



ART REVIEW: David Slivka's Ink Paintings Channel New York School While Correlating to his Sculpture

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by Charles A. Riley II

When considering sculpture, it is always helpful to have access to the artist's drawings, which are so often the trail of breadcrumbs that leads to a better view of the terrain. [David Slivka](#), an Abstract Expressionist sculptor and painter who was at the center of the movement in the 1950s, left a marvelous legacy of paintings on paper, and a number of these are now on view in "Early Ink Abstractions: David Slivka, Works on Paper, 1962-1972," a [folioeast](#) popup show at the [Kathryn Markel Fine Arts](#) gallery space in Bridgehampton, NY. The show was curated by Coco Myers, the founder of the folioeast curatorial project operating from East Hampton, NY.

Who was Slivka? A Midwesterner (born in Chicago in 1914, the son of Russian immigrants) he studied and worked at the age of 19 with the WPA in San Francisco and was pulled inevitably to New York at the height of the Ab Ex movement. He was a ship's carpenter in the Merchant Marine during World War II, which explains his facility with wood construction. As this exhibition readily demonstrates, his range of media was admirably broad, embracing not just sculpture (in granite, bronze, wax rope, clay), but the ink paintings on view in this show as well as watercolors, crayon drawings and paintings.

Trained at the Art Institute of Chicago as a teenager, he had a natural grasp of the possibilities of abstraction in both two and three dimensions. He was also an insider; I knew next to nothing about the artist before seeing these works on paper. Pollock-Krasner House Director Helen Harrison displayed two of his sculptures seven years ago, in part because Slivka shared a cottage at Louse Point in East Hampton, NY with [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Lee Krasner](#) in the summer of 1945. He spent time with them and with [Bill and Elaine de Kooning](#) and [Charlotte Parks and Jim Brooks](#) at Barnes Landing in Amagansett, NY. In another Hamptons connection, Slivka's second wife was art critic and craft champion [Rose Slivka \(nee Schiffer\)](#) who was the art critic for the East Hampton Star from the mid-1980s until 2003, a year before her death. [David Slivka](#) passed away in 2010 at age 95.

The ink paintings in the show, like paintings of [Mark di Suvero](#) or [Hans van de Bovenkamp](#), have associations to Slivka's sculpture—the work he is better known for. The exhibited art works are sufficiently different from the more geometric constructions of his sculpture but there are formal correlations. The mighty sphere at the center of *Untitled #4* has the geometric firmness of a planet surrounded by billowing black clouds, a dramatic skyscape whose composition reminds me of the visionary color etchings of the Romantic poet William Blake. Inside those clouds (they need to be examined closely) what from a distance appears to be black ink separates into washes of indigo

and deep navy blue.



"Untitled #4" by David Slivka, 1971. Ink on paper. Courtesy of folioeast.

The rich blacks and blues of *Untitled #7* are topped by a curvy cloud in burgundy that hovers over the "black" area at the bottom, a sliver of light cutting between them. The most complex of this series is *Untitled #12*, with its [Franz Kline](#)-esque beams of straighter strokes and important gaps of white paper peeking through between slabs of black. There were moments, as with *Untitled #26*, when I was reminded of the curvilinear abstractions of [Georgia O'Keeffe](#), including her watercolors.



"Untitled #7" by David Slivka, early 70s. Ink on paper. Courtesy of folioeast.



"Untitled #12" by David Slivka, 1971. Ink on paper. Courtesy of folioeast.



"Untitled #26" by David Slivka, early 70s. Ink on paper. Courtesy of folioeast.

A fascinating straight line inside an oval form is found in *Untitled #13*, underscored by a pair of uneven black strokes, an [Adolph Gottlieb](#) moment to go with the comparisons with Kline, [Mark Rothko](#) and [Willem de Kooning](#), whose bravura studies in charcoal or oil on paper are the antecedents to the brushy "rapid ink" works on view here, most notably *Untitled #25* and *Untitled #28*, among the highlights of the show. One of them is at the top of the stairs to the second level, and I beg the visitor to make the trip even if the heat is not working properly.



“Untitled #13” by David Slivka, early 70s. Ink on paper. Courtesy of folioeast.



“Untitled #25” by David Slivka, 1962. Ink on board. Courtesy of folioeast.

On the second level, a superb group of horizontal works and some of the “rapid ink” drawings make the trip up the stairs more than worthwhile. I could not help thinking of the “duck rabbit” figure/ground paradox so dear to Ernst Gombrich when I looked at these paintings, especially *Untitled #21*, but I may have been reading into the works, rather than just reading them.

There’s an enviable freedom inherent in pop up exhibitions, and I had to wonder if a gallery or regional museum would take a flier on the way these works on paper were presented. Using shiny bulldog clips to hang the heavy vellum paper, and letting the pale gray, wintry sunlight creep along the wall to add a sliver of feeble sun to the gallery lighting, the curators added refreshing provisional and improvisational notes of the casual to a show that would have seemed duller in a museum—with uv-resistant glass dividing the viewer from the subtle surface of the ink and heavy-duty wall texts with formal explanations.

Coco Myers, who runs folioeast, is simultaneously presenting (through February 4, 2018) another popup exhibition in East Hampton, NY at Malia Mills, reviewed [here](#) by Kelcey Edwards for Hamptons Art Hub. I could not help but be impressed by this kind of energy, and by her stable of other artists, including some of my personal East End favorites such as [Christine Matthai](#), [Carolyn Conrad](#), [Bastienne Schmidt](#) and [Almond Zigmund](#). Her portfolio is certainly worth watching in the future.

BASIC FACTS: “Early Ink Abstractions: David Slivka, Works on Paper, 1962-1972,” presented by folioeast, is on view January 19 to January 30, 2018, at Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, 2418 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932; 12 to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and by appointment. folioeast.com

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