

CLEVE GRAY:
1967 SILVER PAINTINGS

October 27 – December 1, 2012



McClain Gallery is pleased to present the first solo show in Texas dedicated to Cleve Gray's paintings. "1967 Silver Paintings", is an exhibition showcasing an atmospheric group of work completed by the American artist Cleve Gray (1918-2004) within the same year. Typical of the Gray's metamorphosis into total abstraction, these historic works oscillate between explosive energy and contained reflection. The seven canvases in the exhibition feature metallic paint pours which bubble up to simultaneously cover and reveal acid-hued paint splashes and stains.

A key work in the exhibition, Gray's *Silver Diver*, began as a controlled abstraction, but via visceral frustration with the work, it was transformed into gestural fields of green and orange partially shrouded by sensuous pools and drips of silvery paint reminiscent of the cosmos. In a 1977 essay Thomas B. Hess describes:

The artist became 'irritated' at the painting, angry, perhaps because of its intrusive Cubist scaffolding. He picked up a can of silver paint and threw it at the canvas. It made a gorgeous splat...*Silver Diver* became a starting point for several other images. He purposefully exploited accidental effects in them. He splashed water into the wet metallic paint which left lunar craters and tills as it evaporated. He forced pigments to slither over the canvas with air from a compressor hose. Risk, as in so much of the best American abstract painting, became part of the technique and of the content."¹

Gray's subtly nuanced paintings reveal a mastery and understanding of acrylic as a medium. It was only one year prior, in 1966, that Gray began working almost exclusively in acrylics. Only based upon previous experiences with interactions between hues, could Gray anticipate the result.

In a recent *art ltd.* review Peter Frank acknowledged "The work of Cleve Gray, for instance, was widely admired in his day, and its admirable qualities sustain: deep, resonant color, simple and readable gestures. Gray was a painter's painter, not a critic's painter, and painted in response to other painting."² More than forty years later, these paintings still read as fresh as the day they were painted and perhaps even more so upon revisiting their "deep, resonant color" and energetic gestures. As many post-war artists did, Gray worked in series thoroughly examining the potential of a variety of studio practices. This dramatic, rich group of silver paintings would catapult the beginning of an artistic exploration that would last over forty years. The likenesses and contrasts within this body of work strongly establish the artist as a master of color and material.

Cleve Gray, born in New York City, graduated with a degree in art and archeology from Princeton University in 1940. While serving in World War II and post-war, Gray traveled extensively with significant exposure to European art and artists. His earliest inspiration ranged from his Princeton thesis on Chinese Yuan Dynasty landscape painting to his mid-1940s studies with French artists André Lhote and Jacques Villon. In response to painters like Picasso and Braque who paved the way for Cubism, Gray fused his love for landscape with that of the late style. It wasn't until the 1960s that Gray forged a close friendship with Barnett Newman and during this formative period he broadened his artistic vocabulary to include more abstract compositions of distilled, yet expressive, color and gesture. His work has been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago; Brooklyn Museum; Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

¹ Thomas B. Hess, "Cleve Gray" in *Cleve Gray: Paintings 1966-1977*. Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1977.

² Peter Frank "Cleve Gray: 'The Connecticut Paintings' at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art," *art ltd.*, July 2012.

Image: Cleve Gray, *Silver Diver*, 1967, Acrylic on canvas with aluminum paint, 82 x 80 inches

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