

For the Love Of Pure Form

Two new gallery shows highlight the paintings of Stephen Posen.

By TED LOOS

For the artist Stephen Posen, the 1960s were promising indeed. He was a kid from St. Louis who went to Yale and impressed people with his painting ability, coming of age alongside schoolmates who were future art stars: Richard Serra, Chuck Close and Brice Marden.

By the early 1970s, his trompe l'oeil paintings of fabric-covered still lifes were being featured at Documenta and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The New York Times critic John Canaday, citing two meticulously executed canvases that depicted cloth-covered photographs, compared him to Vermeer, in a

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rave.

But around 1980, with the art world encouraging him to keep zigging, Mr. Posen zagged, taking a hard turn away from the virtuoso draughtsmanship that had made his name. These may have been wanderings on “side roads,” as Mr. Posen put it, or there could have been a much deeper ambivalence about his own work. “I pulled away from being packaged,” said Mr. Posen, now 78, seated in his SoHo home and work space. And that was the same year that his son, Zac Posen, the fashion designer, was born.

“I closed the door to the studio,” he said. His road less traveled was “lonely at times,” in his words. He was content to make art largely to please himself and a few die-hard collectors while he raised two children with his wife, Susan.

This week, Mr. Posen is getting the most exposure he’s had in decades — a show at Vito Schnabel’s gallery in New York, to be followed by one in July in St. Moritz, Switzerland. The works in “Stephen Posen, Threads: Paintings From the 1960s and ’70s,” on view through June 23, represent the style that got him noticed in the first place.

In the New York show, the oil “Untitled” (1970) shows a stack of four boxes covered by colorful fabric, each fold lovingly rendered by Mr. Posen, who, as a young student in Italy, studied the pre-Renaissance painter Giotto, a master of rendering robes. In St. Moritz, the irregularly shaped “Clean Clothes” (1969) depicts bagged-up dry cleaning, painted on plexiglass with real metal hangers on top.

Zac Posen frankly acknowledges the influence of those shapes on his career designing clothing. “I grew up with the remnants of the mock-ups for these paintings,” he said by phone in Japan. “These textiles were play-tools for me.”

The younger Mr. Posen — who has his own lines, and is the creative director of women’s wear for Brooks Brothers — is a staunch supporter of his father’s work, a passion that led directly to the current shows.

The dealer Vito Schnabel, a childhood friend and the son of the painter Julian Schnabel, had noticed three Stephen Posen works in the home Zac shares with his partner, Christopher Niquet, and asked if there were more of those. There were more: dozens tucked away in the artist’s two studios.

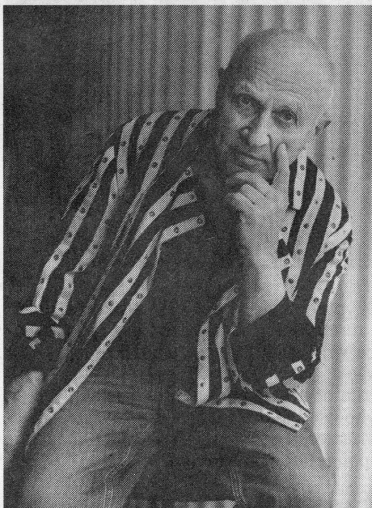
Agnes Gund, the president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, is also an owner of his work. She said she admires the fact that he didn’t “get stuck in one medium.”

“It’s a very artistic family,” Ms. Gund added. “Each has related to each other, and played off each other.”

That was on display in last year’s documentary “House of Z,” which chronicled the rise, fall and return of the younger Mr. Posen. He and his older sister, Alexandra — an artist who has been involved in his fashion business, as has their mother — grew up in an environment that fostered creativity.

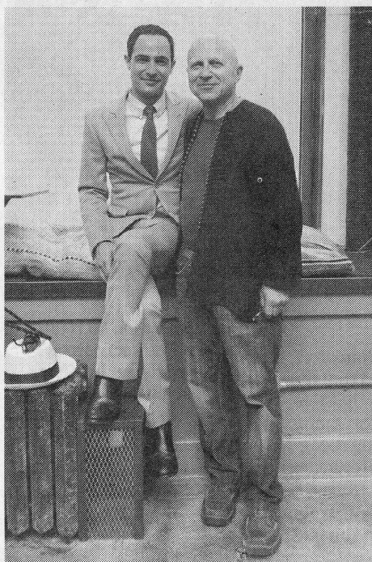
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATHAN BAJAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Top, an untitled oil painting from 1976 by Stephen Posen. Above, Mr. Posen in his SoHo studio. Below, Mr. Posen blending colors. Bottom, Mr. Posen in 2015 with his son, the fashion designer Zac Posen.



MAX LAKNER/BFA

sen said that, as a dad, probably “my criticism stings more than his does.”

“But we’re not Tiepolo father and son,” he added, using an 18th-century Venetian painting analogy to talk about artistic rivalries (Mr. Posen is an erudite sort who named his dog Beaux-Arts). “We have great respect for each other and our respective crafts.”

Seriousness was also a hallmark of the elder Mr. Posen from the beginning. “Serious, but with a smile,” said the painter Brice Marden, a good friend at Yale who has fallen out of touch over the decades.

And that may explain why Mr. Posen evinced little interest in fame and fortune. In the 1970s, he was told, by the noted Pop Art dealer Ivan Karp and others, “Just keep doing what you’re doing, and you’ll be rich beyond your wildest dreams,” he recalled. “Every time I strayed, Ivan would give me an elbow.”

Mr. Posen’s style gelled in the art world’s consciousness because of how it blended the color and everyday subjects of Pop with realism. For the works in the current show, he would usually create what he called a “vertical still life” involving cloth and other materials, draw the construction in pencil and then paint the scene on shaped particle board. The results had an affinity with geometric abstraction that gave it another layer of appeal.

