

BROOKLYN RAIL

Ron Gorchov: Spice of Life

by Tom Glynn
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Ron Gorchov, *Arena*, 1977. Oil on linen, 76 3/8 x 104 x 11 3/8 inches. © Ron Gorchov / 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

To youth, it appears as if history is imminent, ever at one's fingertips, curiously because of the blithe ignorance of the responsibility of making any. Or, if one does have jejune pretensions toward becoming gloriously embedded in the fossil record of Culture, these are quickly replaced by an impatience with the time that might take to recognize—an apostasy of influence.

As a young artist, new to the Downtown Manhattan scene in the late 1970s into the early 80s, I must admit that I was a prime example of the latter, impatient with the inherited genealogies of both first and second generations of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism (and after), and with the indeterminate malaise of the so-called Pluralism that characterized the polyglot scene at the time. Besides, Colab's *Times Square Show* had just happened, so wasn't progressive aesthetics supposed to break wide open into the Social? And the Pictures Generation had arrived to shutter Painting once and for all. Amidst this cultural clamor was the artist's oasis Magoo's in Tribeca, where the beer was relatively cheap and, more importantly, its walls were plural with artwork by the likes of Elizabeth Murray, John Torreano,

and David Reed. The first time I wandered in there (on a surd afternoon) I encountered my first "shield" painting of Ron Gorchov's, thinking to myself with a young punk's bluff confidence of their summary opinion, "Here's some extreme measure to atavistically summon Painting via a primitively warped format." Yet I was held by it, almost against my will. Its evocative construction stranded me somewhere between a 15th-century jousting shield and the unique barkcloth mask structures of the Kairak Baining people of New Guinea. And the loosely painted left and right vertical gestures emblazoning this "shield" were portentous in their runic call to attention: gutsy in an old-fashioned way. Yet it was also that carefully crafted, *gemütlichkeit* appeal which simultaneously turned me off at that time, a more urgent, fulcrum moment when painters such as David Salle and Julian Schnabel were historically manifesting an apposite, post-historic sense in their paintings.

Fast-forward 40 years to Vito Schnabel's cavernous Chelsea gallery's first posthumous survey of Ron Gorchov's work, ranging from 1971 to 2017, the intervening time warp reflected in the artist's concave constructs. The monumental scale of

RON GORCHOV

Sigyn (2017) and *Arena* (1977) both more than adequately complement the expanse of the gallery, while the earliest work in the show, *Set* (1971), holds down one corner of the room with its vertical stack of overlapping horizontal shields. The remainder of the works are a variety of sizes of more intimate address. Since Gorchov's most effective canvases tend to target the solar plexus of the viewer, the scale of each becomes significant. The closer the scale of his paintings to a torso, the more bodily tension they tend to exert. Anything smaller approximates a portrait mask, anything bigger, a tympan-tight environment. The overlapping stack of *Set*, as its title implies, is both an array of equal proportions but, also a hieratically staged "ground" against which one can pose one's figure, (Gorchov did work for a time designing sets). This seems most likely to be Gorchov's retort to Minimalist theatricality. Its attendant claim to actual, physical space that ascends in a shallow vertical appears, in retrospect, a synthesis of the color exploration of Brice Marden's early paintings of bars of muted hue (as in *For Pearl* (1970), for instance) and Donald Judd's similarly contemporaneous steel and Plexiglas stacked units.



Ron Gorchov, *Sigyn*, 2017. Oil on linen, 71 1/2 x 101 x 14 inches. © Ron Gorchov / 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The show's title, "Spice of Life," is taken from a medium-sized work from 1976 in which two inwardly akimbo, deep red lozenges face off symmetrically on a densely stroked black field. Something about this array alludes to a bite mark, from a bat or snake, for instance, but also, as in most of the artist's other paintings, to sharply-intent binocular vision and its graphic analogy of focused scrutiny. One gets the sense that these paintings are staring back at you, while your eyes simultaneously negotiate the charged interval of the parallax view they demand. This wound/eye conflation makes for the immediate realization that optical is also the visceral.

In *6th One* (2006), a large, vertical painting hanging in the gallery's lower level, an elongated "shield" supports two large and two small Naples yellow lozenges grouped Stonehenge-

like around a central light area inscribed with a delicate palimpsest of line drawing. This central array is surrounded by ink-like washes of dark gray and black oil paint, which drip down each side. It's basically a brusquely-painted cromlech, an earthy womb for to enfold Phoebus's first rays and, with it, the light of manifold function and meaning.



Ron Gorchov, *Set*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 150 x 149 1/2 x 19 1/4 inches. © Ron Gorchov / 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

At times, the artist's standard format sets up surprising trains of thought. In *Arena* (1977) for instance, his bifurcate lozenge shapes get chiseled into what look like opposing *Rapa Nui* idol heads, painted in burnt umber over an aqueous light blue-green. An agonistic competition is set up between these two gestures, almost in ignorance of those who might be witness to it, and yet that charged interval between them impresses its weight right between the viewer's eyes. Something different occurs in *Amphora* (1975), in which two cerulean blue eye/wounds hover in a yellow ochre field. Here, and perhaps due to the associative title, one can imagine the blues as the negative space between the handles of an ancient Greek wine jug, whose contour is extended across the expanse of the painting. The theme of the container, therefore, emerges as an abiding form in Gorchov's vision. The inwardly-directed arc of his shaped canvases gather the observer into a tightly-determined arena, where binocular vision is compressed, and hence the viewer is compelled to perform a metaphysic, third-eye exercise. The artist is playing a game with the viewer in which he and they both must resign themselves to such containment in order to mutually heighten an awareness of what's possibly at stake. And what's at stake in Gorchov's work is the *painterly beyond*, which such focused containment so sympathetically circumscribes.