

ART REVIEW: Hamptons Art History Celebrated through Legendary Abstract Expressionists

September 7, 2018

by Charles A. Riley II

Redemption was the reward the moment I crossed the threshold from the hubbub of East Hampton Village into the superb “Montauk Highway II: Postwar Abstraction in the Hamptons” exhibition at the Eric Firestone Gallery. To be specific, it only required making one’s way through the front room to the large, elegant work by [Lee Krasner](#), *Present Conditional*, 1976, to leave the traffic and banality well behind.



“Present Conditional” by Lee Krasner, 1976. Collage on canvas, 72 x 108 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

The work is a collage assembled from the drawings Krasner had made while a student of [Hans](#)

[Hofmann](#), sliced in angled forms and slivers and intercut with gracefully curving forms of buttery white and sunny yellow paint and two tightly painted sections of greenish yellow that would not have been out of place at the [Ellsworth Kelly](#) show at [Guild Hall](#), a short distance away.

Krasner's monumental work was so engrossing that I was tempted to volunteer to sit at the front desk just to savor it for the rest of the weekend. Yet that seat would have been too far away from the milky surface of the drawings, which had been interleaved in her sketchbook so long they had smudged and needed to be sprayed with a fixative that added a waxen layer.

Far from impeding the appreciation of the mark-making, the semi-gloss finish actually added to the harmony of the overall work. The finish served to make the collaged sheets appear more like Old Master drawings impishly cut to fit the window-like spaces, which held them the way the shaped crescents of Matisse's mural for Alfred Barnes contained his dancers.

The surface also reminded me of polished marble, veined with grey. Even with the interruptions made by the artist's cutting, the figural drawings had a smoky allure, testimony to the extraordinary level of technical finesse that Hofmann and Krasner, as teacher and student, were able to reach even in the short time she was in his classes.

In a terrific display of curatorial rhyming, the sweeping curves of *Sentinel*, a sculpture by [Sidney Geist](#) (founder of the Studio School and world-class expert on Brancusi), hold a dialogue with Krasner's clear-edged crescents. For the sake of experiencing Krasner's *Present Conditional* alone, art lovers are urged to pay a visit to the Firestone Gallery.



"Sentinel" by Sidney Geist 1964. Painted Wood. 80.38 x 24 x 6 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

"Montauk Highway II" is the second annual iteration at the gallery of a celebration of East End abstract painting of the 1950s and '60s, the ideal backdrop for an illuminating [lecture given by Helen Harrison](#) on August 31, 2018 on the legacy of the artist-run Signa Gallery, located from 1957 to 1960 nearby on Newtown Lane, where many of the artists currently on view at Eric Firestone had early East End shows. The talk was one of several talks and events designed to illuminate the vibrancy of the East Hampton artist community beyond the art presented in the gallery.

Signa Gallery, Bankrolled by [Alfonso Ossorio](#)—who lived and worked on his 57-acre estate on Georgica Pond, "The Creeks"—first opened in 1957, with the reception on its first night drawing a crowd of 500. The roster included [Lee Bontecou](#), [James Brooks](#), [Robert Motherwell](#) and [Ibram Lassaw](#), one of whose delicate works hangs from the ceiling in the back room of the Eric Firestone show.



“Untitled” by Alfonso Ossorio 1952. Watercolor and ink with wax on paper, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

The promotional material for “Montauk Highway II” leans on a pensive portrait of [Willem de Kooning](#), and a small but potent oil painting by him, *//* (1958), with his dashing gesture spreading a difficult brown cut with blue and black in sweeping layers side to side. It is not the prettiest de Kooning in the world, but, like the small, encrusted Robert Motherwell, *Untitled*, 1948, on the opposite wall (pervaded by echoes of the artist’s much-admired Miro), it reveals a confident hand struggling with a challenging palette.



"II" by Willem de Kooning 1958. Oil on paper on board, 22 x 18 inches.
Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.



“Untitled” by Robert Motherwell, 1948. Oil painting, 14 x 18 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

