

MISSING IN ACTION

ROBERT STORR ON RON GORCHOV

RON GORCHOV could have been a contender—more times over than any other painter of his generation. If he gets the breaks and goes the distance this time, he will be one of the greatest comeback kids the New York School has ever seen. What are the odds on this happening? It's almost impossible to say. But based solely on his recent exhibition of paintings made between 1968 and 2005 at Vito Schnabel's temporary space in New York, I'd say he has an excellent shot. His chances this go-round are improved all the more by the discreet support of fellow artists Saint Clair Cemin and Ray Smith, in whose huge Brooklyn warehouse space Gorchov has carved out a studio of his own. Adding still greater clout is the outspoken backing provided by the gallerist's father, Julian Schnabel, whose cinematic valentines to fellow NeoExer Jean-Michel Basquiat and Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas are matched in this instance by his de facto patronage of an artist who incarnated (for him, and many others who made the scene in the late '70s) the quintessential SoHo brushman. "I remember the first time that I saw a Ron Gorchov painting," the senior Schnabel writes in a brief but generous statement for the show's catalogue. "It was about as big as I was, but it seemed bigger." Given the broad-shouldered source, that's more than just a description of physical scale. It's a rare homage paid retrospectively to an older canvas-master by his young challenger.

To the extent that Norman Mailer—esque boxing metaphors have crept into this account, I beg the indulgence of gender-sensitive readers and point to some style cues in that catalogue. These include

one period snapshot of Gorchov dressed in a dandy's scarf and biker jacket, and another of the furry-chested, mutton-chopped artist in his rough-hewn Grand Street studio. When it comes to image there's no getting around the Guy thing. But Schnabel's fond recollections of his initial encounter with Gorchov bespeak a tender regard for the true subtlety of the elder artist's work: "[The painting] sat oddly on a wall, its top and bottom projecting into the room like the edges of a shield with two hermetic marks, a two color painting, one for the ground and the other for the two marks that were also in effect the ground, but floated, and at the same time rooted the painting like lungs that would bring air into a chest and support a ribcage, even a whole body. It gave me an odd sensation. It was a handmade reality; bulky and delicate."

That says it pretty well, especially the last bit about bulkiness and delicacy. Gorchov's primary invention consists of finely fitted wooden frames resembling saddles or shields. Across these, he stretches linen that has been cut to meet the front edge of the support in order to emphasize that structure's materiality and weight—this in contrast to the thinness of the fabric, over which still thinner washes and skim coats of pigment are laid. The examples of such signature objects shown here come in sizes varying from twenty-four by thirty-four inches to about six by seven feet, the smaller ones acting like eye-trapping concave icons, and the larger ones like warped, body-embracing color fields.

During much of the '70s, Gorchov's way of riffing on the projected anthropomorphism of action paint-



ing was to slow the gesture down and shape it, while dividing the task of mark making between the left and right hands in order to italicize the difference between them. In this respect, his affinity with Arshile Gorky emerges, transmitted through Gorchov's early affiliation with Gorky's mentor John Graham, and is transformed by the brittle but generally streamlined Brancusi-esque forms that he shares with so many artists of the '60s and '70s, notably Joel Shapiro and Richard Tuttle. For Gorchov, however, the instinctive deftness of attack that characterized such pictorial devices came gradually. Indeed, the paintings that made Gorchov's reputation in the late '50s were heavily indebted to late Tenth Street abstraction. (His precocious talents were featured alongside Alex Katz's in "Young America 1960: Thirty American Painters Under Thirty-Six" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which gives us an idea of just how long this artist has been considered "promising.") By contrast, from the '60s onward, Gorchov's mature work is typified by a virtuosic lightness of touch, eccentricity of form, and radiance of color—the latter ranging from rich, saturated hues dissolved in veils of turpentine to the most mesmerizing matte pastels and dry, chromatic oxymorons of earth and air. Imagine Rothko's great "multiforms" flexing.

The dozen paintings in this show beautifully encapsulated this full gamut of formats and painterly manners. In those from

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Top: Ron Gorchov in his studio, 461 Broome Street, New York, 1973. Bottom, left: Ron Gorchov, *Mine*, 1968, oil on linen, 8'10" x 12'5". Right: Ron Gorchov, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on linen, 79 x 71".

