



ART REVIEW: Nicolas Carone's Late Abstractions Give Clues to "What Matters"

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by Peter Malone

"What Matters: The Late Paintings," a selection of Nicolas Carone's abstractions at Loretta Howard Gallery through August 1, 2019, demonstrates how an exhibition title can be more than a catchphrase and provide useful insight into an artist's concerns. Visitors aware of Carone's Abstract Expressionist credentials will likely begin to grasp the title's significance upon realizing that each painting's historic Ab Ex look is refuted—surprisingly so—by a completion date that is only a decade past.



"War Games" by Nicolas Carone, 2008. Acrylic on tarpaulin, 48 x 60 inches. Signed recto lower right. Courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery.

Born in 1917, Carone lived to be 93, a blessing for anyone but a special gift for an artist who had participated in a key moment in New York painting. Advanced age coupled with a faith in abstraction's endless potential motivated him to carry his unique vision into the new century: not to revive an old style but to validate its underappreciated continuity.

As a free spirit who found inspiration in Renaissance portraiture no less than in modernist abstraction, [Nicolas Carone](#) often kept work reflective of such disparate influences confined to separate projects. Yet the late abstractions on view at Loretta Howard show how, on an emotional level, he absorbed painting's varied history in the aggregate. Resistant to dogma by temperament, he painted as if what mattered in 1958 still mattered in 2009 when these canvases were created. Like [Joan Mitchell](#), whose dauntless leap backward from Ab Ex to Late Monet in the 1960s seems so uncontroversial in today's decentralized critical atmosphere, Carone saw more in gestural abstraction than was implied in the critical summations that came to define its modernist pedigree.



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at Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, NY. On view until August 1, 2019. Courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery.

In this respect, Carone and Mitchell are kindred spirits, as both are today appreciated for their broad interpretation of abstraction's representational roots. But at the time they were hardly alone. Many mid-century painters resisted Clement Greenberg's formalist inevitability. In the late 1950s, Carone—along with [James Brooks](#), [Phillip Guston](#) and even [Willem de Kooning](#)—let fragmented figural elements remain on the field after the smoke cleared from their action painting sessions, a feature of Ab Ex that was explored in 2013 in the exhibition, "[The East Hampton Years: Paintings from the 1950s](#)" at the Pollock-Krasner House, in which considerable attention was devoted to Carone's work.



"Cadenza" by Nicolas Carone, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 71 inches. Courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery.

With this history in mind, two things stand out while engaging with *Lost Tribe*, 2007, a heroic-scale canvas dominating the gallery's largest wall. One, its mid-century look is unmistakable; and two, its intelligence and organization are as compelling as its gestural license. Striving to find the secret to its balance of spontaneity and assembly is like trying to decipher when gifted actors are improvising off script. Still, it's clear from the work in "What Matters" that Carone's sense of pictorial structure held sway in his later years.

The emphasis on patient formal judgment is key. Despite the inevitable gestural theatrics, every opportunity to expand a painting's inner logic is thoroughly examined. Drips and splashes, often masked with a gray wash, draw the viewer's attention to what the artist chose to keep, to emphasize, to express what he thought was essential. It makes for a dramatic comparison with the anxious and de Kooning-like *Wake + Tide* of 1956.



"Wake + Tide" by Nicolas Carone, 1956. Oil on linen, 34.25 x 44.75 inches. Signed recto lower left: Carone. Signed verso top right: Nicolas Carone/Wake + Tide/1956. Courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery.

Emphases often hint at sculptural form, suggestively figural but never so demarcated as to detach

from the painting's shallow space. Allusions to figural shapes—and there are more than a few—are neither dominant nor self-consciously biomorphic. Holding to the arms-length draftsmanship underlying each composition, the sense of a carefully assembled arrangement reinforces the artist's focus on a coherent whole. Yet it is a whole that can at times be separated into sectional arrangements.



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Tripartite divisions, for instance, run horizontally across *Lost Tribe*, giving it a classical serenity, despite its near Baroque dynamism. The uppermost rounded shapes give way to a second row of elongated flatter shapes that taper into a stream of drips at the bottom similar in feeling to Pat Steir’s surface-accentuating trickles. Figures apparently insinuated during the painting’s early improvisational stage are detectable but fail to confirm any hint of narrative aspiration. They merely reiterate the artist’s comfort with a visual lexicon reaching beyond fixed art historical categories.

Perhaps the most revealing canvas is one actually titled *What Matters*, 2008. Its many stages of development remain legible yet clearly brought to an order that belies any infatuation with automatism. Whatever spontaneity informed the painting’s creation—and it is a lively and animated effort—is tempered by an assiduous building of formal relationships that in their final state resemble the solidity and understatement of a 1910 Matisse, the *Bathers by a River* in the Art Institute of Chicago, for example.



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“What Matters” is not a redux of the familiar but a reinvigoration of an attitude toward painting that, like most of the last century’s communal efforts—movements that in earlier periods were thought of as schools of painting—were often prematurely forsaken as each movement’s innovative gloss faded and the next grabbed the spotlight. In today’s perhaps not entirely welcome cacophony of theories, or lack thereof, we have the luxury of looking back and rediscovering the work of visionaries like Carone, who saw the bigger picture.

BASIC FACTS: “What Matters: The Late Paintings” is on view June 6 – August 1, 2019 at Loretta Howard Gallery, 521 West 26th Street, 1st floor, New York, NY 10001. www.lorettahoward.com.

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