

Sotheby's

Old Master Ron: Ron Gorchov at Sotheby's S2

February 4, 2015

Robert Storr



INSTALLATION VIEW OF RON GORCHOV - CURATED BY VITO SCHNABEL.
SALOME, 2012 AND PALAIS JAMAÏ, 2013.

LONDON - We dwell on things that won't sit still. Why? Because memory can't hold ambiguity in its grip for long, cannot stabilize an image that will not come to rest within its contours, much less one that refuses to align itself with the habitual formal templates in the mind's eye, chief among them being the phantom grid that haunts all of western art. Tamper with the grid and ease the boundaries of shapes loosely teethered to it and - almost self-protectively - the senses awaken, the imagination comes alive.

This is exactly what Ron Gorchov's paintings do. And do consistently in different proportions - near square, but never square to near oval, but never oval to near rectangular, but never rectangular and all always bowed - and in different sizes - very small to very big - and in different orientations - vertical and horizontal. The purpose of his idiosyncratic saddle stretcher is not to give all his

paintings the same look, but to subject the act of looking to the subtle stresses and pressures of not knowing quite where to focus. Because all the conventional illusions of depth have been sprung by the simultaneous projection off the wall of his work's custom designed support and the concavity of the canvas pulled taught along its margins. What results is the weird, capacious volume his paintings encompass and the invitation that warping space extends to the artist and the viewer to lose their optical bearings while remaining rooted in the objectivity of the sculptural entity in front of them.

The paradoxes built into this format are far reaching in terms of the painterly opportunities they afford. Tradition dictates that we stare into pictures as if we were staring out of a window; as if the picture plane were a window standing in between us and the world beyond. But what if the picture plane is not a plane but a curved surface and



INSTALLATION VIEW OF RON GORCHOV - CURATED BY VITO SCHNABEL.
PHAETHON, 2015; PENTHESILEA, 2012; AND LE BATELEUR, 2013.

What if arch modernist Hans Hoffman's tried and true theory of "push-pull" was suddenly subjected to the principles of topological elasticity? What if biomorphic blobs and squiggles were reduced to flat emblems, but the ground on which they were affixed was anything but flat? What if color and touch alternated between vivid physicality and breath - taking ephemerality? Like light caught in a drizzling rain running down dusty glass, but where it just so happened that the dust was pure emerald, lapis lazuli or less pure mineral mixes that nonetheless glow like particles spread out over a jewel grinder's work table. Gorchov's palette is that rich - in this he is as close to Mughal miniature painters as to Matisse - and his sensitivity to the dual nature of his medium - that the pigments are rock and earth while their liquid vehicles range from watery solvents to golden oils - are that nuanced.

A few words, finally on the forms he favours, or rather the forms that favour his work. Virtually all have the quality one finds in Brancusi's birds and fish and human heads or hands, and that is the appearance of something utterly unique in execution but compellingly archetypal in its fundamental aspect. Ellsworth Kelly's shapes often have the same feel to them - Kelly made a pilgrimage to Brancusi in Paris - but he has stayed loyal to the picture

plan where Gorchov has sought, and found new dimensions and a new plasticity for painting that only Elizabeth Murray - who was the first to acknowledge the impact his work had on her - has taken as far as Gorchov himself. Of course Brancusi had a relatively small repertoire that he established early in his long career and then honed to fertile, form - engendering imperfection for the remainder of his life. I say "imperfection" because no single iteration of any element in his vocabulary ever quite satisfied him. Again and again Brancusi started over where he had just left off, yet he never repeated himself. Ultimately, each sculpture stands alone and is imbued with the vitality of the shape that seems still in the process of becoming. Gorchov's shapes are similarly emergent and in flux even as they seem iconic by virtue of their superficial simplicity and their central placement in his paintings. But over time their easy-to-remember configuration and locations reveal themselves to be impossible to remember. And so, in order to regain our grasp of them we must reopen our eyes to them. And as we do, the quasi-animate quivering of Gorchov's images takes hold and draws the viewer in to visual zones that cannot be mapped but only experienced. Try the memory test with Brancusi. Then try it with Gorchov. In both cases the pleasure that ensues is at once wholly fulfilling in the moment but poignantly elusive in retrospective - but then true pleasure always is.