

# FORGOTTEN BEAUTY

Art Patron talks to Michael Gallagher and Jack Reilly about Abstract Illusionism

restrictions and allowing viewers to perceive colors, not recognizable images, as the primary subject matter.

It was in the 1960s that Al Held, Ronald Davis and Allan D'Arcangelo started using modes of perception and elements of color as a way to create another kind of abstraction.

They arranged recognizable geometric objects on a canvas and enhanced the experience with shadows behind the objects, projecting the image forward off the surface. This represented a break with the tradition of depicting objects receding into the canvas or toward a focal point within the pictorial plane as we see in early examples of the technique of trompe l'oeil ("deceive the eye"). We can say that these artists laid the foundations on which others created the movement of Abstract Illusionism, as New York art dealers Louis K. Meisel and Ivan Karp called it.

Artists James Havard, Jack Lembeck, Tony King, Michael Gallagher, George Green and Jack Reilly can be viewed as the forerunners of the movement, using three-dimensional painting as a way to create abstract works. Each had his own style and ideas about the direction that depth perception and abstraction could take him. In order to understand this shifting paradigm, Art Patron reached out to Michael Gallagher and Jack Reilly, asking them to share their unique experiences at the height of the movement. Gallagher lived in New York and Reilly in Los Angeles, and the two had approached the movement differently, with Gallagher interested in undefined abstract forms and Reilly more attracted to sharply defined shapes.

began to treat the canvas as a window onto the unconscious, combining techniques for suggesting depth with realistically depicted imagery based on random thoughts to evoke a Freudian universe. They placed their subjects in a space in which our eyes could explore our fears and hopes and desires.

By the late 1940s, however, artists had reverted to the idea that the canvas is essentially a flat surface. Jackson Pollock splattered paint onto his canvases, breaking out of the confines of academic

During the 1970s and '80s, artists working in a new style transformed the pictorial plane into a three-dimensional space by using shadows and angles to challenge our perceptions in an abstract way.

Over the preceding hundreds of years, artists had accustomed our eyes to the fact that a flat canvas could transport us into a three-dimensional world beyond its two-dimensional surface. But in the 1920s the Surrealists



Michael Gallagher, *4X*, 1978, 72x70 inches, acrylic and oil on canvas. Private collection.

Educated at Yale, Gallagher explains that New York's art world has changed immensely since the 1970s. He remembers the Lower Manhattan district of SoHo as being a warehouse area of light manufacturing (mostly printing and garment shops) supported by a diversified blue-collar immigrant population. Business was going through a depression and large loft spaces became available for very little money.

But these spaces were barely habitable, he remembers. They were missing floors and had bad plumbing and electrical connections. When businesses were closed on lower levels at night and on weekends, there might be no heat. This was Bohemian living, as Gallagher describes it – surviving "in a space where an animal could die."

There were fewer than half a dozen galleries in the neighborhood, but artists were just as respected as any other profession. Gallagher remembers becoming fascinated early in his career with exploring modes of perception in fine art, specifically painting. "Learning about the various schemes deployed for constructing illusions – overlapping, scale and placement, linear perspective, relative hue and value, chiaroscuro and atmospheric perspective – fueled further study."

Gallagher and his Yale colleagues created a co-op named Razor Gallery on West Broadway where they had "atypical shows" in which "Kurt Vonnegut gave readings and Annie Sprinkle showed her wire mesh house models inhabited by



Jack Reilly, *Ace*, 1980, 60x80 inches, acrylic polymers on shaped canvas. Private Collection, Los Angeles, CA

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horizontal and vertical lines creating a reference point in layers of loosely applied color forms that appeared to be floating in front of or behind the veil. The paintings were well received by critics thanks to the aggressive and daring manner in which Gallagher balanced his abstract compositions in an organized, three dimensional scheme.

A 1978 graduate of Florida State, Reilly became interested in a similar approach when he discovered the endless possibilities of using an abstract format in a three-dimensional space. He remembers this being unheard of at the time, and contemporary abstraction was ripe for a shake-up. He began to produce his first large-scale minimalist works – canvases that were essentially backdrops for floating multi-colored bars – right out of college. It was a simple yet dramatic attempt to combine geometry, color and perception in a transcendent form of organic composition. His works were well received

large canvases of organized, floating color fields that were often placed on a grid-like plane. The compositions had a sense of structure, held together by faint

hissing cockroaches while performing stripteases a couple of times a day.” It was then that he solidified his fascination with his new painting style, producing

Jack Reilly, *Eclipse of Reason*, 1993, 60x94 inches, acrylic polymers on shaped canvas. Collection of the Artist.



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Jack Reilly, detail from *Fidelity*, 1993, acrylic polymers on shaped canvas. Shadows are painted to emulate dual light sources. Collection of Stuart and Arlene Marzell, Hacienda Heights, CA.

and his first Los Angeles exhibition sold out immediately. He remembers turning his studio into a literal factory, producing

over fifty large scale works per year to keep up with the demand.

It was in 1979 that prominent art

dealer Molly Barnes discovered Reilly's work and offered him a solo exhibition at her gallery. Like Gallagher, he was accepted a short time later in a traveling exhibition of Abstract Illusionist artists called *The Reality of Illusion* that opened at the Denver Art Museum and made its way to other museums around the country. He felt like a rock star.

Reilly describes Abstract Illusionism as a "bourgeoning hybrid style which combined aspects of Abstract Expressionism and post-painterly abstraction with a longing to redefine three-dimensional depth (as a formal element) in painting." He and Gallagher made their contributions to a period of art history that we would do well to revisit and celebrate, but they are still working today, producing works that collectors continue to appreciate. (A.7)

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