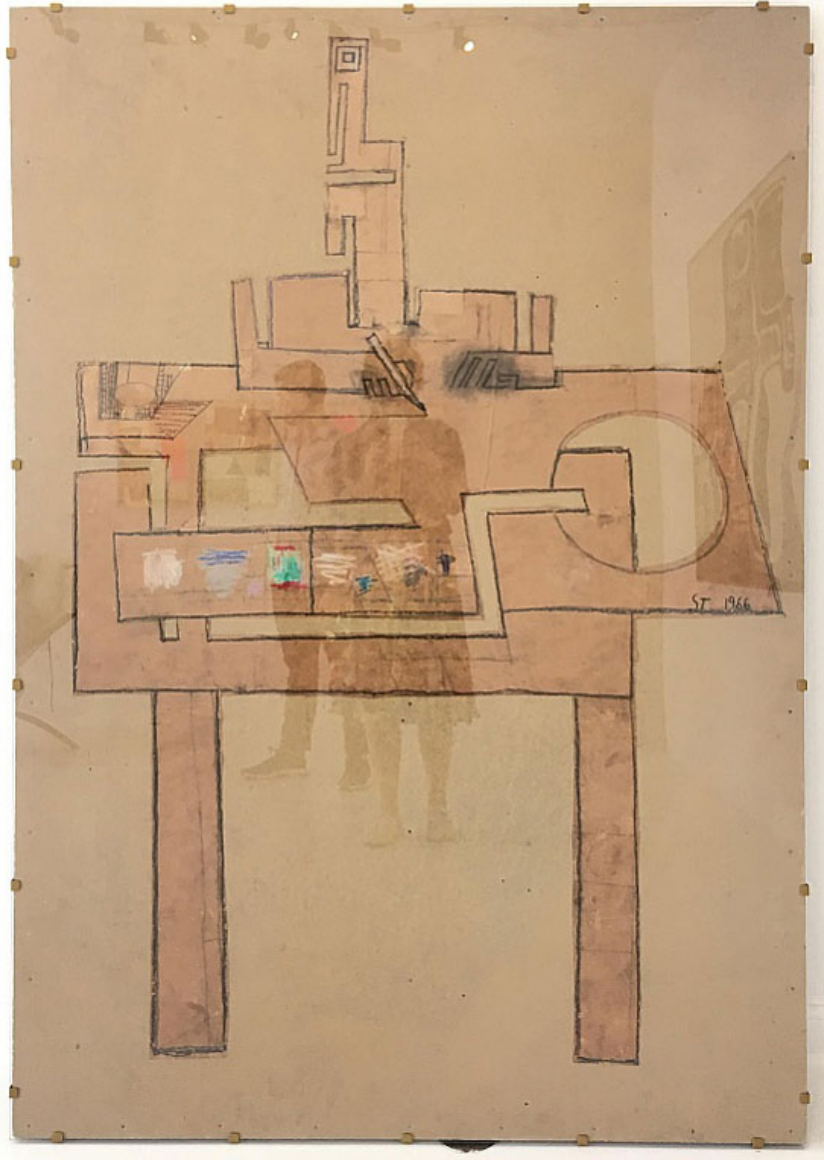
Brown is such a tough color. It dominates as well a large and aggressive painting by James Brooks, *BERL*. Brooks moved to Montauk along with the wonderful artist [Charlotte Park](#) after visiting [Jackson Pollock](#) and Krasner in 1938, eventually settling in Springs in 1957 after their first studio was damaged by Hurricane Carol in 1954.

It would be easy to forget how much [Wassily Kandinsky](#) meant to the Abstract Expressionists had I not spent some time with the Brooks painting and seen the influence. That flicker of blue near the center, like the lower core of a Bunsen burner flame, is pure Murnau-period Kandinsky, as is the diagonal flow of dark colors rising to meet the white and yellow that descend from the top edge.



“BERL” by James Brooks, 1956. Oil on canvas, 62 x 66 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

The show has its lighter moments of pure charm, like an untitled rough-and-ready Saul Steinberg collage that makes deft use of tan papers and his inimitable squiggly lines, or [Giorgio Cavallon's](#) bleached yellow and pulsing whites, a burning ridge of orange separating them. The temptation is to relate these abstract works to a mimetic agenda, and the press materials suggest a number of correlations between the sea, fields and open spaces of the Hamptons and the works on the walls.



"Untitled" by Saul Steinberg, 1966. Collage on fiberboard, 72 x 48 inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.



“Untitled” by Giorgio Cavallon 1974-75. Oil on canvas. 72h x 84w inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

“Painting is a correspondence between what you are and what you see. It’s a moment when something is holding together in such a way that it is a universe in itself,” [Milton Resnick](#) has said.

With historical anecdotes like Al Held hanging paintings on the trees of his Sag Harbor shack, and [Costantino Nivola](#) arriving back in the studio on his 35-acre estate in Springs fired up to start sand casting sculpture after taking his children to the beach, there is a cogent argument for these correspondences. Reference points like these fast forward the past to the present by surfboards tucked in cars driving by, glimpsed outside the gallery windows.

BASIC FACTS: “Montauk Highway II” is on view August 4 to September 23, 2018 at Eric Firestone Gallery, 4 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. EricFirestonegallery.com

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