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Norman Bluhm

(1921-1999)

Norman Bluhm was born in Chicago in 1921, and initially studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology with Mies van der Rohe. He studied briefly in Florence before moving to Paris in 1947 to continue studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After serving in World War II, Bluhm lived in Paris and developed an interest in figurative painting. In 1956 he moved to New York, where he began painting full time. Bluhm's earliest paintings were figural, but by the early '50s he had moved into full abstraction, eventually taking on its characteristically looser and more gestural style. Throughout, Bluhm maintained a passion for art history and an abiding interest in contemporary practice. The critic Raphael Rubinstein has written, "What's... impressive about Bluhm's canny use of art history is that he is able to recapitulate and reinterpret stellar moments from the history of Western painting without ever lapsing into pastiche, the bane of so much history-conscious art." Soon, his work was showing at the Leo Castelli and Martha Jackson galleries in Manhattan, and Galerie Stadler in Paris. From the late 1950s until his death in 1999, Bluhm exhibited regularly in group and solo shows throughout America and abroad.

In the 1960s, Bluhm was exploring relationships between swirling, loosely applied forms and unexpected arrangements of color. He used large brushes, soaked with vibrantly hued paint, and treated his work surface with enthusiasm and energy. This method produced works that were orgiastic in their dramatic intensity—bold, organically applied pigment insouciant in its application and outlook.

Critic John Dorfman called him "the greatest Abstract Expressionist painter you've never heard of. Or if you have heard of him, you're part of a select group of aficionados who appreciate the multifaceted, challenging work of a painter who refused to be pinned down to any one school or style and kept working regardless of the shifting tides of the market and art-critical opinion."