

HYPERALLERGIC

Norman Bluhm's Second Act

By John Yau | 4 August 2022

It is time that the art world recognize what Bluhm went on to do during the last three decades of his life, when he was deep into his own territory.

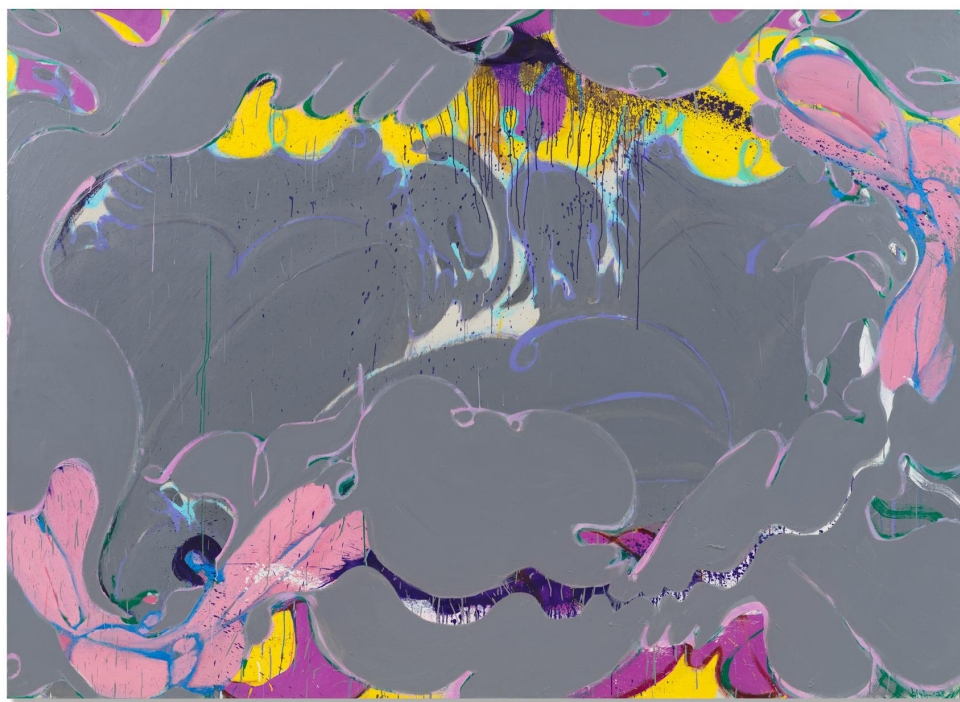


Norman Bluhm, *Millbrook Blues*, 1976, oil on canvas, 84 x 96 inches

The case for Norman Bluhm has been building for some time. He has been written about favorably on more than one occasion by discerning critics such as Raphael Rubinstein and Barry Schwabsky. His monographic survey, *Norman Bluhm: Metamorphosis* at the Newark Museum (February 13–August 20, 2020), curated by Tricia Laughlin Bloom and Jay Grimm, expanded his legacy, but more remains to be done. His debut exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery, *Norman Bluhm* (July 28–September 1, 2022), clarifies the degree of Bluhm's innovation and individuality when he began making the best work of his career in the 1970s.

Long considered a member of Abstract Expressionism's "second generation," Bluhm gravitated toward European painting far more than his contemporaries, with the exception of Joan Mitchell. Bluhm and Mitchell weren't haunted by the idea that they had to embody "American" painting. Whereas Mitchell's longtime subject is summed up in her oft-quoted statement "I carry my landscapes around with me," Bluhm's most sustained subject took root when, in 1970, he began titling his paintings after women and goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology.

He was alluding to the female form merging with a world that was both natural and mythic, a classical theme. Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (1485–86) is probably the most famous, and most reproduced, example of the theme. Bluhm seemed to ask, could an artist make this subject new without resorting to parody?



Norman Bluhm, *Sooty Lady*, 1978, oil on canvas, 76 x 106 inches

Bluhm lived in Paris from 1947 to 1956, where he shared a studio with Sam Francis and had a speaking role in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950). Fluent in French and Italian, he was easily accepted into French artistic and literary circles and, in that regard, he was quite different from other American ex-patriates in Paris on the GI Bill. There, he met the art historian Georges Duthuit, who was married to Marguerite Matisse, daughter of Henri, as well as artists, poets, and intellectuals. While Henri Matisse's use of saturated color would have a profound effect on Bluhm, that only speaks to a small part of his ambition to achieve something new through great art. This meant looking to the voluptuous nudes of Peter Paul Rubens, the light-filled skies of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, the odalisques of Matisse, the

women of Willem de Kooning, rendered with a loaded brush, the liquidity of Jackson Pollock's poured arabesques, and Chinese dragon paintings dating from the Song dynasty.

