



Springs Invitational Art Stories: Athos Zacharias, 90, Ties Vibrant Action Painting to New York School

August 16, 2017

by Dakota Arkin Cafourek

Now 90, Hamptons painter [Athos Zacharias](#) is at once driven by his need for artistic expression and surprised, as he says, “that my obsession continues.” At this year’s 50th Annual Springs Invitational at Ashawagh Hall, Zacharias’s *Hat*, a 40 x 46 inch abstract painting, invites viewers to take in its clues and “fill in for themselves with their own imagination” the painting’s story.

“It’s what I prefer,” Zacharias said in a recent interview from his East Hampton studio, sharing his joy in the mysteriousness of art and his belief that it’s not necessary for him to interfere with the viewer’s interpretation.

Becoming an artist was something that crept up on Athos Zacharias—a gradual realization that creating art was exactly where he belonged. Too young to enlist when the nation was in the grips of World War II, he joined the Merchant Marines and somewhere along the Equator found himself drawing maps of the ship in colored pencils. Whatever was he doing with colored pencils on the top deck of a navy gun crew?, he asks himself now, but it was among the many early signs for Zacharias that he might be an artist.



“Angel” by Athos Zacharias, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

When of age, he enlisted in the army and was taken on as a draftsman. At the war’s end, used the G.I. bill to go to art school. While earning a B.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design, Zacharias was educated in everything from still life to lithography, but it was in abstract oil painting that he found himself as an artist. “Painting is my instrument in getting to know myself better,” he said.

His love for abstract expressionism led him to New York and evenings at the Cedar Tavern—the Greenwich Village haven for painters, Beat writers and intellectuals—where he was introduced to [Willem de Kooning](#) and [Milton Resnick](#). Thrust into the heart of the 1950s and 1960s art scene and handy in carpentry, he soon became [Elaine de Kooning](#)’s assistant, and then her husband “Bill’s,” Zacharias informally added, in their respective New York City studios.



Announcement for a Parsons Gallery exhibition in NYC in the 1950s. Courtesy of Athos Zacharias.



NYC gallery solo show announcement for Athos Zacharias.
Courtesy of the artist.

Athos Zacharias's style is known as action painting. For Zacharias, it means removing oneself from outside influence, from the world and its structures. It's an experience of exploring the "nowness" of the canvas, he said. From start to finish, the process is a complete journey for Zacharias, who explained, "Thinking is the enemy."

"The total concern, and what I love," the artist said, "is composition." The technique leads him through a flipping and rotating adventure, employing squeegees and a suite of brushes for each layer on the canvas, a genesis from a horizontal and vertical bedrock into a finished piece.



"Lookout" by Athos Zacharias, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

In 1956, a fellow graduate from Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art, where Zacharias earned his M.F.A., told him about the East End, describing it as an enclave for artists. Land was cheap and Zacharias's circle of abstract expressionist artists steered him to the area each weekend. In his role as an assistant, he would help set up the studios, stretch canvas, build display walls or work tables, anything needed. In his free time, he'd work on building his own Springs abode—which includes a second floor studio with large windows that invite natural light.

The period he spent in the company of de Kooning, Franz Kline, [Robert Rauschenberg](#) and their contemporaries was an edification, and their legacy remains an influence on some of his work. Zacharias used dagger brushes in his early pieces, inspired by de Kooning's calligraphic curves. He also cites his fascination with Andy Warhol's vibrant colors, which he used in some of his own paintings. Later, after [Jackson Pollock](#)'s death, he also became assistant to Lee Krasner. "I saw those artists as mentors," Zacharias said, "gobbling information I could get just by listening to them

[when] I didn't know who I was."



"Zing" by Athos Zacharias, 2017. Acrylic painting, 48 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Ashawagh Hall's Springs Invitational "is our big show," he said, recognizing the excitement in the community. A half century of tradition has its roots in the original idea to build freestanding walls in front of the old schoolhouse—Ashawagh Hall—on which to hang paintings, and bring them in at night; those walls erected by none other than Athos Zacharias.

Hat, named for a hat shape in the piece, is one of the few large paintings ever to be admitted into the Ashawagh Hall Springs Invitational. Teri Kennedy's curatorial decision to include a limited number of large paintings in the show made this possible. "*Hat* is a very important piece for me," said Zacharias; "There was a lot of daring; it's a wonder I was ever able to finish it." After working so hard on a piece and then feeling so pleased with the end result, he is overcome with the satisfaction that it was worth the endeavor. "That's how I like to paint. Maybe it should be hard," he said.

"When Athos Zacharias and I selected *Hat* for the Invitational, I could immediately see it in its place anchoring the northern wall of Ashawagh Hall," Kennedy said. "Color, form, excitement ... I could not resist."



"Hat" by Athos Zacharias, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Paraphrasing James Brooks, Zacharias said: "I create beautiful accidents, and then I work on them." Referencing Jackson Pollock's notion of being inside or outside of the painting, Zacharias describes his own process as intuiting the canvas and composition until it looks superficially good, at which point he stops and breaks away to look back from the outside. "The painting tells me what changes to make," he said.

Zacharias's painting style is a dance between intuition and subconscious. To be in the moment, he begins his day at the canvas, before the rest of the world "interferes with trying to approach a painting in as innocent a manner as I can." He said the process is one of "creating order out of confusion; creating confusion first on purpose," to set himself up to take chances and let his

personality beam through, all the while bonding viewers to the true New York School.



Athos Zacharias in his East Hampton Studio. Photo by Dakota Arkin Cafourek.

[The 2017 Springs Invitational Art Exhibition](#) presents art by around 114 artists with work selected by Invitational curator Teri Kennedy. The show will be on view from August 4 to 20, 2017 at Ashawagh Hall in East Hampton, N.Y. Presented by the Springs Improvement Society (SIS), the exhibition is a benefit for SIS which maintains and manages Ashawagh all.

The “Springs Invitational Art Stories Series” was arranged by Teri Kennedy to reveal the stories behind some of the art on view, presented from the point of view of the exhibiting artist or artists. To read the series introduction for the Springs Invitational Art Stories, click [here](#).

BASIC FACTS: The Springs Invitational will be held August 4 to 20, 2017 at Ashawagh Hall, 780 Springs Fireplace Rd, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.ashawagh-hall.org.

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