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Goldberg

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RESOURCE AND RESPONSE
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



RECKONING
WITH
TRADITION:
THE ART OF
MICHAEL
GOLDBERG

Acknowledgements

This exhibition draws upon an exceptional concentration of Goldberg's work that is to be found in three private collections in Nebraska. To these private lenders, the Sheldon extends special thanks. Phillip Schragger deserves special mention; without his generous support, this exhibition would not have been possible. Thanks go, too, to the artist, who has shared both his time and his own collection with the Sheldon.

Ms. Patricia Griffin, B.A. candidate in Art and Art History at UNL, served as research assistant. Her industry and attention to detail were indispensable in developing the essay on Michael Goldberg's work.

Goldberg

This exhibition, the second in the Resource and Response Series, assembles approximately a score of works which span nearly four decades of Michael Goldberg's career as a painter. In so doing, this exhibition also reflects upon perhaps the most fabled chapter in the history of American art: the emergence of the New York School and, with it, the creation of an "independent, self-generating, and specifically American art."¹ Here, as for all shows in this series, the intent is not to rival a full retrospective, but to develop a focused response to prominent issues and concerns in the world of contemporary art.

In speaking about his work, Goldberg remarked (with a level of pretension hovering around absolute zero), "I think of my art as being a little like a slinky toy. It expands and then gathers itself into the same shape."² What this exhibition offers, is the opportunity to suggest some of the ways in which Goldberg's work, through all of its changes, remains an expansion and a gathering of the artist's original ideas. At the same time, this exhibition provides a chance to question the place in American art history which criticism, until very recently, had designated for Goldberg and other members of the "second generation" of Abstract Expressionists.

That place has been assigned largely, it would seem, because the lure and tradition of the New, by the middle Fifties, was altogether compelling. As Robert Rosenblum recently admitted, "I was already aware that

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Rothko and Still, Pollock and deKooning were heavyweights and spoke for past achievement; but I couldn't wait to turn the page and find out what would happen next."³ Further, he writes, "...I, for one, thought I could write off most of the work by [Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg, Grace Hartigan, Al Held, Alfred Leslie and Joan Mitchell] as irritating anachronisms, the product of loyal but growingly irrelevant satellites. I was anxious to sweep them under the carpet and get on with the evolution of art."⁴ In this context, it is important to note, if very elliptically, that the art of the first generation, of Rothko, Pollock, de Kooning, — and perhaps a dozen others — owed a great deal to tradition, and little of that American.

In 1952, the critic Harold Rosenberg made perhaps the most widely quoted assessment of this newly respectable painting in an article titled "The American Action Painters":

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act — rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.⁵

As Phyllis Rosenzweig observes, these words "...seemed to summarize, rather than introduce many ideas which had already appeared in print."⁶ What is important here is the fact that, although Rosenberg's remarks stress the newness of the American achievement, they depend heavily upon the thought of the French existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre, and a European philosophical tradition which reaches back to Edmund Husserl. Further, they imply what was certainly a fact: the American painters were influenced by a cluster of shared ideas. Their gestural, spontaneous approach to making a work was, if nothing else, mutually respected and corroborated.

Many of the painters of the first generation also shared an interest in Surrealism and the notion of automatism. Yves Tanguy, André Masson and André Breton, driven from France by Hitler, had brought their Freud-influenced surrealist ideas to New York. By war's end, in fact, Matisse, Picasso and Braque were conspicuously absent from the extraordinary group of emigres who had found their way to America and the advanced art circles of Manhattan. Throughout much of the Thirties, however, important examples of the work of Matisse, Picasso and Braque had been installed in the library of New York University. The Museum of Modern Art had consistently showed the works of the European moderns, perhaps most significantly in *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition which

opened in March of 1936. Kandinsky's abstract expressionist works were also on view in New York after 1939, at a converted brownstone on 54th Street which was the forerunner of the Guggenheim Museum. To this incomplete list, at least, should be added the presence of Hans Hofmann, in New York since 1933. To his influential classes, Hofman brought his own concept of modernist art as a fusion of Fauve color and Cubism — and Kandinsky's vision of the spiritual in art. In all, and quite apart from the fact that deKooning was born in Holland, Mark Rothko in Russia, and Arshile Gorky in Armenia, Abstract Expressionism was nurtured and challenged by European art and thought, and stands, in many respects, as an international achievement.

