

Art Review: Jack Youngerman's Visual Language

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by Gabrielle Selz

"Jack Youngerman: Works on Paper 1951-2012" at The Drawing Room

On view through June 3, 2013

The French call it, *le menu degustation*. In restaurant parlance this means to taste and carefully savor a delicate sample of everything the kitchen has to offer provided by the chef. The show on view at [The Drawing Room](#) in East Hampton from May 3 through June 3, presents just such an exquisite representation: 50 years of works on paper by the artist [Jack Youngerman](#).

Youngerman was greatly influenced by the flavors of French Art and his time in the Parisian Art World in the aftermath of World War II. In 1947, when most young American artists were congregating in New York, Jack Youngerman left Missouri for Paris on the GI Bill, immersing himself in a city bursting back to life following the dark period of German occupation. This reemergence of vigor, of esprit and essence, as well as the clean cutout shapes of [Jean Arp](#) and the saturated colors of [Henri Matisse](#), left indelible marks that are evident throughout Youngerman's long career.



Banlieue by Jack Youngerman, 1953.
Oil on paper, 7 7/8 x 6 3/8 inches.
Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of

The Drawing Room.

Grouped chronologically and ranging in size from delicate 3-inch squares to more formally resolved 21-inch forms, the show traces Youngerman's evolution toward his own style of organic, geometric abstraction. Works from the early '50s, such as *White Blue Construction* (1951) and the gentler, soft paintbrush marks of *Banlieue* (1953), are both small symphonies of rhythm and color informed by the paintings of [Paul Klee](#) and [Piet Mondrian](#).

In the late '50s, when Youngerman returned to New York at the behest of the art dealer Betty Parsons, he had moved on from the precision of his early collages and drawings, evolving into a bolder style of gestural shapes, evidenced by such works as *Blue Delfina* (1961).

This 21-inch square of blue and black gouache on paper is one of the largest pieces in the show. The dynamic interlocking jagged forms take on the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, but without the angst and bluster. A few years later, in the ink on paper work titled *August 31, 1966*, the artist unites flowing forms with ragged edges that define the white space of the paper.

By the late '60s, Youngerman's irregular shapes, both on the canvas and on paper, had given way to more iconic imagery. He was producing work with central, organic motifs, some of which resembled large, abstracted flower heads. Look at *Yellow and Black* (1960): This watercolor resembles a Pop version of a [Georgia O'Keeffe](#) if the point of view on the flower was as up close and personal as a bumblebee. The lemon yellow design in the lower quadrant is nearly symmetrical, the encircling black shape provides an emblematic focus, and the entire composition is a merging of strength and sensuality.

Soon Youngerman's shapes became looser and more flowing. In the late '60s he established a studio in Bridgehampton, and his imagery, which had always harked back to the natural world, became imbued with organic shapes. By the '70s, his ink and gouache compositions, like *July 2, 1972*, had successfully blended the cutout forms of Matisse's that inspired his early work, with his own gestural lightness, his own way of infusing lyrical design with white space in a dance of positive and negative elements.



Green/Orange/Blue by Jack Youngerman, 2010. Gouache on handmade Japanese paper, 13 x 11 5/8 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

Over the next decade, Youngerman worked with stylized patterns—crisp squares, circles and triangles, layered in contrasting colors that caused the images to pulsate and vibrate. Pieces such as *Crucifer (study)* 2008 combine geometric shapes with the juxtaposition of primary colors, lending the work a dense optical quality.

In his latest work, Youngerman's hard edges have given way to a softer geometry. Circles and curves dominate gouaches such as *Green/Orange/Blue* (2010), in which the colored form has been applied to handmade Japanese paper. The paper maintains the brown-grey color and the texture of the tree-bark it was made from, and this bestows a fragile, natural delicacy to the origami-like complexity of the central images.

At 87, Youngerman is having a Renaissance. Additionally, [Washburn Gallery](#) has a display of his cut plywood paintings (to be reviewed shortly on Hamptons Art Hub) and [Longhouse Reserve](#) in East Hampton is displaying six of his black and white fiberglass sculptures from the 1980s through October 12. Also currently on display at [The Parrish Art Museum](#) is *Conflux II* (2003), a vermilion red wood relief. Youngerman began working with these elegantly carved shapes in the 1970s; the piece at the Parrish combines the gestural form that is reminiscent of his earlier work, with the boldness of color and central configuration of his later plywood paintings.

As The Drawing Room rightly states in its press release, its current show on Jack Youngerman is “a window on the development of Youngerman's visual language.” And this is a window with a spectacular view.

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BASIC FACTS: “Jack Youngerman: Works on Paper 1951-2012” opened May 3 and remains on view through June 3, 2013 at The Drawing Room. The gallery is located at 66H Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.drawingroom-gallery.com

To see more artworks in the show, click: “[In Pictures: Jack Youngerman’s Visual Language.](#)”

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