

they approached the threshold of ecological thinking, Godwin, along with such prescient female Abstract Expressionists as Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell, is able to enter this realm through her art where she can enjoy some of its benefits.

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GODWIN: ON BECOMING AN ARTIST

That painting and sculpture are not skills, that can be taught in reference to pre-established criteria, whether academic or *modern*, but a process, whose content is *found*, subtle and deeply felt; that no true artist ends with the style that he expected to have when he began, anymore than anyone's life unrolls in the particular manner that one expected when young; that it is only by giving oneself up completely to the painting medium that one finds oneself and one's own style...such is the experience of the School of New York.

The School of New York

Robert Motherwell, 1 January 1951

Expressionism is one fundamental approach in the history and practice of modern art--an individualistic art, bonded to the artist's emotional state. In the figurative mode, expressionism utilizes distortion, exaggeration and strong color to convey rude, shocking, and candid communications of truthful feeling. The German and Austrian expressionists of the first quarter of the 20th century come first to mind--Kirchner, Heckel, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Schiele and their many colleagues. At the same time Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch are prototypical expressionists of the late 19th/early 20th-centuries, as Grunewald remains the preeminent exemplar from the 16th.

In its abstract mode, expressionism was first recognized in the improvisations of Vassily Kandinsky, c.1910-13, wherein lines, color areas, and polyphonic imagery-systems interact while also coalescing into a fresh and decorative unity. Kandinsky's non-referential color, linear meanders, and arabesque are the external evidence of inner tensions, spontaneously arrived at, and perhaps less than entirely clear to the artist. While his works of the period owe much to the transitional period of the Murnau city- and landscapes, they achieved an immediate life of their own, crowded with idiosyncratic detail, independent color, vigorous linear motives, rough and smooth paint handling, and an intuitive sense of visual rhyme and balance. The artist's subjective feelings were rendered in a spontaneous and individualistic fashion.

By 1950 Judith Godwin was a regularly exhibiting artist. Having studied at Mary Baldwin College, in her native Virginia, she later continued her education at Richmond Professional Institute, College of William and Mary, 1951-3, and later at the Art Students League (NYC) and the Hans Hofmann School, in Provincetown and in New York. She met and came to know many of the leaders of the "first generation" of Abstract Expressionism, including Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko, and James Brooks. The world of vanguard art in the '50s was a small, little publicized, and more generously welcoming one than the one we know today. The experience of working in Hofmann's studio classes, reorganizing her learning around the systematic pedagogy and esthetics of the most distinguished teacher of modern painting, while coming to know dozens of young artists of many nations and predilections, was a stimulating and intimidating exposure that served to charge the young artist's work.

Godwin embraced an art of intuition, learned to trust her visual experiences and her impulse to draw upon her feelings as directly as she did her rational mind. She gave attention to her subconscious promptings in painting. Hans Hofmann's words and work served both as inspirations and daunting landmarks through their casual reflection of Fauve and Cubist syntax and innovative paint handling. She came to recognize that his best paintings were precisely those in which his painterly gift had most free rein, and in which the discipline of Cubism served not to control but to inform and imply, embodying an awareness of style without redundancy.

Countless ideas, directions and concerns coexist in Godwin's work at any time: fresh color harmonies, the danger of overworking, memories of works recently seen and old icons remembered, respect for the canvas' flatness, regard for the nature of the medium, effects made possible with close valued dark colors, difficulties with bright and misbehaving advancing colors, etc. She probably forced herself to deal with independent and contradictory themes and information through her intense reading of Hofmann's paintings, which are so unpredictable. Her tolerance for frustration kept her from limiting her vision to the shibboleth of "serial imagery." Monet's *Haystack* and other series, dealing with the same or similar subjects under different light conditions, and Jawlensky's landscape *Variations*, *Constructive Heads*, and *Meditations* are the implicit springboards for the widespread practice of artists in the second half of the century to work color variations on an unvaried compositional format. This has not been Godwin's practice. She begins afresh with each new canvas, reaching back to her intuitions, renewing her commitment to the creative process, savoring her paint materials while avoiding the seductions of coloristic repetition, utilizing whatever techniques--learned or improvised--appropriate to the emerging work, while testing with her highly developed sensitivities for quality. Each work is an autonomous object, wholly self-sufficient and independent of other works and of nature.

This selection of Godwin's work ranges over four decades and documents an unusually broad range and intensity of colors and their harmonies, and an impressive consistency of compositional invention. From the sonorous reds and yellows of *Parrot*, 1953, knowingly dramatized by blue, green and violet, Godwin asserts her identity and her rejection of the period's mural scale. *Blue Figures*, 1954, plays with close valued dark colors while balancing bright yellows and reds on the plane. *Divisions*, 1955, and *Yellow Square*, 1956, pose contrapuntal themes with small forms, effectively related to the canvas edge. *Red Monument*, 1960, and *Mars Study*, 1965, are masterful color compositions which reveal a grand sense of scale. *Red Lightning*, 1966, is an explosive near-square canvas that shows unusual skill in holding recessive colors on the plane. *Suspension*, 1971, and *Tropic Zone*, 1978, center large calligraphs, risking comparison with the work of Franz Kline. Godwin's deft handling of a closely harmonized second theme, successfully eludes that comparison while revealing another aspect of her invention. *Green for Danger*, 1982, recalls the elegance of Nicholas de Stael's work: a charming surprise to the gray, blue and purple oppositions to the red field. *Purple Raven*, 1985, displays an understated economy that is a measure of quiet professionalism. The italicized red zig-zag is surely a salute to Hofmann. *Monolith*, 1987, *Capricorn*, 1990, and *Sirocco*, 1992, are large works, which develop polyphonic compositions on the horizontal axis--clear assertions of Godwin's raising the stakes, drawing upon accumulated experience to offer paintings which challenge the standards of her first generation colleagues. Godwin is not a virtuoso. She does what she needs to do in order to realize the work at hand. She uses a laconic art vocabulary and is averse to "fine painting" or technique for its own sake. Despite her enviable education, she has found it necessary to invent her own way. Being a modern expressionist, a lyrical abstract painter, sometimes anguished, but without self-consciousness, her work is passionate, intelligent, and truthful.

Gerald Nordland

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