

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Ron Gorchov's Art of the Here and Now

by David Carrier  
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Installation view of Ron Gorchov, *Spice of Life*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York (Artworks © Ron Gorchov / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery)

### **Gorchov is an artist whose best pieces are purely aesthetic and totally present, here and now.**

Without using any explicit imagery, and without any recognizable allusions to art's history, Ron Gorchov's abstractions merge intense color and brilliantly original compositions. He is a major New York artist who only late in life became celebrated. And two concurrent Chelsea shows offer marvelously complimentary pictures of his development. *Ron Gorchov: Spice of Life* at Vito Schnabel Gallery conveys, on two floors, the story of Gorchov's identification of his mature style. "Set" (1971), which is 14 feet tall, is a stack of four sprawling, shaped monochrome canvases. It is an oddly gawky work that resembles a classic Ellsworth Kelly gone bad. "Untitled" (1976-77) is an early version of Gorchov's more recent format, its graceful shapes, much slimmer than those usual in the newer paintings, set on a curved canvas. And "6th One" (2006) features four yellow rectangles with rounded edges, two of which are vertical keyhole shapes that insert color into the ground, as in Gorchov's later works, and two are horizontal (and, at least in retrospect, appear redundant). His paintings work best, he discovered, when the two color inserts are roughly the same

size, as in "Spice of Life" (1976), a good example of his later signature style. The show demonstrates how, by stages, in some cases making works that are less than fully successful, Gorchov moved toward his late, glorious resolution.



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RON GORCHOV

*Ron Gorchov: The Last Paintings* at Cheim & Read presents works made between 2017 and 2020, when he died at the age of 90. Using his saddle-shaped frame, the canvas is mounted on a wooden stretcher with a gentle concave curve in one direction and a convex surface at 90 degrees to the concave side. To either side, left or right on this background field, Gorchov sets rounded inserts. In these works, all of the forms are gently rounded. The varied colors of the inserts play against those of the background, which can be as pale as that of "Sir James Jeans" (2020), with its lilac background, or as intense as the deep blue of "H" (2020). In "Close Call" (2020), turquoise paint drips down the right insert, revealing traces of the bare linen surface at the top and bottom.

As Barry Schwabsky notes in his catalogue essay, viewers who get close can see that the backgrounds were painted after the inserts; in "Esperanza" (2020), for instance, heavy runoffs of paint pool at the bottom. The paintings range in size from 19 by 28 inches ("Eteocles," 2019) to 85 by 76 inches ("Merope," 2017), and are oriented both vertically and horizontally.



Ron Gorchov, "6th One" (2006), oil on canvas, 110 x 80 x 8 inches (© Ron Gorchov / 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

These two shows are nicely complimentary, for if the roughness of the Schnabel show suits the story of Gorchov's development, the superbly refined space at Cheim & Read is

perfect for the later works; they are sleek pictures shown in a sleek space.

Were some misguided collector to purchase one of these late Gorchovs and have it remounted in a flat frame, we would be left, I think, with a rather banal composition. Why, then, do these structures, concave in one direction and convex in the other, make such a difference visually? Perhaps because the shape of Gorchov's saddles makes them ideal containers for pure color. The inserted color stands in a happily uncompetitive relation with that of the surrounding background. Each of these paintings has only two or three colors, those of the two inserts and the background. This format means that he doesn't need to compose in any traditional sense; when viewed from a glancing angle, they seem to be turning toward you, as if the entire painting was a person swiveling to look at the viewer. As he has said, nothing is hidden in his art.

When I walked into Cheim & Read and saw the majestic "Jocasta" (2017), which is more than seven feet wide, on the far wall in the first room, the name that involuntarily passed through my mind was Mark Rothko. No doubt I made that very ambitious association because Gorchov's painting has a powerful visual impact. I grant that Gorchov and Rothko are very different painters. Where Rothko wanted viewers to get close, so close that they become immersed in fields of saturated color, Gorchov, by contrast, aims to set his colors visibly on the saddle. We can keep our distance and see everything, because we are not viewing a scrim of color, but looking at a painted surface. This is why Rothko needed to work big, while Gorchov created totally successful small and mid-size as well as large paintings. And while Rothko's late works appear as if not made by human hands, Gorchov is a more physical visual thinker and, usually, a much more varied colorist.



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These exhibitions raise some pressing questions that I cannot as yet answer. Why did it take Gorchov so long to discover how to make these late, great paintings? Like many of the best inventions, these compositions truly are simple. All that matters is the internal structure, the saddle and backgrounds with two roughly symmetrical inserts, and the colors. They are clearly handmade. To call Gorchov the last Abstract Expressionist, as I am tempted to do in describing his sensibility, is in some ways misleading. None of the 1960s New York movements – neither minimalism nor Pop Art, and certainly not Color Field painting or the varied abstractions cited in the literature on him – had any obvious effect on his work. He was no throwback, for there's nothing belated about his art. He's an artist whose best pieces are purely aesthetic and totally present, here and now.

Ron Gorchov: *Spice of Life continues at Vito Schnabel Gallery (455 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 30.*

Ron Gorchov: *The Last Paintings 2017-2020 continues at Cheim & Read (547 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 18.*