

JASON MCCOY GALLERY

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Between Inwardness and Irony.

By Peter Plagens

Bernard Childs: 1950s

Jason McCoy Gallery

41 E. 57th St., (212) 319-1996

Through March 15

Modern art history, particularly concerning American abstract painters who hit their stride in the aftermath of World War II, tends to neglect anybody who wasn't Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning or Franz Kline. Bernard Childs (1910-1985) is one of those painters. (Mr. Childs was given a solo exhibition at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 1959, but he's something of a rediscovery today.) Having served aboard a destroyer escort ship in the South Pacific, Childs belongs to a group of artists whose war experience—in the words of the exhibition's brochure—"forever meant a finite break with the world previously known."

In 1951, after a couple of hospital stays, Mr. Childs went to Italy before settling in Paris. During the 1960s and '70s, he split time between his Parisian studio and one here at the Chelsea Hotel. But he did his best painting in Europe in the 1950s: something between—I'm describing, not claiming an influence—the gossamer semiabstract landscapes of Loren MacIver and an easel-size presaging of Helen Frankenthaler.

Mr. Childs's paintings may at first seem thin gruel—the color is muted, there's not much paint on the modestly scaled canvases, and his sense of shape and composition are right out of the School of Paris handbook. But Mr. Childs, an expat who belonged to what he called "the school of displacement," wrought his own poetry from those familiar ingredients. This is a subtle show worth a little work by the viewer.