

## **Herman Cherry**

*A Different Kind of Abstraction*

September 13th-October 25th

### **Herman Cherry: Reliving the '60's on Canvas**

Herman Cherry, the Abstract Expressionist painter (1909-1992) began his long and multi-faceted art career on the West Coast, first studying with the Synchronist painter and cutting-edge Modernist Stanton MacDonald-Wright at the Art Students League of Los Angeles in 1926 and by 1930 migrating for a spell to New York and studying under the famed American Scene Regionalist and raconteur Thomas Hart Benton.

"It wasn't that he taught me color," recalled Cherry in describing the Synchronist's influence, "he made me see color."

A Los Angeles critic at the time wrote that the League under MacDonald-Wright's watch "would become the locus of Modernist thought, teaching and inspiration in Southern California."

It all rubbed off on the young artist in ways that helped forge his singular vision, acting as a kind of springboard from Synchronism's interplay of color and music to new waters.

"I think when an artist gets older," recounted Cherry to Harlan Phillips in an Archives of American Art oral history interview in 1965 when Cherry was 56 years old, "he finds his technique. He finds his way, and he more or less sticks by it...because that seems to work best for what he has to say. All he wants from a medium is for it not to get in the way."

By that prime time of his life, Cherry had traveled extensively across Europe, living and painting for a time in Paris where the likes of Joan Mitchell and Paul Jenkins partied and drank hard whiskey at Cherry's studio, explored and photographed the prehistoric paintings in the Lascaux caves with the filmmaker Alain Resnais and chalked up any number of experiences that any dyed-in-the-wool bohemian would be proud of.

Around the time of that first oral history interview, Cherry already had significant exposure in the New York art scene, included in the historic Ninth Street show in May 1951 organized by artist members of The Club-- the downtown hot bed for New York School era artist debate and frolicking-- and the impresario and future super star dealer Leo Castelli, exhibited his series of Black Paintings at Eleanor Ward's path breaking Stable Gallery in 1955 and soloed twice (in 1959 and 1960) at the Elaine Poindexter Gallery.

Along that hard scramble way, Cherry gained membership in The Club, brought in by Philip Guston who Cherry first knew from his Los Angeles days in the 1930's when he ran the Stanley Rose Gallery in Hollywood, a tiny off-shoot of the eponymous bookstore that was a storied Bohemian refuge and where Cherry gave the likes of Guston and Reuben Kadish their first solo exhibitions.

Those kind of stellar credentials would seemingly have made Cherry a kind of downtown art star but several things got in the way, most notably the emergence and take-over by the Pop Art movement in the early 1960's that overnight snuffed out and replaced the brawny reign of the Ab-Ex era.

"But I think the artist," recounted Cherry in tart reaction to that new movement, "has lost his role as a revolutionary in a certain sense, a malcontent, which was partly his role. It wasn't a malcontent because he was a cynic or unhappy or anything like that. It's just that he refused to accept anything until he discovered it for himself. And when he discovered it usually was quite different than anybody else's discovery ...and those values are all down the drain now."

Coming in part on the hardened heels of his Black Paintings series, the new work collided in shocking contrast to its past as say the leap from van Gogh's Potato Eaters to his rapturous landscapes in Arles and Auvers. Those breathless leaps and bounds of his practice come into clearer focus in Cherry's own words: "I always

seem to be in a landscape I was never in before so I have to rediscover the way to get to it, that place I vaguely see. I have to make my own roads and sometimes I go the wrong way. But I'm always willing to take the chance."

The viewer can take in these few morsels of Cherry's biography and use it as a lens to better see and take in his stunning abstract work, teeming in glowing color and graphic precision that were executed in the early-to-mid 1960's and now still fresh and potent six decades from now.

"Bandaide" from 1963, in oil and charcoal on canvas, two chunky biomorphic-like forms in milk chocolate shades and held together, just barely, by a slim rectangle of powder blue 'tape' and hence the title.

The sly humor also speaks to the challenge of uniting the floating forms—otherwise, they'd drift apart like wandering cumulous clouds.

On the far left of the 50 by 40 inch canvas, a lozenge of gold/orange color grips the edge and possibly attempts to escape the confines of the canvas.

(Franz Kline recalled Cherry, "...was the first to make me fully aware that the image in the picture could go past the canvas and thus destroy the picture's edge.")

"Untitled (Anthropomorphic Forms)" also from 1963 is denser and more brightly hued in sunglass needing shades of blood red, orange citrus and forest green, all seemingly snugly packed in kissing close forms.

Two of the just off-center elements bring to mind Brancusi's "Kiss" but evoke more of a full-on snog. "Bulging Forms" in oil and charcoal on canvas and scaled at 60 by 50 inches exude a Venus of Willendorf bulk though sharply and shapely delineated by curving black lines that form fit around the competing shapes.

Though completely abstract, the composition breathes out a kind of pulsating sensuality.

"Jazz" from 1963 and similarly scaled, projects a very different beat with its striking contrast of a tightly packed chromatic quartet of yellow forms placed against a darker hued background and deftly separated by conforming black lines.

The influence of jazz as an art form played a big part in Cherry's mature work, no doubt colored by his own discovery of the jazz haven Five Spot off the Bowery that became a haunt for Cherry and his downtown artist friends.

Cherry's work from the first half of this '60's decade brims with more evocative titles such as "Secret Chamber" that speak to the artist's sophisticated literacy and poet-like intelligence.

Writing on the occasion of Cherry's 1959 exhibition at the Poindexter Gallery, the artist's close friend, the avant-garde composer and choreographer Lucia Dlugoszewski deftly captured Cherry's practice at that time and beyond: "...it hangs awkward and delicate with the brutality of the clean and clear with the transparent ambiguity of immediacy."

A fresh look at the vibrancy of these color-charged paintings and powerhouse black and white collages on coated paper in pencil and India ink, place his work and reputation on a higher plane than where he stubbornly and steadily traveled.

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**Judd Tully**, New York, 2025