhibition catalogue. (Roanoke, VA: Art Museum of West Virginia, 1997): 9-11.
4. Scala, "Judith Godwin," 10. She continues to maintain her family home and formal gardens in Virginia, an example of her longtime interest in gardening and architectural renovation.
5. Interview with Godwin.
6. Interview with Godwin.
7. Statement by Godwin published in Joan Marter; "Color and Movement: The Art of Judith Godwin," in *Judith Godwin: Color and Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Libraries, 2001), n.p.
8. Interview with Godwin.
9. The seemingly academic approach of Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on drawing and long apprenticeship contrasted dramatically with the Pop and Minimalist movements of the 1960s and 70s, marginalizing the many artists associated with the earlier movement. Godwin was no different and although she continued to make art, it has only been since the late 1970s that her work has once again received critical attention with several important exhibitions in the 1990s. Scala, "Judith Godwin," 11.