



ART REVIEW Conrad Marca-Relli: Avant-garde of Abstract Expressionism

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by Charles A. Riley II

What was in the water in New York back in the 1950s...especially in its ice cube form at the Cedar Bar? Those in need of a reminder of the thrill of the Abstract Expressionist era need look no further than the high-voltage exhibition of 18 collages and paintings by Conrad Marca-Relli at Hollis Taggart Galleries in Chelsea. Not only does "Conrad Marca-Relli: Reconsidered" offer a fresh look at one of the founding members of the 8th Street Club and a Cedar Bar regular, this exhibition also demonstrates how a transcontinental admixture of the avant-garde was stamped in the passports of vibrant polyglots such as Marca-Relli.



"Conrad Marca-Relli: Reconsidered," at Hollis Taggart Galleries.

If Conrad Marca-Relli's name seems peripherally familiar, perhaps that's because his major painting [*The Battle \(1956\)*](#) hangs at right angles to [*Jackson Pollock's Autumn Rhythm \(1950\)*](#) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, more than holding its own in the august company of a canonic masterpiece. The blockbuster painting on that level of graphic punch in the Hollis Taggart show is an untitled chromatic fantasy from 1949-50 that is from the collection of the artist [*Nicolas Carone*](#) (godson of Marca-Relli).



"Untitled" by Conrad Marca-Relli, c1949. Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.

This piece projects the spectral range of color of a painting by Arshile Gorky, including a dash of the glowing Gorky red and green, and some of the gestural complexity of a de Kooning from the period. The pushy reds and whiplash black lines are also reminiscent of Hans Hofmann, another direct connection to this artist, who was right in the thick of the movement from its beginnings.

The son of an Italian journalist, Conrad Marca-Relli was born in Boston in 1913. From his high school

days he was destined for the studio. After studying at the Cooper Union and a vital stint as a teacher on the WPA Federal Art Project (checking in at roll call with Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, John Graham and other stars), he began shuttling between Europe and New York.

One of the revelations of the Hollis Taggart show is detecting the trace elements of Italian and French art, from Old Masters to contemporary, notably the influence of Marca-Relli's friend [Alberto Burri](#) (1915-1995) as well as the neglected later AbEx painters such as Theodore Stamos and Esteban Vicente, reminders that the New York-based movement was anything but parochial.

"Art is art anywhere," Marca-Relli told those who thought he was too nomadic. He shuttled between New York and Rome, then Rome and Paris, imbuing his work with the influences of Giorgio Morandi and the unfinished slave sculpture of Michelangelo at the Accademia in Florence (particularly notable in the muscular proportions of *Sleeping Figure* in the current show).



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I saw de Chirico's mineral green in the background of the tightly painted Surrealist puzzle *Circus* (1947), but William Agee, who wrote the superb catalogue to the show, ensures that viewers will not miss a striped homage to [Robert Motherwell's *Little Spanish Prison*](#), acquired by MoMA in 1943 and certainly on Marca-Relli's radar.



"Circus" by Conrad Marca-Relli, c1947. Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.

The museum was essential to the stimulus and response of his career. In 1948, two MoMA shows had their impact upon him, one devoted to collages by Picasso, Braque, Arp and Schwitters, the other to the cutouts of Matisse (repeated at MoMA last year). The impact of the latter show is evident in the pieced-together collage forms that assemble as figures in Marca-Relli's work.

By 1951, he was in Leo Castelli's epochal "Ninth Street Show" at Betty Parsons Gallery as well as Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery a year later, confirming his importance to the movement. When he ran out of paint in Mexico in the summer of 1952, he pushed deeper into collage, seeking a "literal and material density." He combined painting and collage in his seated men series from that period, their chalky, oblique faces recalling both de Chirico and Giacometti, reflect a rigorous exploration of what he called the "architecture of a single figure."



“Seated Figure Outdoors” by Conrad Marca-Relli, 1953.
Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.

The “material” effect is clearly seen in many of the other large-scale collages that are a major component of the Hollis Taggart show, especially the powerful, large-scale *Black Board 2*, a bit of Cy Twombly avant-la-lettre with Jasper Johns-worthy leaden greys and chalky dotted lines that chatter in a rhythmic Morse code from section to section.



“Black Board 2 (L-L-1-84)” by Conrad Marca-Relli, 1984. Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.

The medial gap between the two panels of this piece—a couple of inches of white wall (curators decide how wide)—reminded me as well of two-part Rauschenberg works. The most charming of the collages is from Cezanne territory, the compact Provencal fantasy *Villa Horizon*, which evokes the ochre and pale blues of the region.

For the summer of 1953 and after, Marca-Relli had joined the gang in East Hampton (made up of Pollock, de Kooning, James Brooks and others). His scale expanded and his work filled with action. Some of the most engaging works are battlegrounds, literally smoke-tinged, dripping with bloody reds and hacked by black brush strokes with the sheen of pitch. Both the *Sleeping Figure*, as disturbing as a Pompeian victim, and *Collage #55*, which brings puckered textures and Motherwell’s blacks to the strong thighs of a Matisse nude, are intense AbEx explorations of the figure, anything but pure abstraction. This was, remember, the moment when de Kooning was bucking the abstract fashion with his return to the figure in the *Woman* series.



“Sleeping Figure (J-L-16-66) ” by Conrad Marca-Relli,1966. Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.



“Collage #55” by Conrad Marca-Relli, 1957. Courtesy Hollis Taggart Galleries.

The superb and unusual catalogue is a notable reunion between Marca-Relli's work and the eminent art historian and curator William C. Agee, who was an assistant curator at the Whitney in 1967 when he was put in charge of a retrospective of the artist's work. For deeper context, the catalogue reproduces the 1967 text by Agee with a new text that reconsiders the paintings and the moment with the benefit of hindsight.

The first essay is passionate and pointed, defending the "relevance" of abstraction in pure 1960s ideological terms: "And to think we still hear people who insist that abstract art is divorced from real life." I had to envy Agee the Proustian privilege of time travel, if only for the opportunity to show the continuing relevance of this observation almost 50 years later.

BASIC FACTS: "Conrad Marca-Relli: Reconsidered" remains on view through March 5, 2016. Hollis Taggart Galleries is located at 521 West 26th Street, New York 10001, www.hollistaggart.com.

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