



ART REVIEW: Abstraction across Generations through Four Artists on Long Island

April 3, 2017

by Charles A. Riley II

DIX HILLS, N.Y. — “Long Island Abstraction: Two Generations” in the sunlit atrium Jeanie Tengelsen Gallery at the Art League of Long Island pairs living master artists with painters who may grow to become one. The living legacy of nonagenarians Stan Brodsky and Frank Wimberley was on display in two forms: their own vibrant canvases, humming with vitality; and the formidable achievements of two star students, Laura Powers-Swiggett and Frank Galasso.

Brodsky is guru to a fortunate few who took his courses at C.W. Post on Long Island for more than 30 years or have attended his crit sessions at the Art League for decades, a sort of [Hans Hoffmann](#) of the North Shore. Brodsky is the best known of the four artists in the show, with paintings in the permanent collection of [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton and the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Water Mill, and in notable exhibitions through the years at art museums in both Suffolk and Nassau Counties.

Born in Brooklyn in 1926, after serving in World War II [Stan Brodsky](#) used his GI benefits to take studio and art history courses in Missouri and Iowa. He completed a doctorate in education at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, where the legendary [Maxine Greene](#) was pioneering a bold new approach to creativity in the classroom, emphasizing a barrier-breaking sense of freedom. Even at the high level of this exhibition, Greene’s liberating message resonates loud and clear in the opened voices of Powers-Swiggett and Galasso.

Brodsky was part of the Ab Ex crowd in Greenwich Village until moving out to Huntington on Long Island in 1965. His papers and 10 sketchbooks from 1951 to 2004 are now part of the [Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art](#). One of the aesthetic elements of the [Art League](#) show was the dynamic tension between the orthodoxy that can often set in when a movement self-consciously defines itself—the Club, as it was called in Brodsky’s day, was deeply committed to abstraction—and the individual impulse toward originality. As many aphorisms tied to pedagogy attest, there has to be a moment when the student lets go of the teacher’s hand.

Along those lines, Brodsky’s own work adheres to many of the gestural tenets of the Club, with swooping brush strokes and massed passages of green or orange (as in *Tuscan Series #11*), parts of which remind me of [Clyfford Still](#) or [James Brooks](#). Then there is the lightning flash of a calligraphic stroke of red or orange grazing the surface that bears all the singularity of handwriting. The lighter touch, a later addition, becomes the focus.



“Tuscan Series #11” by Stan Brodsky, 2008. Oil and paint stick on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Courtesy Art League of Long Island.

Closest in accent to Brodsky, [Peter Galasso](#) was also born in Brooklyn and has shown at the Nassau County and Heckscher museums. In addition to working with Brodsky, he studied at the Art Students League (and has an MBA from Hofstra). He lives and works on Strong’s Neck in Suffolk County on Long Island. Having seen his boldly colorful works in other venues, modulating from tasteful harmonies to fearless dissonances, as in the Richter-esque *Blue in Green*, I was particularly intrigued by the recent work, which adds a rectilinear element that rides like a screen across the wild backgrounds of works such as *Confluence*.



“Blue in Green” by Peter Galasso, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 31 inches. Courtesy Art League of Long Island.

[Frank Wimberley](#) is another established figure, with works at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Islip Art Museum and the Time Inc. corporate collection. He was born in Pleasantville, New Jersey in 1926, and now lives and works in Sag Harbor in The Hamptons as well as New York. A graduate of Howard University, where he studied with [James Porter](#), [Lois Mailou Jones](#) and [James Wells](#), he won a Pollock-Krasner Grant in 1998. Like Brodsky, his work has exhibited in notable solo and group exhibitions at art museums on Long Island as well as gallery shows in New York and East Hampton, N.Y. and elsewhere.

I was intrigued by the improvisatory philosophy of his artist’s statement: “The abstract painter can commence his drawing or canvas generally with only a preconceived notion, reflection or emotion. The end result, whether finished or still seeking a conclusion, is then determined by tools, paint, the colors or tones employed, and the size of the work as well as the mood of the moment ... It is very much like creating the controlled accident.”

Taking my cue from the title, I synaesthetically overheard the shimmering tremolo of Felix Mendelssohn’s brilliant symphonies for strings in Wimberley’s *String Ensemble*, one of several terrific, large monochrome works in the show that use his signature compositional strategy. A strange blue skin stretched over a yellow base (a peek at the edges helps the viewer catch up with the process) accepts the rapid play of figures that skim the surface.



“String Ensemble” by Frank Wimberley, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 48 inches. Courtesy Art League of Long Island.

Wimberley, whose surfaces can be so layered as to seem collaged, as some are, can also come in fortissimo, as with the slabs of heavy red and blue (resembling the primaries, but these are mixed tones) in *Knight Space*, a work that is more built than it is painted. The curator Susan Peragallo, who hung the show with tons of input from the four artists who were on hand, wisely opted to place this texturally complex work by a window on the second floor where the sun can pick out the sculptural depths of its parts.



“Knight Space” by Frank Wimberley, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 46 inches. Courtesy Art League of Long Island.

The most pleasant surprise of the exhibition was the discovery of Laura Powers-Swiggett, a lifelong Long Islander and Brodsky student whose fresh talent ranges across several media, from acrylic and oil on canvas to flashe vinyl (an opaque paint that offered a convenient alternative to tempera) on paper. My favorite work in the whole show was her deft flashe vinyl on paper, *Evidence of Spring #2*, its smoky palette of pewter greys mingled with pinks and oranges releasing a whiff of the awakening garden, without overpowering by way of color or gesture.

Departing from the rules of the Ab Ex code, Powers-Swiggett pulls as much inspiration from the landscape as, for instance, [Willem de Kooning](#) would from the figure, risking a referential revelation to great effect. The work is on two pieces of paper, and the medial division is just enough to add a spatial tension to the usual edge-to-edge progress of this kind of mark-making. I also delighted in the flicker of sylvan greens and blues in her poetic *Wawapek*, in which she applies the tache method, block-like strokes with swiftly ragged endings, that tap the pure genius of [Cézanne](#)’s flickering leaves when he similarly ventured into the woods.



“Through the Trees (Wawapek)” by Laura Powers-Swiggett, 2016. Acrylic on paper, 32 x 25 inches. Courtesy Art League of Long Island.

The atrium that houses the gallery where the exhibition is shown is at the center of the spacious Art

League building. It is the hub around which two floors of nine bustling studios radiate, serving 4,000 students seven days a week. The evening I visited, a student was training her laser gaze on a cast under the teacher's vigilant supervision in an after-school drawing class. The next generation of Long Island artists is in good hands.

BASIC FACTS: "Long Island Abstraction: Two Generations" is on view March 25 through April 15, 2017 at the Jeanie Tengelsen Gallery of the Art League of Long Island, 107 E. Deer Park Road, Dix Hills, NY 11746. www.artleagueli.org.

Copyright 2017 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.