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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Out of Time: Stephen Greene's 1960s Abstractions

By Natasha Seaman, April 2016



Stephen Greene, "Vigil" (1962), oil on canvas, 68 x 80 in / 172.7 x 203.2 cm

Visiting the exhibition of Stephen Greene's paintings from the 1960s at the Jason McCoy Gallery is like hearing a squat black dial telephone ring next to an ashtray holding a freshly lit cigarette, the smoke curling up into a shaft of sunlight. The phone rings clear and loud and suggests the pleasure of a time — now bygone and suspect, like smoking or sunning — when it seemed possible to make something completely new.

Actually, the phone, smoke, and sunlight are good analogs for what is in Greene's paintings: weighty, curving shapes, dissolving outlines, and diaphanous layers of colors. The paintings are on one hand typical of their post-Abstract Expressionist era, but on the other transcend it, largely through their complexity. They are difficult to reduce to a formula in the manner of Barnett Newman (big and red with zips) or Franz Kline (black brush storms on white).

Where to start in describing one? For instance, in "Vigil" (1962), one might begin where the eye is drawn — like a teenager's to the word "sex" on a page of *Catcher in the Rye* — to the bright vermillion dot in the left center. Or perhaps with the orange bar on the far left, or the patch of yellow on the far right — but there is no logical place to proceed next. Go from bottom layer to top, then, starting with the unprimed canvas, which still peeps through in a few places but is mostly covered by a brown wash overlain by green, or displaced by a swatch of aqua. Except where it's red. Or tan. Or pink.



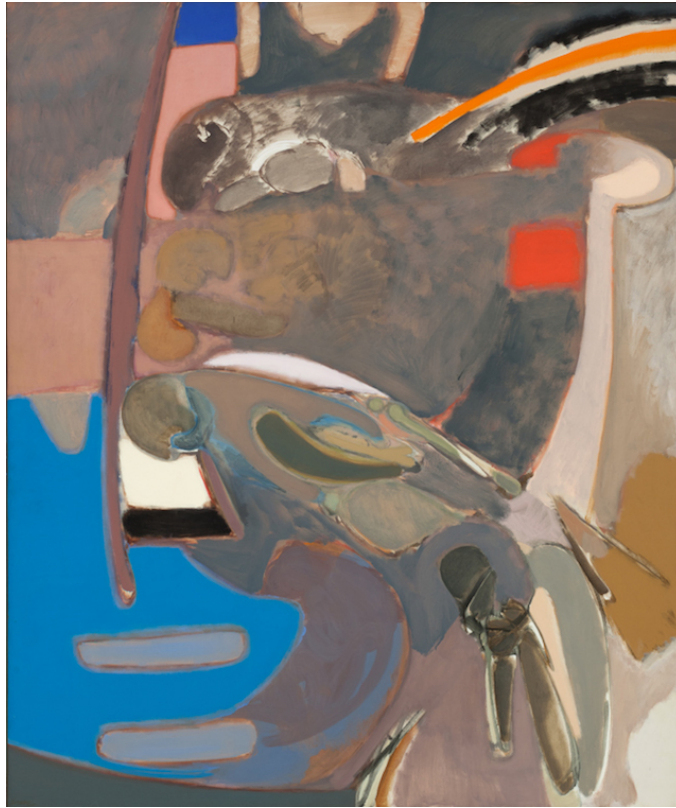
Stephen Greene, "The Ladder" (1963), oil on canvas, 58 x 58 in / 147.3 x 147.3 cm

This difficulty translating the visual into verbal is not just an indicator of the paintings' complexity. Stephen Greene was a figurative artist until the mid 1950s, and in these works he seems not only to have rejected external referents but even the most basic narrative, such as the progression of the paint as it was applied to the canvas, or a coherent sense of cause and effect in the interaction of the elements. While never feeling arbitrary, the forms seem to simply appear in the paintings, each a universe in itself: the tall bundle of gray elements on the left side; the central crescent, bordered now and again with green and gray, red nestled inside, impinging on a field of brushy, transparent maroon; a black stick with a bone-like end, thrusting in from the right; the brushy, dark gray entity floating over a yellow swathe like a fetal barbell, cross-sectioned in an ultrasound.

Yet the forms in these paintings can't seem to leave one another alone: they penetrate, glide, rub, reach, displace, encroach, agitate, slice, blot, lean, dissolve, wedge, bridge, drape, embed. Only rarely, however, do they seem to transform each other, and when they do it feels notable, as in "The Ladder" (1963), in which a pale green bar sullied with gray leans against a broad vertical stripe of gray-blue-orange. At their intersection is a distinct smudge of black, and behind it a cyst of drizzly maroon turpentine wash takes shape inside the vertical stripe.

The complexity of the forms is furthered by the brushwork and color. There are very few areas, such as the turpentine wash in "The Ladder," where the painterly effect is left to chance;

brushstrokes are highly controlled, even when artfully clumsy. Most common is a kind of scrubby mark, the brush not fully saturated with paint, that reveals the layer beneath and almost — but not quite — comes up to the borders of its form, as in the pink-gray passage just above the midline in “Descent” (1963). Sometimes the brush is wetter, working into wet, like the swatch of purplish gray over blue at the bottom center of the same painting.



Stephen Greene, "Descent" (1963), oil on canvas, 80 x 68 in / 203.2 x 172.7 cm

Much of the variety of color is created like this, through the overlapping and intermingling of layers, whether wet on wet or through glazes or scumbles. Almost all of the paintings have a zone of détente: an area where a smoothly applied single hue contrasts with the complexity of the surrounding earth tones, providing the eye with the simple, velvety satisfaction of color on canvas. Greene is also pleasantly addicted to a particular shade of orange, like heated iron, that burns in distinct spots (as in “Vigil”) or is compressed into intense bars.

Despite their old-school ambitions, Greene’s paintings do not feel dated. Each painting creates a singular experience, one that roots the viewer in the moment of viewing and evokes the moment of creation — each brushstroke feels deeply considered and invites consideration. The exhibition as a whole, in its white-walled aerie overlooking 57th Street, doesn’t so much take you back in time, but out of time in a way that makes you sad to leave.