

eric firestone gallery

MONTAUK HIGHWAY: POSTWAR ABSTRACTION IN THE HAMPTONS August 4th - September 17th, 2017

Norman Bluhm - Paul Brach - James Brooks - Nicolas Carone - Friedel Dzubas - Elaine de Kooning- Willem de Kooning John Ferren - Perle Fine - Audrey Flack - Sidney Geist - Michael Goldberg - Grace Hartigan - Al Held Allan Kaprow - William King - Franz Kline - Lee Krasner - Ibram Lassaw - John Little - Conrad Marca-Relli Peter Moore - Kyle Morris - Hans Namuth - Costantino Nivola - Alfonso Ossorio - Charlotte Park - Ray Parker Philip Pavia - Miriam Schapiro - Jack Tworkov - Tony Vaccaro - Esteban Vicente - Manoucher Yektai - Larry Zox

EAST HAMPTON, NY: Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce the exhibition Montauk Highway: Postwar Abstraction in the Hamptons, opening August 4th, and on view through September 17, 2017.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Hamptons became one of the most significant meeting-grounds of like-minded artists, who gathered on the beach, in local bars, and in the artist-run Signa Gallery in East Hampton (active from 1957-60). It was an extension of the vanguard artistic activity happening in New York City around abstraction, which constituted a radical re-definition of art. The East End was also a place where artists were more free to experiment. Eric Firestone Gallery pays homage to this rich and layered history in the exhibition Montauk Highway. The show includes work from the period by more than twenty-five artists who played an important role in the Hamptons scene and had studios in the area.

Uncluttered sight lines and flat vistas of farm fields and sea define the landscape of the East End. In the 1950s and 60s, when the artists lived mostly amidst farmers and fishermen, it was particularly so. The influence of this landscape and its light permeates the painting and sculpture on view.

Work in the show is linked not only geographically, but also by the aesthetic of fragmented, abstract forms. The impulse to break apart and explode forms may be connected to a response to World War II, as well as the ongoing lineage of Cubism. These are not depictions of the landscape; they are about the experience of moving through it. As Willem de Kooning famously noted, "Content is a glimpse."

This aesthetic also becomes a visual metaphor for what the East End represented to these artists. It was a refuge from the pressures and quotidian nature of the city, and as such, a fragmenting of dense urban culture. It was bucolic but punctuated by tragedy: Jackson Pollock died in a car crash in Springs during the summer of 1956. Pollock and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, were among the earliest artists of the scene to decamp to the Hamptons; they moved to the Springs in 1945.

Alfonso Ossorio, a painter born into a wealthy Filipino family, first encountered and purchased Pollock's work in the late 1940s. The two artists became friends, and Ossorio and his partner Ted Dragon spent the summer of 1949 with Pollock and Krasner. In 1951, Pollock encouraged Ossorio to buy the East Hampton estate, The Creeks, which Ossorio would make his full-time home until his death in 1990.



Alfred Leslie and Franz Kline in Leslie's truck Rosebud, Springs Fireplace Road, East Hampton, 1956. Photo: Tom Clyde. Courtesy of Alfred Leslie.

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In 1957, Ossorio, along with John Little and Elizabeth Parker, decided to bring a major art gallery to the area. The Signa Gallery in East Hampton was far from provincial: its opening attracted about 500 guests, among them Marcel Duchamp. In the first season, more than 30 artists were exhibited, including Franz Kline, James Brooks, Ibram Lassaw, and Charlotte Park. It had a distinctly international character; for a group exhibition in 1958, Michel Tapié chose artists from Europe and Japan, while Signa chose American artists.

Another early gathering place was the home of Leo Castelli and his wife Ileana Sonnabend, on Jericho Lane in East Hampton. Willem and Elaine de Kooning spent two summers in the early 1950s living there. It was during this time that de Kooning was struggling with his Woman series, and he was able to carve out his own studio on the porch of the rambling house. His palette lightened during this intense period of artistic transition; the sea and water seemed to infiltrate the paintings. Soon after, he established his own home in the Springs, and was known for riding around the area on his bicycle. Numerous paintings were named after the landscape: Montauk Highway (1958), Clam Diggers, and Rosy Fingert Dawn at Louse Point, (both 1963).

Charlotte Park and James Brooks first came to the East End after visiting Pollock and Krasner in 1948. They originally lived in Montauk, but after their studio was badly damaged by Hurricane Carol in 1954, they moved to Springs in 1957. Miriam Schapiro and her husband Paul Brach bought a house in 1953 in Wainscott, where they would summer and eventually live full time. Norman Bluhm studied architecture with Mies van der Rohe in Chicago prior to serving in the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II. After the war, Bluhm abandoned his architectural education in favor of studying painting in Florence and Paris. His work in the late 1950s and 60s is characterized by an improvisational approach; he has linked the gesture in his work to a lingering sense of violence that he carried within. Finding his relationship with the New York art world to be fraught and conflicted, Bluhm moved to East Hampton in 1957, the year of his first solo exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery.

Also part of the first wave of artist migrations was the sculptor Costantino Nivola, who was born in Italy and had a background in architectural decoration and graphic design. He and his wife Ruth relocated to a 35 acre property in the Springs, which became another gathering place for artists. One such visitor, Le Corbusier, painted a mural in their living room. Nivola, who made plaster and concrete sculptures, revived the technique of sand casting after observing his children at the beach.

The landscape also deeply impacted the sculptor Philip Pavia, a founder of The Club, the association of artists and writers who met on 8th Street in the late 1940s and 50s. Pavia lived on the North Fork from 1965-69, and in East Hampton from 1979 until his death in 2005. His sculpture of the 1960s reflects the natural landscape; grouped pieces of rough-hewn marble look like found stones rather than perfectly arranged.

This aesthetic, of individuated parts and segments organized across a field, is recurrent in the abstract painting and sculpture on view. It links the early work of Nivola, Marca-Relli, Esteban Vicente, Kyle Morris, Lassaw, and Schapiro. It can be seen as a response to the landscape - where scattered elements punctuate flat expanses. This was the backdrop for the vigorous exchange among artists who defined postwar American painting.

Also on view are documentary photographs by Hans Namuth and Tony Vaccaro, as well as the video produced by Gordon Hyatt, What I Did On My Vacation, which documents a series of Happenings staged by Allan Kaprow across the Hamptons in 1966.

The gallery is open Sunday-Thursday 10-6, Friday-Saturday 10-8.

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