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The Location of the Second Generation

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ONLY A PHILISTINE COULD THINK THAT SOMETHING AS COMPLEX AND NUANCED AS ARTISTIC success could be explained along the lines of the real estate mantra "location, location, location." And yet, there is no doubt that location plays a key role in the careers of artists who make the canon. Absence from New York City, for instance, was crucially detrimental to the posterity of a would-be practitioner of Abstract Expressionism, which also goes under the name New York School.



Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery

Raymond Hendler, '#No. 4 (Big Blue Cardboard)' (1950).

The Jewish Museum's current exhibition "Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976," which considers the New York School in relation to the competing discourse of the critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, polices the AbEx pantheon into some very tight corners. Never merely a local style, however, Abstract Expressionism was from the outset an international impulse in advanced, mid-century painting. Within the American context, there is no room to doubt the crucial impact of the founding fathers celebrated in the Jewish Museum show. But there is equally no question, when it comes to the second generation and beyond, that a metro-centric perspective has obscured the achievements of lesser-

known figures who deserve another look.

That is where commercial galleries come to the rescue. Handling the estates, or, in some cases, looking after artists in their dotage, they provide a glimpse into fascinating secondary personalities of an art world that, as Marcel Duchamp famously quipped, consisted of a couple hundred souls.

Two shows up right now fulfill this mission. Anita Shapolsky Gallery has "Masters of Abstraction" up through September, a delightful miscellany that includes James Brooks, Jimmy Ernst, Grace Hartigan, John Hultberg, and Yvonne Thomas. Of three dozen artists on display in the town-house gallery, which also serves as a cultural foundation, Joan Mitchell is the sole overlap with the Jewish Museum's roster. Mitchell's career straddled the divide of New York and Paris, just as a major figure such as Sam Francis did between the West Coast and Paris. Both these centers were far-flung from a New York perspective, but, then, so was Philadelphia.

That is where Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery comes in, with a provocative revisionist take on the New York School. The gallery recently took on the estate of the overlooked action painter, Raymond Hendler, who also played a pioneering role in presenting Abstract Expressionism beyond its Manhattan habitat in the avant-garde gallery he ran in Philadelphia between 1952 and 1954. The new show presents Hendler's work alongside the friends he exhibited in his short-lived gallery.

Hendler was an interesting case of an artist with a foot in two camps: New York and not-New York. He started out, as early as 1949, as an AbExer in Paris, and it was there that he made contact with two seminal

Canadian painters — the radical Catholic artist Paul-Émile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle, who was a long-term partner of Mitchell's — who explored a form of agitated, gestural abstraction that came directly from Surrealist unconscious drawing. Hendler showed these men, together with Francis and Thomas, in his Philadelphia gallery.

But Hendler also spent significant time in New York. He was an early member of the famous Artists' Club in Greenwich Village, the intellectual fulcrum of Abstract Expressionism, up until its closure in 1957; was a friend of Franz Kline, de Kooning, and Pollock, as well as Rosenberg, and showed with the Rose Fried Gallery in New York. Kline wrote an effusive preface for Hendler's solo exhibition there in 1962.

Introducing Hendler by way of direct comparison with his peers is a high-risk strategy. The Perlow Gallery is obviously trying to make a claim for parity between their man and the better-known artists he showed, but juxtaposing his work with the likes of Pollock and de Kooning runs the risk of exposing the stylistically eclectic Hendler to a suspicion that he aped others rather than forge his own identity. Often, however, Hendler holds his own in terms of quality and of his own work. And despite some hair-raising moments, the hanging of the show avoids crass, overdetermined formal analogies between works with evidently different intentions.

An opening pairing, between Hendler's centrifugally organized burst of white on black, his "No. 5: Log Hitting the Water" (1952), and a pair of posthumously printed Pollock screen prints from 1951, makes the case for Hendler's automatism. The Pollock prints are stand-ins, obviously, for his drip paintings, although even one of those paintings would drive home Hendler's stronger affinity with the Canadian automatistes.

The pairing with de Kooning's undated drawing, "Woman, Embracing and Embraced," on the other hand, though less historically sound, is a whimsical curatorial improvisation, inviting Hendler's abstract interlocking shapes to be read in figural terms.

The proximity of Hendler to Kline comes across forcefully, although Hendler's dab touch in "No. 3 (Tightish Black and White)" (1953) is misty and mottled compared to the trademark thrusting strokes of Kline's "Untitled (Study for Wanamaker Block)" (c. 1955), which comes across even at this tiny scale.

The most persuasive pairings, however, are with the painters Milton Resnick and Philip Guston, probably because, like Hendler, both these masters retained an essentially European scale of brushstroke, as well as deep roots in Expressionism. Less compelling are the attempts to ingratiate Hendler with colorists such as Francis and Jack Tworkov. Rather out on a limb is a comparatively outside, exuberantly primitive George McNeil, though Hendler did share with McNeil a robust and fearless indifference toward chromatic politeness.

Like the biblical Daniel, Hendler seems to have survived the Perlow's decision to place him in a lion's den. Posthumously, he is a prophet to be welcomed back to his adopted hometown.

"Masters of Abstraction" until September 20 (152 E. 65th St., between Lexington and Third avenues, 212-452-1094).

Hendler until July 15 (41 E. 57th St. at Madison Avenue, 212-644-7171).