Abstract Expressionism and Its Legacy
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October 6 – November 5, 2011

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Mary Abbott (b. 1921), Mr. Lee, 1950, oil and oil stick on canvas, 34 × 55 in.

Opening Reception
Thursday, October 6 from 6 to 8 pm

RSVP to elizabethruebush@spanierman.com

The exhibition can be viewed online at www.spanierman.com
For further information please contact Gina Greer (ginagreer@spanierman.com)

Spanierman Gallery, LLC
45 East 58th Street   New York, NY 10022   Tel (212) 832-0208
Gallery hours: Monday through Saturday 9:30 to 5:30
OPENING at Spanierman Gallery on October 6, 2011, Abstract Expressionism and Its Legacy presents a group of paintings reflective of the period when Abstract Expressionism was in its formative years, a time when American artists faced existential dilemmas in the aftermath of World War II and the escalating Cold War arms race. The works evoke the artists’ belief in action painting as a means of embodying freedom. In this manner, they reacted against totalitarianism, old rules, and the devastations of the atomic bomb and the recent war. Taking risks in their work, artists sought to step into the unknown, giving rise to a new idiom that broke from the past. As the noted critic Harold Rosenberg wrote in Artnews in December 1952: “The big moment came when it was decided to paint... Just to paint. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, aesthetic, moral.”

DURING THE 1930S, when American Regionalism and Social Realism predominated, a number of American artists held to abstract methods, working primarily in hard-edge geometric styles stemming from Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Constructivism. It was not until the late 1940s that the gestural methods and freeform approach of Jackson Pollock and other artists began to emerge, signifying the radical new art and philosophical stance. While many of the innovative modes that arose were spurred by the arrival of European artist-emigrés, fleeing their war-torn homelands, others sprang sui generis from the exhilarating intellectual milieu generated by the artists and critics who gathered in Greenwich Village. Several of the artists made the transition from an earlier linear mode to the new action-painting methods, among them Rolph Scarlett and Gertrude Glass Greene. Scarlett, who had met Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky in Europe in the 1930s, was among the first American artists to develop a nonobjective style. In the 1950s, he turned from his structured designs of the late 1930s and 1940s—avidly collected by Hilla Rebay for the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now the Solomon R. Guggenheim...
Gertrude Greene (1904–1956), *Structure and Space*, 1951, oil on canvas, 60 × 46 in.

Museum)—to produce works such as *Black, White, and Gray with Sand Drip* (1950s), in which he flung and dripped sand-embedded pigment into a decentered composition, suggestive of the theme of free will seeking escape from confinement. Exposed to progressive currents in Europe during the 1920s, Greene was a pioneering figure in the development of American geometric abstraction and a founder of the American Abstract Artists. In the 1950s, she brought an organic emphasis to her Cubist-based images such as *Structure and Space* (1951), using a palette knife to create a sense of movement and energy that was new in her work.

Abstract Expressionism has often been considered a masculine style that women could not fully achieve. Nonetheless, several women directly witnessed and played important roles in the era’s gestalt, demonstrating a presence to which scholars are today giving recognition. Among them, **Perle Fine** was at the center of the movement throughout her career. She studied with Hans Hofmann, participated in exhibitions at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, was a member of the elite artists’ gatherings at The Club, showed her work at major galleries that promoted the avant-garde (including those of Nierendorf, Betty Parsons, and Tanager),
and was close to many of the leading Abstract Expressionists, such as Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Ad Reinhardt. In *The Forest* (1949), Fine denied the completeness of her shapes, creating a dynamic interplay between form and space that evokes a mystical state of being. Mary Abbott was another early exponent of Abstract Expressionism. One of few women to attend the short-lived experimental school, called The Subject of the Artist School (which fostered the careers of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell), as well as also a member of The Club, Abbott did not curtail her art due to ideas as to how women should paint. She created explosively electric images such as *Mr. Lee* (1950).

Abstract Expressionism provided a means by which artists could define their identities through the distinctiveness of their brush marks. Such a quest is apparent in Stephen Pace’s *Untitled (55-31)* (1955), in which strokes of charcoal gray battle for dominance over iridescent blues and reds. In John Little’s *Phobos* (1958) broad brush movements seem to be in a violent contest, with no single color or stroke predominating. Little perhaps sought to evoke the Greek god named in the title, a personification of the fear brought on by war (Little served in the Navy during...
World War II). Both Pace and Little studied with Hofmann. Pace was a long-time friend of Milton Avery, and Little was a neighbor and friend of Pollock and Lee Krasner in Springs, East Hampton. **John Ferren**, who was close to Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and John Helion while living in Paris in the early 1930s, also joined the Springs community around Pollock in the late 1950s. His distinctive Abstract Expressionist style, in which he considered the movement and complexity within simple, subtly shifting colors and nuanced brush handling, reflects his exploration of Eastern philosophy.

While some artists of the era believed that it was only through nonobjective expression that an artist could venture into a new world, one without borders or limits, others felt that the natural world could continue to provide the basis for creative exploration within an abstract forum. Such a broad-minded attitude characterized **Betty Parsons**, a leading and legendary dealer of the day whose wide-ranging stable of artists included “giants,” such as Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, and less prominent figures working in many different styles. Herself an artist throughout her life, Parsons drew from the rich plethora of the art she showed in her gallery in her own work, while using a vibrant palette and a flexible technique to interpret the spirit of places she experienced in her many travels, as in *Blue Field* (1957).

Ideology was also not a barrier for **Charlotte Park** (wife of James Brooks and a friend of Pollock and Krasner), who developed a dynamic, effervescent approach to express a wide emotional range. In *Zachary* (ca. 1955), she used modulated hues, cursive, undulating lines, and floating forms that call to mind the natural world without being specifically referential.
Charlotte Park (1918–2010), *Zachary*, ca. 1955, oil on canvas, 36 × 47 in.

A number of artists have continued the Abstract Expressionist tradition, using its painterly language as well as following its mission, to venture beyond the known and to explore the precarious nature of reality. Among them, Judith Godwin, who also studied with Hofmann and was a close friend of Kline and Brooks, paints with emotionally expressive color and line, conveying complex feelings, inner tensions, and a struggle for self-awareness. Her *Pink Sky Pond* (1960) reveals a mood of lyricism disrupted by intonations of dissension. Frank Bowling (a native of British Guyana), who has been honored by his election to the Royal Academy, London and by being made an officer in the Order of the British Empire by the Queen of England (O.B.E.), delves through his heavily worked surfaced paintings into a realm between associative impressions and abstract objectivity—the latter advocated by Clement Greenberg, with whom Bowling carried on a Socratic dialogue in the 1970s. In *Kaieteurflow* (1980), the vision of Abstract Expressionism is present in Bowling’s many discrete adjustments to the surface, which create a sense of unleashed and variable time, both immediate and cosmic.

Often described in terms of its revolutionary stylistic features, Abstract Expressionism was also a way of thinking and looking at the world and the self. For artists then and now, its methods and ideals have spawned an unbounded range of creative results. Of the artists of his era, Rosenberg wrote in 1952: “The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea. On the one hand, a desperate recognition of moral and intellectual exhaustion; on the other, the exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity.” Such exhilaration can be felt in these powerful, sensuous, and evocative works.

![Frank Bowling](b. 1936), *Kaieteurflow*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 28½ × 35 in.
Cover: John Little (1907–1984)  
*Phobos*, 1958, oil on canvas, 48 × 36 in.

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Frank Bowling

John Ferren

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Judith Godwin

Gertrude Greene

John Little

Stephen Pace

Charlotte Park

Betty Parsons

Rolph Scarlett

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