To an extent that is significant, it can be said that the New York School created a "specifically American art" because, in the face of indifference or outright hostility to advanced art, they managed to create it in America. Hofmann, at a 1950 Artists' Session at Studio 35, observed:

The American painter of today approaches things without basis. The French approach things on the basis of cultural heritage.... It is a working towards a refinement and quality rather than working towards new experiences, and painting out those new experiences that finally may become tradition. The French have it easier.⁷

It is in those experiences that finally became tradition that Michael Goldberg, as a painter, has his roots. Enrolled at the Art Students League as early as 1938, a student at the Hofmann School in 1941 and 1942, he was excluded from closer involvement with the first generation's early development by World War II. (An Army paratrooper, he jumped in North Africa and then survived eighty jumps behind Japanese lines in Burma.)

In the earliest work in this exhibition, a 1947 still life, Goldberg's schooling tells. His use of black and thinly washed yellows, beiges, and silvery grays, the overlapping shapes arranged on a surface which is actually a steeply pitched plane, reflect the influences of Gorky, Matta, and above all, Hofmann. Even in this very early work, done shortly after the painter's post-war nine month stint in the oil fields of Venezuela, Goldberg's own meld of cubist space and expressionistic facture is clear. In altered guises, this fusion persists.

In direct fashion, it also reflects the artist's succinct view of deKooning's achievement, an achievement which, for various reasons,⁸ proved the strongest single influence on his own career. "Though I think Pollock is the most important artist we've produced in the past fifty or sixty years," Goldberg recently said, "de Kooning offered a way to translate Cubism into the American consciousness. His fusion between gesture and structure, his physical flow of color, offered a clue to the way painting could be extended."

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CHECKLIST

Paintings

- 1) *Untitled*, 1947, 54" x 67", oil on canvas, Private Collection, Lincoln, NE
- 2) *Chair*, 1954, 54½" x 42½", oil on canvas, Private collection, Lincoln, NE
- 3) *Park Avenue Facade*, 1956-57, oil on canvas, 108" x 109½", Pacesetter Corporation
- 4) *Lem Duck The Happy Hooligan*, 1961, 80" x 66", oil on canvas, Pacesetter Corporation
- 5) *The Other Sunday Afternoon*, 1960, 48" x 42", oil on canvas, Collection of the artist
- 6) *Untitled*, 1968, 96" x 96" (two panels), oil & pastel on canvas, Collection of the artist
- 7) *Hobe Sound, Fla.*, 1973, 66" x 66", bronze powders, clear alkyd on canvas, Collection of the artist
- 8) *Untitled*, 1973, 100" x 70", bronze powders, clear alkyd on canvas, Collection of the artist
- 9) *Untitled*, 1974, 72" x 72", bronze powders, clear alkyd on canvas, Collection of the artist
- 10) *Untitled*, 1975, 65" x 75", bronze on canvas, Pacesetter Corporation
- 11) *Untitled*, 1977, 63" x 86", bronze powder on canvas, Pacesetter Corporation
- 12) *Untitled*, 1978-79, 78½" x 78", bronze powders, clear alkyd on canvas, Collection of the artist





13) *Codex Morales Piede Contadino II*, 1981, 60" x 48", bronze powder on canvas, Pacesetter Corporation

14) *Codex Morales Piede Sermugnano*, 1981, 60½" x 48", bronze powder, alkyd, pastels and matte on canvas, William Thiesen Collection