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the '70s, Gorchoy's play with ambidexterity tends toward nuances of asymmetry, accented by Art Deco-ish shapes. The most "design-y" examples begin to look like masks, though the "tribe" in question could hardly be less primitive. (Happily, the artist makes no pretense to be anything of the kind.) Rather, Gorchoy luxuriates in the medium and his formal and technical sophistication even as he economizes on pictorial incident, at once reflecting the abiding power of Minimalism throughout the decade and the gradual loosening of its hold as the '80s approached. By the '80s, drips and luminous streaking become more pronounced, the sweep of the artist's hand more open and graphic, and the shapes off center and animated, not to mention overtly biomorphic and surrealist: liquid Arp. Today, seemingly mistrustful of such hedonism, Gorchoy has foresworn the graciousness of these curves and set aside his bowed structures altogether in favor of striped compositions that seek a position beside Newman while keeping a distance from Buren. This puts almost all the pressure on handling and hue, meaning that Gorchoy has voluntarily denied one source of strength in order to face the test of total reliance on two others. The result is pictures that satisfy on their own terms but sharpen the appetite for less abstemious fare. And there is reason to think that it will be forthcoming once Gorchoy has convinced himself that he doesn't need to prove he has more than one good idea. After all, his art is not really about ideas: First-rate painters don't need so many if they are able to give renewable substance to the ephemeral traces that drift through the mind and down the arm. As this minisurvey makes clear, Gorchoy continues to do just that even when he assigns himself a handicap.

Meanwhile, pride of place at Vito Schnabel was given to Gorchoy's two grandest (and simultaneously awkward and elegant) experiments in neo-constructivism: multipaneled stacks of heraldic monochromes that were first installed in 1972 at the Emerson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. One of these works, *Set*, was later included in



"Rooms," the inaugural exhibition at New York's P.S. 1 in 1976, while the other, *Entrance*, was also exhibited at P.S. 1, later still, in 1979. *Set* is intended to partially block a corner like a medieval barricade or hunter's blind. *Entrance* opens near the middle like a portal through which the viewer may walk. (One can also stroll around the end of the former composite.) Visible behind these paintings are makeshift struts, fasteners, and guy wires, the kind of studio bricolage that represents the antithesis of Minimalism's industrial aesthetic. This point is made more explicit by the larger stretchers' combination of tentative modular dovetailing and overall monumentality. Anyone who claims that such works are emblematic of painting's desire to morph into sculpture (at a time when painting was widely assumed to be dead or dying) might be right in their assessment, insofar as Gorchoy took up the challenge that sculpture posed. But they would be wrong to the degree that these works fail as sculpture—or Minimalist sculpture at any rate—because the odd gestalt of self-containment that they possess as individual units prohibits their joining seamlessly into a greater entity. Moreover, in their frontality, they refuse finally to be anything but painting, albeit painting of a very unexpected and intriguing variety.

These two works were made in the early '70s, during the period of Gorchoy's greatest visibility and impact. With such shaped canvases he was an inspiration to Elizabeth

Murray and, in his pioneering use of curved rather than flat surfaces, a natural rival to Frank Stella. Stroke for stroke, he was (and is) Brice Marden's equal when it comes to pure painterly pleasure. Yet for reasons I suspect only he can explain, Gorchoy has had a spotty "career." Although his path includes impressive showings at Susan Caldwell and Pat Hamilton galleries in the '70s, followed by Hamilton, Marlborough, and Jack Tilton galleries in New York and Galerie M in Bochum, Germany, in the '80s, its circuit has been interrupted by spans of years during which he seems to have gone missing or simply allowed himself to fade into the background. It is not far-fetched to suppose that the temperament responsible for work of such formal novelty and idiosyncratic sensuality would not thrive in the go-go art world that came into being as Gorchoy achieved full command of his idiom. Not that he is a self-effacing "sensitive" (as Ivan Karp once termed artists too modest with respect to their muse to make a bold move). Rather, he's a chronic doubter and reviser who used to force himself to finish paintings by writing arbitrary time limits on the wall next to his canvas: three more hours to go, four more days to go . . . Well, the existential clock is running out, and Gorchoy must be aware of that. But one can hope that he also takes heart from the fact that a lot of people who have known his paintings for a long time—as well as those who are just now getting acquainted with them—are rooting for him to stay in the ring and get the job done. □

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Top: Ron Gorchoy, *Entrance*, 1971. Installation view, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 1979. Bottom: Ron Gorchoy, *Set*, 1972. Installation view, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 1976.