HYPERALLERGIC

How Norman Bluhm Reinvented Gestural Abstraction

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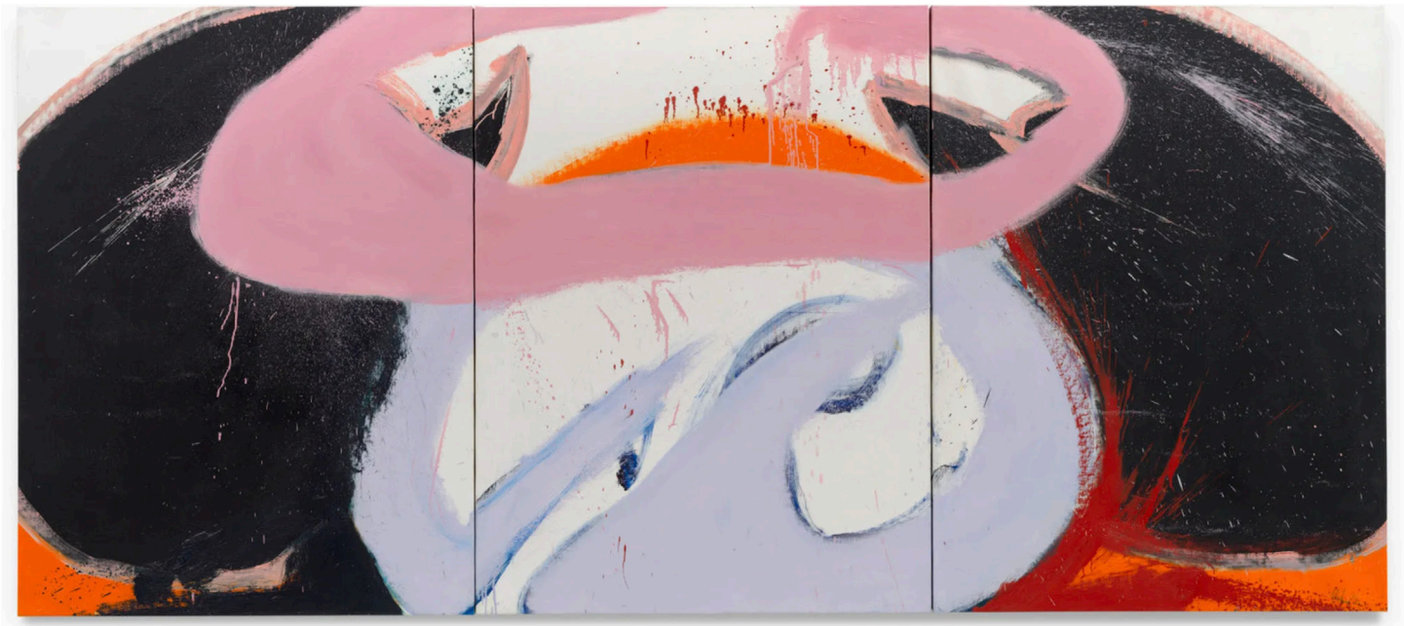
10 March 2025 | By John Yau