15) *Codex Ca Boso — New York #VIII*, 1983, 80" x 100", bronze powder, pastels, chalks, liquitex matte on canvas, Pacesetter Corporation

16) *House, Tree V*, 1984, 80" x 72", oil, pastel, chalk on canvas, Collection of the Sonnabend Gallery, New York Drawings

17) *Untitled*, 1977, 28½" x 24½", Pacesetter Corporation

18) *Untitled*, circa 1976, 21" x 15", Pacesetter Corporation

19) *Untitled*, 1975, 28½" x 25", Pacesetter Corporation

20) *Untitled*, 1973, 15" x 21", Pacesetter Corporation

21) *Untitled*, 1977, 28½" x 24", Pacesetter Corporation

ABOVE: *Codex Morales Piede Contadino II*.

LEFT: *Park Avenue Facade*.

COVER: *Codex Ca Boso — New York #VIII*.

Goldberg

These terms offer the clearest insight into the center of Goldberg's work. Gesture, it often appears, is structure; the physical flow of color, or more accurately, the flow of medium, stands as a formal metaphor for the stroke of the brush and structures his art, extending our own experience of the tradition of abstract expressionism.

Chair, 1954, is a work in which the handling of paint has become much looser, apparently sometimes brushed wet into wet, sometimes applied directly from the tube. *Park Avenue Facade*, 1956-57 is equally deKooning-esque; there is evidence that the vigorously brushed surface has been worked and reworked. The final surface of confidently brushed color can be read as an abstract triptych; the locked-together, roughly geometric zones of color recall, but do not imitate, the stability of architecture.

Both works reflect the accuracy of the recent observation that, during the Fifties, "For Goldberg....abstraction is always at the mercy of the representational world....he always structures his paintings by referring to still life, architecture, or landscape."⁹ Such works during this decade received high praise. Leo Steinberg, in his review of the Stable Gallery show, wrote in January of 1956, "In Goldberg's hands, the most undoctored splashings of thick paint become transfigured into space and motion. Pigment is smeared and knifed, scratched away and masked out by paper diapers and canvas strips. But it works and works joyously."¹⁰ Given the quality of the works themselves, and the authority of such praise, it would perhaps seem startling to find a young Robert Rosenblum anxious to see such work swept under the carpet — and at least curious that Goldberg, together with other members of the second generation could wait nearly two decades for recognition of their work to be persuasively renewed.

But Barbara Rose, for one, could observe in 1965 that although the talent of this group "is enough to make any of the virtuosi of the past envious," their abundance of talent "was their downfall."¹¹ Rose goes on to claim that their work showed little evidence of struggle; it was all too easy. Today, none this work looks easy. Proof that the works were without struggle is conspicuously absent from any criticism of the time. It was, simply, a claim.

Such claims came out of an art world which was, by the mid-Fifties, extremely complex. Goldberg recalls, in the late Forties especially, "it was a very reflexive situation. Nobody had any money. It felt perfectly natural to visit each other's studios and pick up what was going on." Perhaps more importantly, he also recalls that, in those days, "There were no peer distinctions. There was

no sense of being in a junior or student relationship." Irving Sandler, in this connection, observes, "In retrospect, it appears that a desire for historical position, not only in relation to European artists of their own generation but to their American followers, led the first generation Abstract Expressionists to establish a pantheon."¹²

In any case, what Dore Ashton has called "the solidarity of poverty"¹³ gave way. "Money began to filter past Pollock, deKooning, and Kline," Goldberg recalls, and cites consecutive mid-decade afternoons when his own studio was visited by Walter Chrysler, Jr. and Martha Jackson. Each bought groups of works — at half the going rate — and each spent exactly the same amount of money: \$10,000.00

Resentments and rivalries soon and perhaps inevitably appeared. These, in turn, may have figured largely in the sometimes acrimonious debate over the general question, is abstract expressionism a viable style or has it become merely academic — a learned activity? In 1959, *Art News* devoted many pages in two issues to this question. Helen Frankenthaler, an exact contemporary of Goldberg and his colleagues, and herself profoundly influenced by Pollock, offered a response which now seems ironic: "The people in the new academy deny there is one; people not in it recognize its existence. The academy was easier to recognize a couple of years ago because then its pictures were *obviously* derivative...."¹⁴ It seems to have occurred to no one that derivative qualities were becoming hard to recognize because the painters in question were actively, "painting toward new experiences."

