

ARTS

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IMAGE TO ABSTRACTION—

THE FIFTIES

Luise Ross

20TH CENTURY MASTERS

Lafayette Parke

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Gallery exhibitions that make the viewer think about art historical oversimplifications are a rarity. The majority of shows seem designed to further entrench the stereotypes or the easy boundaries of movements and of periods. Perhaps this makes it easier to sell works of the recent and not-so-recent past, or perhaps challenging generalities and preconceptions are considered by the dealers and viewers as best left for museums, lengthy books, and the duller articles in art journals. The Luise Ross gallery, and in particular its group show "Image to Abstraction—the Fifties," has been charting a course that is markedly in contrast to this trend.

American art of the 1950s is, of course, best known as the preserve of Action painting. Just as the late 1970s and early '80s are, and most likely will continue to

be, identified with Neo-Expressionism. Though it is still quite easy to note the great exceptions to the Neo-Expressionist label for those very recent five or six years, mainly because they are so recent and the exceptions are still incontrovertibly visible, the 1950s are quite another matter. First of all, they occurred thirty years back. Second, many of the exceptions to the Action painting label are no longer active or visible or even alive. Yet these exceptions are, in general, the ones that the Luise Ross exhibition addresses.

Emil Bistram's oil *Moon Magic* (1950) is a perfect example of just the sort of 1950s tendency that was then relevant but is certainly now ignored. Bistram's canvas is possessed of a linear quality that is at once biomorphic and post-Cubist. The undulating, concentric lines of the border echo the floating, fractured kidney-shape in which resides a set of interconnected lines that limn a New Mex-

ican village's boxy adobe structures before a series of stylized mountains. The interior lines present a flattened and overlapping geometry that owes much to analytic Cubism. The undulating lines and the broken kidney-shape are such a quintessential product of 1950s design sensibility that it is shocking to confront them both in one piece today.

Nahum Tschacbasov's painting *Iste of Birth* represents another now disregarded trend of 1950s American art, namely a blend of Cubist fracturing with Surrealist dream imagery. In this canvas, a figure with a faceted face lies on its side next to a giant fish inside of which are a small group of people. A road extending to the horizon runs through the center of the grouping. The juxtaposition of these various elements is perplexing and personal, but very much a part of the 1950s art environment.

Matta's bronze *Couple III* (1959) appears to be one of his odd figural abstractions taken from the surface of a canvas or drawing and projected into three dimensions. Like his two-dimensional figure-creatures, this grouping is very active yet undefined. The crude modeling and surface of the various limbs is reminiscent of objects that children playing with clay can produce.

Kimber Smith's painting *Circus Horse* is a very flat, vertical abstraction in grays, flesh tones, and orange. It is intensely muted, both in color and in its forms, which is the result of a seemingly great deal of paint layering. A few muted or partially obscured lines reveal in this 1951 canvas the direction of simplification that his work would eventually take by the 1970s.

Sam Glankoff, who remained virtually unshown throughout his years of active painting, is one of the great surprises of this unusual exhibition. His collage-montage, *Untitled*, is tiny, but surprisingly strong and arresting. It is divided into two vertical sections: one blue, one black. On each are positioned strange alphabetlike markings that seem very 1950s in their chunky geometry and in the simultaneous impression they leave of being both space-age calculations in advanced mathematics and blow-ups of ancient clay tablets.

Peter Agostini, Walter Anderson (a Mississippi painter and recluse), Herman Cherry, Elaine de Kooning, and Jacob Lawrence are but some of the other known and unknown, surviving and unsurvived artists in this exhibition. Perhaps it will be shows such as this, on the gallery or the museum level, that will begin the process of rounding out our view of the 1950s art world in New York. (Luise Ross Gallery, September 22-October 28)