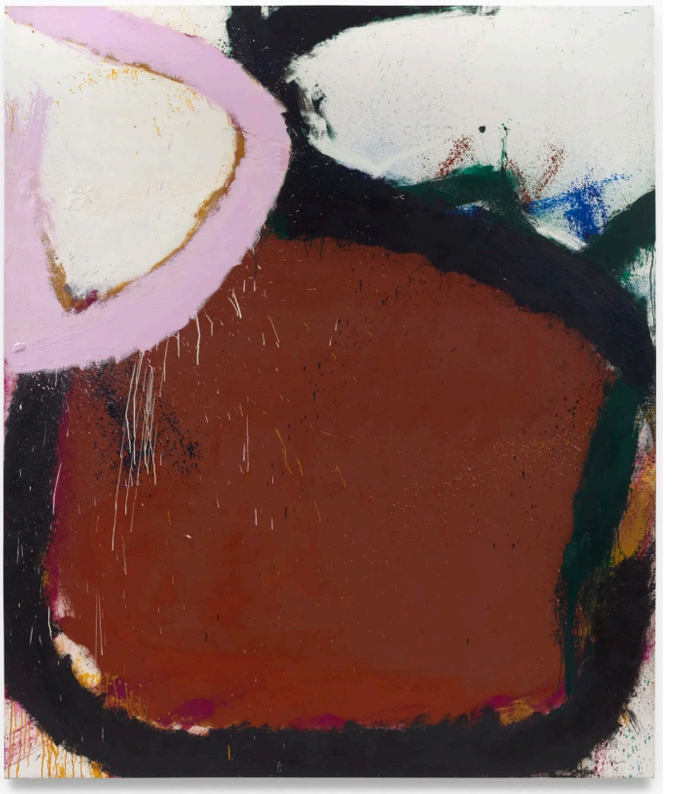


Tages, 1971, Oil on canvas
(All images courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery and The Estate of Norman Bluhm)

I first visited Norman Bluhm's studio in the late 1970s. There, I saw art spanning 30 years, from the late 1940s, when he lived in Paris on the GI Bill and briefly shared a studio with artist Sam Francis, to his most recent work. At that point, he had no New York dealer; his previous one, Martha Jackson, had died in 1974. Despite being championed by the esteemed curator Jim Harithas, and being the subject of exhibitions at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, in 1973, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1977, his next New York show was not until 1985, at the Washburn Gallery.

From the moment of his reemergence in the mid-1980s until his death in 1999, the art world did not know what to do with Bluhm. While his work was clearly rooted in gestural abstraction, his noncompliance with formalist orthodoxies that ruled the New York art scene for decades and his nonconformist taste were everywhere in his painting, from his tutti-frutti color palette to his use of drawing in paint and transformation of gesture into liquid-like forms, to his cosmic spatiality. During his lifetime, he would never get credit for his extraordinary, mold-breaking achievements. Bluhm did something unprecedented in art: He reinvented gestural painting, transforming its broad sweep into fluid shapes, which he combined with saturated color to create floating forms ascending and circulating through a layered space.

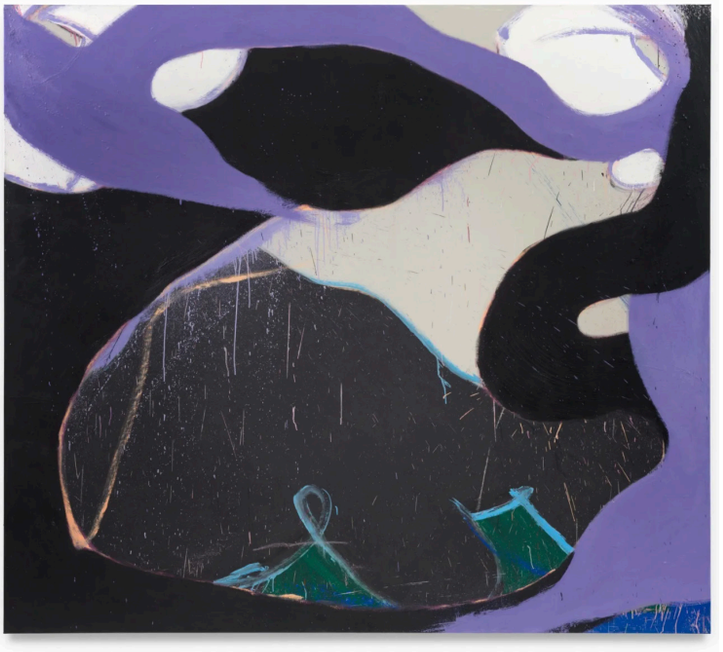
From the late 1960s on, Bluhm's artwork was an unlikely combination of sensual hedonism and a desire for spiritual transcendence. Long an admirer of Renaissance and Baroque paintings, he sought to recreate their sensual forms, unearthly light, and infinite space in abstraction. As a bomber pilot in World War II who flew at least 50 missions, he could imagine heavenly bodies floating in an unbounded space. Just as Joan Mitchell said, "I carry my landscapes around with me," one could say that Bluhm carried the skyscapes he witnessed inside of him, from his wartime flights to Tiepolo's radiant clouds and Tintoretto's billowing clouds of heaven.