Criticism which focused on form and rejected content also took aim at the gestural tradition. The chief formalist voice in American criticism in the Fifties was, undoubtedly, Clement Greenberg, but perhaps the most decisive statement of the general position was offered by Michael Fried. He insisted: "only an art of constant formal self-criticism can bear or embody or communicate more than trivial meaning."¹⁵

This position was a very rigorous one. It meant that painting, a two-dimensional art, should rid itself of all of those qualities which interfered with or contradicted its essential two-dimensional character. That meant that art, for instance, should not contain complex illusions of three-dimensional space, nor should it contain ostensibly theatrical, painterly gestures. Painting was expected to be engaged in a "self-critical" process, in which a purely visual statement was the goal.

It evidently occurred to very few, except artists, that it was entirely possible that some of these assumptions about the inherent character of painting were simply wrong, or that it was possible to be engaged in a continuing critical dialogue with one's work while also exploring the resources of the gestural tradition.

The art of Michael Goldberg asserts that

Footnotes:

1. John Russell, *The Meanings of Modern Art*, New York, Harper & Row, 1974, p. 291
2. Michael Goldberg, interview with Donald Doe, July, 1984. All remarks by the artist were made during conversations of July & September, 1984.
3. Robert Rosenblum, "Excavating the 1950's," *Action/Precision: The New Direction in New York, 1955-60*, exhibition catalog: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1984, p. 13
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13-14
5. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, December, 1952, p.22
6. Phyllis Rosenzweig, "The Fifties: Aspects of Criticism in New York," *The Fifties: Aspects of Painting in New York*, exhibition catalog: Hirshhorn Museum, 1980, p.15
7. Cited in Maurice Tuchman, *New York School: The First Generation*, Greenwich, Conn., New York Graphic Society, 1970, p.26
8. Goldberg reports that deKooning lived "one building over and one floor down" from his own studio on 10th Street, between 3rd and 4th Avenues. DeKooning, unlike many of the first generation, continued to live and work in the midst of the younger painters. With Kline, he was the most available of the older group.



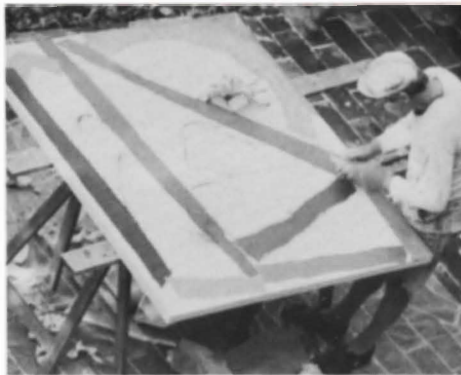
Peter Bellamy

such critical dialogue is indeed possible. With increasingly restricted means, Goldberg arrived at two series of monochromatic works, the first black, the second red, by 1960-61. These paintings, in the artist's words, were "completely abstract, and as abstract as I could make a painting." They are not uninflected fields of color, however, but are broadly brushed; the surface, in fact, is structured by the enduring presence of the artist's gesture.

The slinky toy then began to expand. Bands of white were brushed across the black fields; the fields of color ceased to be monochromatic. By 1964-65, Goldberg had completed a large number of works which were either spatially compact still lifes or more spatially open, thoroughly gestural landscapes.