But in Mr. Posen’s mind, he was on a philosophical quest. “I was proposing to find out what a line is,” he said. “The basis of it was drawing.” And so when the style of his artworks changed, it made sense to the artist but left others puzzled.

In the following decades, Mr. Posen has turned to making more abstract paintings as well as taking photographs and exhibiting them as juxtaposed pairs.

“Stephen puts elements out there and defies them to work together,” said the photographer Larry Fink, a friend.

One piece in the St. Moritz show, “Fragments from cut out” (1968), resembles two striped pieces of cloth. Mr. Posen used his foot to wreck the original work so that he wouldn’t have to move it when he changed studios.

“I destroyed a lot of them,” Mr. Posen said, with methods that included “breaking them with a hammer.” But he also kept the leftovers: “I thought, ‘I painted this pretty well, I’m going to save these pieces.’”

His son called it “punk” to change styles so often, but noted that he wanted more recognition for his father.

“I remember very clearly when he stopped showing,” the younger Mr. Posen said. “I did not see the work out there in the world as much as I would like.”

In the end, perhaps the crucial lessons transmitted from father to son were not only about love of pure form, but also that worldly success is a choice.

“I’ve built my career around the idea that repetition is reputation,” the younger Mr. Posen said, which he acknowledged was something of a reaction to his father’s path. “Fashion is a business,” he added.

The elder Mr. Posen said he had no regrets.

“What gives me the greatest pleasure is being alone in the studio, day to day,” he said, “doing the best work I can.”

STEPHEN POSEN

The New York Times

Stephen Posen Knows How to Fashion a Line. So Does His Son.

Two new gallery shows highlight the painter – and the influence his folds and shapes had on his clothing-designer son, Zac.

by Ted Loos
May 1, 2018



The painter Stephen Posen in his SoHo studio. His new show, "Stephen Posen Threads: Paintings from the 1960s and '70s," opens Tuesday. Credit: Nathan Bajar for The New York Times



Mr. Posen with two pieces from 1969, "Untitled River Edge," left, and "Shaped Cloth." By the early 1970s, his trompe l'oeil paintings of fabric-covered still lifes were being featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art. Credit: Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

For the artist Stephen Posen, the 1960s were promising indeed. He was a kid from St. Louis who went to Yale and impressed people with his painting ability, coming of age alongside schoolmates who were future art stars: Richard Serra, Chuck Close and Brice Marden.

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Mr. Posen with "Fragment" (1968). His son, Zac, frankly acknowledges the influence of those shapes on his career designing clothing. Credit: Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

1960s and '70s," on view from May 1 to June 23, represent the style that got him noticed in the first place.

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Zac and Stephen Posen at a 2015 event celebrating the publication of "Ellipsis: Dual Vision," a book of Stephen's photographs. Credit: Max Lakner/Bfa

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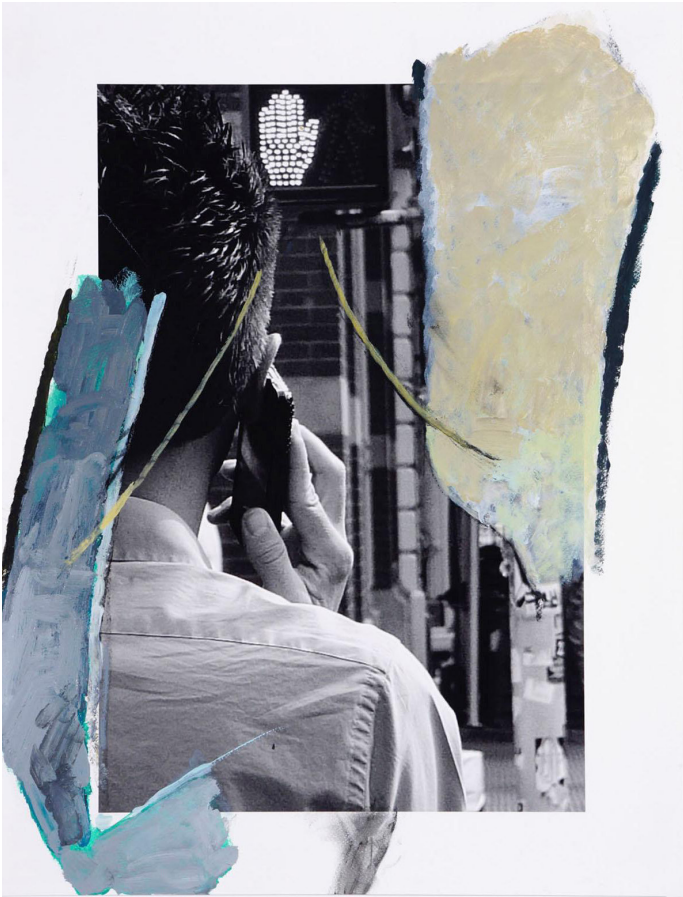
Mr. Posen juxtaposes photographs in pairs: "Gumball vending machine, Quakertown Farmers' Market, Pennsylvania, November 2011"; and "Memorial at Killing Fields, Siem Reap, Cambodia, October 2011." Credit: Stephen Posen

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Left: "Handset, 2012," paint on photograph by Mr. Posen. Credit: Stephen Posen
Right: Mr. Posen and his dog. Credit: Nathan Bajar for The New York Times



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"Untitled", 1976, oil on canvas. Credit: Stephen Posen

His style blended the color and everyday subjects of Pop with realism. For his current show, he creates a "vertical still life" involving cloth and other materials, then draws the construction in pencil and paints the scene on shaped particle board. Credit: Nathan Bajar for The New York Times