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David Reed Did Not Go Along with Those Who Threw the Baby Out with the Bathwater

Making a brushstroke painting in the mid-1970s — a decade after Greenberg, Stella, and Lichtenstein gleefully presided over its burial — was foolhardy and brave.

John Yau



David Reed, “#49”(1974), oil on canvas, 76 x 44 inches (© 2017 David Reed / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Robert McKeever, courtesy Gagolian)

In 1975, Christopher Wool went to see an exhibition by a young painter that has stayed with him for more than forty years: that exhibition was David Reed’s first solo show at Susan Caldwell on West Broadway.

Works from that show are presented in a discrete gallery as part of Painting Paintings (David Reed) 1975 at Gagolian, an exhibition organized by Wool and Katy Siegel. For those who have not seen this show, which contextualizes Reed’s paintings with the work of other artists, and are unable to see it today (its last day, February 25, 2017), I highly recommend buying the catalog. It reproduces lots of archival material from that period and includes two conversations between Siegel and Wool as well as a short memoir “New York in 1975” by Richard Hell. It is an

important document, presenting an alternative view of what was going in New York in the mid-1970s, when painting was supposedly in the pits, writhing and mostly dead.

Like Wool, I went to see Reed's exhibition at Susan Caldwell, and it has stayed with me as well. The paintings were done on vertical canvases measuring 76 by 11 inches, an eccentric format. They were painted in acrylic, wet-into-wet. Basically, they are a series of short but firm horizontal brushstrokes done in either black or red. Starting on the left, Reed dragged a loaded brush across a wet, goopy ground, usually stopping before hitting the painting's right edge. He repeated this straightforward, matter-of-fact gesture from the top to the bottom of the narrow vertical canvas, usually leaving a sliver of white ground above the top brushstroke and below the last. He also made larger, wider paintings by bolting together two to five canvases after he had painted them.

In the paintings made of two or more joined canvases, there is the feeling of a grid without any of the mechanical or photographic repetition we associate with this format (Andy Warhol's silkscreens of Coca Cola bottles, for example). This is not what makes these works interesting or relevant today. Rather, there is an important lesson that they convey through their modesty and directness. The lesson is this: nothing is dead, no matter how many authorities claim otherwise. Sweeping generalizations are the politician's bailiwick and, in the world of culture, it might be best to reject these across-the-board announcements out of hand.

However you look at these works — and Siegel and Wool do not see them the way I do, and why should they? — they are brushstroke paintings done long after this practice had been declared dead by Clement Greenberg in his advocacy of "Post Painterly Abstraction." Greenberg had a derisive phrase for gestural abstraction, "the Tenth Street touch," which applied to anyone who used a loaded brush. If Greenberg or Frank Stella, who said in an interview, "I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can," failed to convince you that the paint stroke was passé, perhaps you were persuaded by Roy Lichtenstein's send-ups of Abstract Expressionism's supposed spontaneity in paintings such as "Brushstroke" (1965), which was derived from an image in a comic book. One way to go forward is by negating the past, but it is good to remember that's not the only way, even if it is the one most quickly approved. Obsolescence is for toasters and cellphones, not art or, for that matter, literature.

Making a brushstroke painting in the mid-1970s — a decade after Greenberg, Stella, and Lichtenstein gleefully presided over its burial — was foolhardy and brave. This is how Stella put it in the interview I cited:

If something's used up, something's done, something's over with, what's the point of getting involved with it?

Reed ignored the message, even as many took it as gospel. Perhaps he did not think of Stella as a reliable source because he had stopped painting by the early 1970s and was making wall-reliefs. Whatever the case, he found a way to bring the brushstroke back into painting without being nostalgic. This is what I think Reed's generation of abstract painters — the one that began showing in the mid-1970s, unaffiliated with Color Field painting, Minimalism, or Pop Art (I would include Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth Murray, Thomas Nozkowski, and Jack Whitten in this group) — has never gotten credit for. They found a way to push painting forward.

Reed established a strict set of parameters for his practice: a narrow vertical format; thick acrylic paint in one of two colors on a warm creamy white; a brush of a certain width; loaded, horizontal brushstrokes that welcomed the accidental; a fast pace to avoid bogging down in the process. Despite these strictures, which are self-evident in the paintings, something happens on each canvas that distinguishes it from the others. By incorporating accident into the process, Reed is clearly pushing back against the rigid geometry, control, and monumental scale that had become Frank Stella's trademark.

As Peter Schjeldahl wrote in *Art in America* (July-August 1975): "There is no 'getting around' these paintings." The format of Reed's paintings were simultaneously human-scaled and necessary: they needed to be as narrow as they were so that the artist could move the brushstroke across the wet surface and go on to the next one before the paint became unworkable. Looking at these paintings more than forty years later, two things occurred to me. One is that Reed, having zeroed in on the brushstroke so early in his career, has continually found ways to expand, fracture, and transform it into something different without getting stuck. This is not to say that there have not been ups and downs, but that is true of all artists of note. The other thing that grabbed me about Reed's strokes is the way their drips undermined the horizontal movement, like melting ice cream. Sometimes the drips reminded me of the jagged contours of an electrocardiogram. In this, Reed's marks departed from those of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. They were his and his alone, and he has gone on to make other singular strokes reflecting his wit and invention. This is a major achievement that the institutions of the New York art world have failed to recognize, as they have with so many artists who embraced painting in the 1970s.