Following a 1966 trip to Buffalo and the Albright-Knox Gallery's installation of newly received works by Clyfford Still, Goldberg was again convinced that, in the artist's own phrase, "abstract art remained the principal challenge of our century." His work again tended toward contraction. Working with bronze powders and clear alkyls, his canvases again veered toward a single color. Always enlivened by the presence of the artist's activity, these works drain of internal passages which might read as elliptical reference to landscape. By 1972, the surface is inflected by a delicately drawn, roughly grid-like pattern inscribed on surfaces of monochromatic, metallic color.

From these works, Goldberg moved toward a centralized image. Clearly hand wrought, with a square set within the larger square of the canvas, the paintings of 1973-74 shimmer and have an extraordinary weight and density of surface. Arriving at this nexus, the paintings lost their hand-made geometry in favor of centralized geomorphic shapes. In bronze powders on unprimed canvas, these dark shapes evolved toward calligraphic images — rather like single letters from an alien alphabet — that seem a depiction (but not in the manner of Lichtenstein) of his painterly gestures of the Fifties. The actual presence of gesture, meanwhile, remained in his paperworks. As one critic noted, "Goldberg uses the kernel of the abstract expressionist style and, using the technique but not the confessional passion, digs, scratches, penetrates actually into the surface of the paper."¹⁶



Lynn Umlauf

Gradually, the gestural motive, without the "confessional passion," has been returned to the surface of Goldberg's paintings. The calligraphic stroke was first transformed into dark bands which tend to bracket or frame a central shape which suggests, variously, a mountain landscape or the sweep of open fields. Ensuing paintings find the vertical bands, executed in bronze powders, the sole motif. By 1979, several of the many bands articulating the surface were done in bright colors; in the latter part of that year and into the first of this decade, the colored bands were also employed horizontally. These bands sometimes framed or partially framed the dark bronze vertical zone, sometimes penetrated into it.

With the Codex paintings, the dark bronze has vanished. The bands of color shimmer with intense chroma and are no longer held to directions which essentially parallel the framing edges of the works. These bands, instead, evoke architectural forms and suggest the structural forces of architecture as well as the jewel-encrusted covers of medieval codices. Very recently, these bands of color which structure the surface of Goldberg's works have seemingly become electrified, coursing across the canvas in jagged patterns which recall the visual energy of *Park Avenue Facade*, but do not overtly assert the physical energy of the painter at work.

In 1963, William Berkson observed, "...Goldberg carries into his work an authentic, Proustian memory that entails abundance, because it is a natural memory of continual action."¹⁷ The painter's memory now includes the experience of working within a tradition. The physical flow of color, the formal possibilities of action, as well as the importance of the representational world — to which Schimmel has already pointed — continue as central to Goldberg's art. The artist's *oeuvre* is not marked by a strict stylistic unity; it would appear, however, that his painting is rooted in a personal vocabulary which has persisted as the painter has given shape to experience.

Donald Bartlett Doe
Assistant Director

9. Paul Schimmel, "The Lost Generation," *Action/Precision: The New Direction In New York, 1955-60*, exhibition catalog: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1984, p. 29

10. Leo Steinberg, exhibition reviews, *Arts Magazine*, January, 1956, p. 46

11. Barbara Rose, "The Second Generation: Academy and Breakthrough," *Artforum*, December, 1965; p. 62

12. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting, A History of Abstract Expressionism*, New York, Icon Editions, Harper & Row, 1970, p. 269

13. Dore Ashton, *The New York School, A Cultural Reckoning*, New York, Viking Press, 1973, p. 211

14. Helen Frankenthaler, artist's statement, in "Is There a New Academy?" Part I, *Art News*, Summer, 1959, p. 34

15. Michael Fried, cited in Russell, p. 359

16. T. Schwartz, "Paper Theater," *Arts Magazine*, October, 1977, pp. 140-41

17. William Berkson, "Michael Goldberg Paints a Picture," *Art News*, January, 1964, p. 67



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