Initially inspired by the flowering landscapes of Camille Corot and stained-glass windows, Bluhm went on to absorb all the New York School offered him. He pursued a trajectory that led him to an unlikely and challenging territory in painting just as conceptual art replaced painting as the center of the New York art world's attention. A good friend of the poet Frank O'Hara (they both loved the opera), Bluhm had no interest in making art that rejected the celebration of a rhythmically sensual world in sunset colors. Now, more than half a century after he reinvented himself, his work remains surprisingly fresh.

What distinguishes Bluhm's work from that of his peers is his commitment to evoking an alternative world. The domain he creates out of paint seems to be in constant motion, at once sensual and whimsical, carnal and cloud-like. It is a layered world in which forms frolic and cavort as they slide past, over, and under each other, a surface in which line, form, and gesture mingle while figure and ground exchange identities.



Norman Bluhm, *Untitled, Studies in Blue, White, Gray*, 1975, oil on canvas, 48 x 240 inches

At a time when many abstract painters felt compelled to emphasize flatness, work monochromatically, employ geometry, make conceptually simple compositions, and remove the hand from painting, Bluhm refused to conform to these widely accepted pressures. Because of this and myriad other reasons, including his unshakable belief that painting could be as joyful, uplifting, emotional, theatrical, expressive, irreverent, bawdy, and exuberant as a great piece of music, he reached his maturity at a late age. Still genuflecting to the idea of genius and youth, this is what the art world has never been able to embrace about Bluhm. And yet, the poet Wallace Stevens, who published his first book, *Harmonium* (1923), to almost no acclaim, also reached his maturity late. Simultaneously traditional and experimental, both men were interested in remaking the world out of the particularities of their respective mediums. At times, Stevens seems to be describing one of Bluhm's paintings, as in the opening line from the poem "Banal Sojourn": "The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black." These are colors that could be found in a Bluhm painting, especially "Ice Blue" and "Coral Dream Girl" (both 1978).

The change in Bluhm's work coincided with his decision to leave New York City. Increasingly estranged from the art world since O'Hara's death in 1966, married with two young children, he had come to a crossroads in his life.

“Viper Lady” (1979) is one of the works that takes its compositional cues from illusionistic ceiling paintings, such as the oculus in Andrea Mantegna’s “Camera degli Sposi.” The blue center of Bluhm’s rectangular painting is encircled and framed by a paler blue serpent-like form that swells and shrinks. Bluhm complicates this formal relationship by adding other layers and openings, including a jagged black and purple one. This unexpected opening, in which the black and purple pull us in, raises the questions: How deep is the space of this painting and what is in front of or behind what? Compositionally, Bluhm combines the symmetrical and asymmetrical, order and disturbance. In the fluid line that defines a form’s edge or divides it into different sections, the repeated loops evoke architectural ornament and classical female statuary.



Norman Bluhm, *Viper Lady*, 1979, oil on canvas, 77 x 107 inches

Working in counterpoint to this opening, and its suggestion of deep space, Bluhm paints one area white, but leaves other areas unpainted. He suggests a limitless space through his use of black and placement of the blue forms, yet he contradicts this with the unpainted areas. Painting is a construction and therefore artificial, something created. Can you continue to believe in it once you know it is fictitious?

One format that Bluhm made his own is a panoramic view comprised of four abutted paintings. In “Untitled, Studies in Blue, White, Gray” (1975), a white, lithe, and bulbous form — divided down the middle by a narrow, oscillating slit — spans the entire 20-foot length of the painting, partially interrupted by two blue forms opposite each other. In this and other works from the 1970s, he transformed de Kooning’s loaded brushstroke and Pollock’s viscous pour into animated forms undulating across the painting’s surface while staying perfectly flat. Bluhm’s curvaceous painted form can and should be read as

an elated brushstroke. It is what connects his work to two very different artists, Roy Lichtenstein, in his comic book evocations of Action Painting, and David Reed, who began exploring the brushstroke in the early 1970s. Like Bluhm, both Lichtenstein and Reed broke away from Abstract Expressionism. It is time that the art world recognize what Bluhm went on to do during the last three decades of his life, when he was deep into his own territory. Marianne Moore's description of Wallace Stevens's poems as "riots of gorgeousness," in which the poet's imagination finds refuge, comes to mind.

Norman Bluhm continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through September 1. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.