

## PRESS RELEASE

# Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s Curated by Raphael Rubinstein

Opens Thursday June 27 from 6-8 pm

Exhibition continues through August 30, 2013



*Louise Fishman*  
*Navigation 1981 oil on linen 25 x 22 in*

This exhibition focuses on New York abstraction in the 1980s as practiced by a generation of painters born between 1939 and 1949. Official accounts of the 1980s—the decade when most of these artists either emerged or solidified their approaches—tend to ignore the individualistic abstraction exemplified by these painters in favor of more easily identifiable movements and styles (Neo-Expressionism, Appropriation Art, Neo-Geo etc). For these artists, who were in their 30s and 40s during the 1980s, it was not a question of a “return to painting,” but, rather, of finding a bridge between the radical, deconstructive abstraction of the late 1960s and 1970s (which many of them had been marked by) with a larger painting history and more subjective approaches. They opened their work to elements that had been largely excluded from abstraction in the previous decade, beginning with a reinvestigation of the conventional rectangular support. They were unafraid to explore gesture, improvisation, relational compositions, allusions to figuration and landscape, as well as art historical and cultural allusions, high and low.

The 1939-1949 bracket encompasses a generation marked by the 1960s, by the social and political upheavals of the period. Rejecting formalism, these artists found diverse means of introducing new content into their work; their abstraction was frequently an impure abstraction. In the early 1980s, biomorphic imagery began to appear in the paintings of Carroll Dunham, Bill Jensen, Thomas Nozkowski and Terry Winters. Other artists such as Elizabeth Murray, Joan Snyder and Mary Heilmann injected autobiography into their work. Explicit references to historical events appeared in the paintings of Louise Fishman and Jack Whitten. In the 1980s, painters such as Stanley Whitney and Stephen Mueller were fighting their way out of Color Field painting, gradually assembling the components of noteworthy personal styles. Via distancing effects and eccentric processes, Jonathan Lasker and David Reed brought radical structural reforms to modernist abstraction. Pat Steir and Gary Stephan staged dramatic confrontations between contemporary painting practices and art historical precedents.

The 1939-1949 frame inevitably leaves out many important older and younger artists of the time (just as the limits of wall space impose other exclusions), but the subject of this show is not the entirety of New York abstract painting of the 1980s, rather what a specific generation contributed to it. Although many artists in the show have received significant attention, “Reinventing Abstraction” challenges existing exclusionary histories by mapping out an artistic time and place that has yet to be canonized, or even acknowledged by the museum and academic mainstream. This exhibition also hopes to draw attention to the historical grounding of much recent work by younger painters. It’s not by chance that the title takes its inspiration from painter Carrie Moyer, who, writing about Stephen Mueller in 2011, identified his as “the generation that reinvented American abstract painting.”

Raphael Rubinstein is a New York-based poet and critic. His blog *The Silo* won a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant in 2011. His most recent curatorial project was “Provisional Painting” at Stuart Shave/Modern Art in London. He is Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art.

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