



Ron Gorchov, *Set*, 1971, oil on canvas, 150 x 149 1/2 x 19 1/4 inches (381 x 379.7 x 48.9 cm) © 2024; Estate of Ron Gorchov / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery

RON GORCHOV
EXPLORING THE NEAR/FAR PAINTERLY HORIZONS OF MODERN SPACE
CURATED BY ROBERT STORR
SEPTEMBER 5 - OCTOBER 19, 2024

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY
455 WEST 19TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10011

Vito Schnabel Gallery is pleased to present *Ron Gorchov: Exploring the Near/Far Painterly Horizons of Modernist Space*, curated by Robert Storr, preeminent critic, author and artist who has previously served as Senior Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, and Dean of the Yale University School of Art. The exhibition, organized in collaboration with the Estate of Ron Gorchov, will be on view at the gallery's West 19th Street location through October 19.

Sometime in the 1950s the art critic and oracle of mid-twentieth century American formalism, Clement Greenberg, decreed that the essence of modernist painting was "the flatness of the picture plane." It was an axiom of art that brooked no violations or compromises of any kind although in subsequent decades this infallible high priest felt free to qualify the law himself and even to downplay it. So much for the rigor of aesthetic ideology.

Be that as it may, in the fertile margins of formalism artists gave themselves permission to rewrite its rules. And even to set off in directions wholly outside of its well patrolled boundaries. The most adventurous simply charted their own course to suit their independent intuitions about what painting was capable of doing or being. In keeping with Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning's credo that the painter is given a quantum of space to do with whatever he can - or words to that effect - Ron Gorchov decided that the most fecund option was to warp the flatness that most of his peers had chosen to respect or still others had tried to punch holes in or build out from, literally or pictorially.

The result was a variable topological surface as distinct from a plane, a surface that Gorchov discovered was open to unlimited nuances of shape and color and texture that simultaneously anchored or floated in the hybrid convex/concave expanse on which he worked. The saddle-like stretchers that he designed to torque the canvas were likewise of potentially infinite dimensions and proportions, each yielding different gestural, chromatic and compositional opportunities. Thus Gorchov's formal innovation escaped the cul-de-sac in which many formalist formulas so predictably found themselves in the postwar struggle to extend and renovate abstraction. In that regard, his was an essentially unique and original invention and it gave rise to a steady flow of spatially dynamic works.

Arcing back to the beginning of the artist's protean trajectory with 'Mine' (1968-69), this exhibition is mostly culled from examples that remained in his Brooklyn studio following his death at 90 in 2020. In addition to those late works is the large multipanel ensemble 'Set' (1971) which recalls other architectonic experiments such as 'Entrance' (1971), a sort of portal made of stacked canvases in which Gorchov demonstrated possibilities for abstract reliefs ignored by the likes of Frank Stella at that time, as well as the potential for physically and therefore optically bending space overlooked by that New York School wunderkind even after he had become an Old Master of technologically assisted structures made in metal.

Indeed, elements of 'Entrance's' post and lintel configuration spawned variations of the post alone that over time evolved into vertical ladders of color such as 'Algol' (2016), 'Ascella' (2017), and 'Totem' (2010), Gorchov's commission for the public events room of the Charles Gwathmey designed building for the United States delegation to the United Nations on UN Plaza.

We are accustomed to think of careers as being distinguished by bold moves in succession. Gorchov made just such a move when he departed from formalist norms in the late 1960s and early 1970s but the doctrines in force at that time made it effectively impossible to recognize, much less appreciate, the full ramifications of his contribution. That blind spot even encouraged some observers to think of his eccentrically shaped, non-Euclidean canvases as a "signature" gimmick. It wasn't! So after one brief episode of returning to the flat picture plane in the 1990s Gorchov realized how far ahead of the game he'd been since his breakthrough two decades before and went back to the bowed stretchers and devoted his full concentration to refining the spatial consequences of color and tone. So, as with that of Brancusi, his was a case of boldness seconded and enhanced by the relentless pursuit and exploitation of seemingly effortless finesse. And, they proved to be a very persuasive combination!

Robert Storr
Parry Sound, Ontario
August 2024

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Ron Gorchov (b. 1930, Chicago, IL; d. 2020, Brooklyn, NY) was an American artist who began working with curved surface paintings in 1967. He created his first shaped canvas work in Mark Rothko's studio. Gorchov was best known for helping to spearhead the shaped canvas movement with his bowed wooden frames, resembling saddles or shields, stretched with linen or canvas and marked with simple shapes of thin paint providing chromatic contrasts. As part of a group of artists in New York in the 1960s and '70s including Frank Stella, Richard Tuttle, Blinky Palermo, and Ellsworth Kelly, Gorchov pushed painting to its extreme, defying Greenbergian formalism. Becoming a sort of hybrid between painting and sculpture, the warped edges of Gorchov's canvases created new dimensions and depth, disorienting the viewer's perception.

Gorchov was the subject of the first solo exhibition that Schnabel curated in 2005. At that time, Gorchov's work had not been presented in over a decade, and the show led to a resurgent interest in his work, including a solo exhibition the following year at MoMA PS1. Since then, Schnabel has exhibited Gorchov's work in both New York and St. Moritz. Schnabel also curated an exhibition of his paintings at Sotheby's S|2 in London in 2015.

Gorchov's paintings are included in many prominent collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Everson Museum of Art, New York.

Robert Storr is a preeminent art critic, curator, artist, and educator, and the former Dean of Yale School of Art and senior curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He has written numerous catalogues, articles, and books on major 20th and 21st-century artists. He was the first American to serve as visual arts director of the Venice Biennale.

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