Argyrus, 1967, Oil on canvas

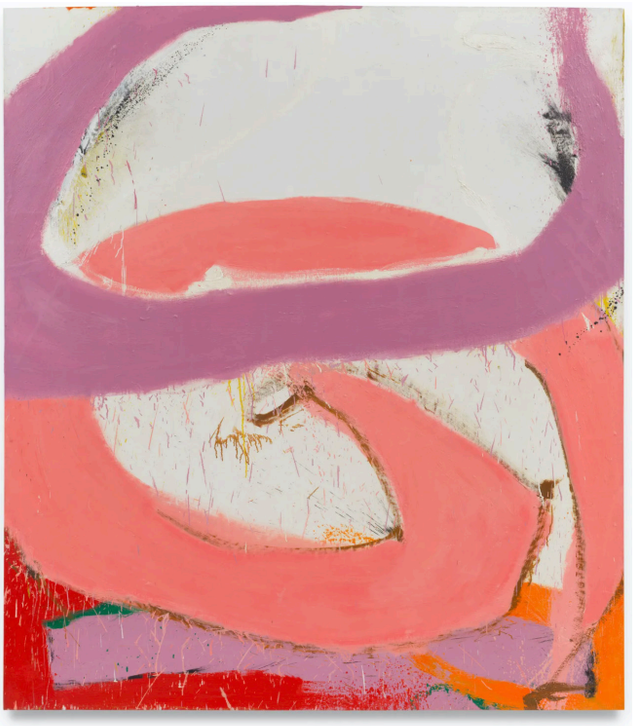
Norman Bluhm, his second exhibition with Miles McEnery Gallery, features 10 paintings completed within a five-year period (1967–72). In *Priam* and *Tages* (both 1971), Bluhm abutted three canvases, which together are nearly three times as wide as they are tall, underscoring his early interest in panoramic views. I believe his experience as a pilot contributed to his transforming his sweeping, gestural brushstrokes into swelling and contracting, liquid-like forms moving quickly across the pictorial space, changing direction at corners, even as some part is cropped by the painting's edges.

Starting in the late 1960s, Bluhm was in contentious dialogue with the formalist tenet that a painting had to acknowledge the edges of the picture plane, as exemplified by Frank Stella working within the shaped format and Gene Davis's use of the stripe. Bluhm refused to work solely inside the rectangle; he drew robustly in paint and, signaling his defiance of convention, he always went beyond the edges. He layered space, especially when he splattered white across a black surface, conveying a sense cosmic depth and wondrous awe without veering into illusion. He went in unexpected directions by using a soft, floral palette of pinks, purples, lilacs, and violets to render strong, violent gestures.



Philomela, 1972, Oil on canvas

Bluhm's path was idiosyncratic, defiant, and erotic, with none of the misogyny evident in Willem de Kooning, whose work he admired. He could pair clashing colors, as in the black and pink of *Opis* (1970) and *Tages*, or more subtly, lilac, fleshy pink, and red in *Thisbe* (1969). In many paintings, warm color appears the edges of a dark and light area, creating a halation effect and adding another kind of depth. At a time when artists routinely adhered to painting's two-dimensional surface, he rejected flatness, without resorting to perspectival, atmospheric, or illusionistic space.



Thisbe, 1969, Oil on canvas

What makes Bluhm's painting engaging and necessary is that he harnessed his restless, rebellious spirit into a complex, continually changing body of work in which light and matter, sensuousness and otherworldliness, are never forsaken. A magisterial painter who never met a curve he didn't like, his pieces are the opposite of reductive. He always celebrated the pleasures of eroticism, paint's creamy delectability — somewhere between cloud and flesh — drawing, color, light, and space, while continually refusing to conform. There is an amorous frankness to his work that warrants our attention. In this way, his art seems more important than ever.