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Harvey Quaytman Was on His Rocker

With “Harvey Quaytman: Against the Static,” BAMPFA takes on a painter’s painter, an artist who it was impossible to categorize.

By Jonathan Curiel | Nov 28th, 2018



Harvey Quaytman: Harmonica YP, 1972. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. . University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

“A writer’s writer” may be the most bittersweet label you can give someone who aspired to climb the ranks of the profession. It means they were never really popular, never really embraced by the public, never really sold a lot of books. Henry Miller was a successful author, but Henry Green was a writer’s writer. So it is in the art world, too, which is full of artists whom other artists admire — but who never got extended public attention or acclaim.

Harvey Quaytman, anyone?

Quaytman, who lived from 1937 to 2002, made paintings that are visually striking rabbit holes. Yes, you can glimpse a Harvey Quaytman work and walk away — but good luck, because Quaytman played with color, played with texture, and, hell, played with art-world conventions. The result is oddly shaped canvases, original colors that include unique bronzes and blues that collided together and also went their own way, and a playfulness that connected seemingly strange titles with visions of paint that were like abstract landscapes into the soul.

Yes, Quaytman was a kind of abstract painter, but he delved into so many other genres that he was hard to classify — which is one reason the art world didn't latch on to him in a more profound way.

“He doesn't fit neatly within a clean category,” BAMPFA curator **Apsara DiQuinzio** tells *SF Weekly*. “He's not a minimalist, he's not a post-minimalist, he's not an abstract expressionist, he's not a constructivist. He's kind of at the intersection of all those things, but he wasn't known for being a part of any of those movements. He was his own thing. And he was always reinventing his forms and shapes.”

BAMPFA and DiQuinzio are trying to right what they say was a big wrong. And in “**Harvey Quaytman: Against the Static**,” which opened in October, we see Quaytman's full output, including his 1970s “rocker” paintings — many of which are canvases with curved bottoms that rest on flat bases. The bases' raised ends connect to the ends of the canvases' curved bottoms — producing a shape resembling a rocking chair. But Quaytman's shapes, DiQuinzio says, may also be referencing something more esoteric: Islamic calligraphy — specifically, Kufic lettering, which originated in Iraq more than 1,300 years ago, and produced fantastical, elongated shapes that non-Muslim artists and designers have gravitated toward for generations. Even anti-Muslim Crusaders in France loved Kufic lettering, exemplified by the wooden door of the giant 12th-century cathedral in the town of Le Puy-en-Velay, which features Kufic lettering around its perimeter.

Quaytman collected Islamic calligraphy, as did his then-partner, the artist Frances Barth, whose master's thesis at Hunter College was on Henri Matisse and Islamic art. One of Quaytman's rocker paintings, a 1970s work called *Kufikind*, makes explicit his Kufic sensibilities. But Quaytman's rocker shapes are really a warm-up act for the paintings' central appeal: their color spectrums.

Quaytman was a kind of color scientist, experimenting with pigments right on the canvas after applying an adhesive that allowed for quicker painting of layers. In his 1970 rocker work called ***A Street Called Straight***, which is 11 feet wide, Quaytman created hazy sheets of purples and yellows, interspersing the scene with splotches that resemble giant microscopic matter. The painting's long blue base, and the air pockets between the base and the canvas' curved bottom, make *A Street Called Straight* almost sculptural. Who else was doing this mix of genres in the early 1970s? Quaytman made more than 30 rocker paintings, including the olive-yellow ***Araras***, the blue-jean-colored ***Harmonica YP***, and the dark-blue-streaked ***The Consolation of Logic***, whose brush-stroked surfaces bubble up and crack in places — as if they had volatile scarring that Quaytman deliberately left in.

Quaytman's rocker paintings should have been enough to burnish his reputation over the long-term, but in the 1980s and '90s, he turned to another style that produced stunning work: “cruciform paintings.” Each acrylic work had a cross, but instead of being religious, they were piercing studies in geometric abstraction — saturated with intense colors that Quaytman originated. In two untitled works from 1987, Quaytman incorporates blacks, charcoals, and whites to make crosses that seem to live in an infinite space. They're almost celestial, even existential — and beautifully so. The rust colors and layers he made for his cross paintings, as for *Geometry of Desire* and *Wanderer*, are by themselves an immersive sight: shadowy and shady, tinted and textured. Throughout its surface, each bronze cross fades in and out of a spectrum of bronze, which contrasts with the steadier colors around it. The exhibit's accompanying catalogue explains Quaytman's ability to produce his one-of-a-kind colors, and it really comes down to this: Quaytman let his

curiosity drive his search for colors and his search for meaning. It's these searches that are there in his art, waiting for anyone who makes the time to see Quaytman's paintings up close.

Quaytman exhibited many times in his lifetime, both in the United States and abroad, including an exhibit at San Francisco's Haines Gallery in 1995 and a survey in 1999 at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in his native New York. But "Harvey Quaytman: Against the Static" is the artist's first comprehensive retrospective, the result of DiQuinzio's recognition that Quaytman needed an overview that connected many of his works in one space. It all started around 2009, when DiQuinzio visited the New York studio of **R.H. Quaytman**, Harvey's daughter and an acclaimed artist in her own right. She happened to have some of her dad's small cruciform paintings there.

"That was the first time that I learned about her father's work," DiQuinzio says.

DiQuinzio was then with SFMOMA, and when she moved to BAMPFA in 2012, she saw Quaytman's work again, this time in the museum's collection. Among the paintings was *A Street Called Straight*, which she says "caught her off guard since that's not a shape you typically see in painting. Its eccentricity was appealing to me, and the way he used the pigment. That painting is almost like a sky." DiQuinzio immediately put *A Street Called Straight* in a 2014 exhibit, "Color Shift," that explored many artists' use of color. This earlier exhibit coincided with Phaidon's 2014 publication *Harvey Quaytman* — the first monograph to explore the artist's work from start to finish. Four years later, DiQuinzio has finally actualized "Harvey Quaytman: Against the Static."

Quaytman's earliest work in the exhibit, from the early 1960s, are derivative of **Willem de Kooning** and **Arshile Gorky**, but Quaytman found his way to uniqueness, not unlike how saxophonist John Coltrane found his way after doing standards and then exploding onto the jazz scene with records like *A Love Supreme* that had no parallel. Like Coltrane, Quaytman had distinct artistic periods — and some art-goers will love, say, the cruciform paintings but not the rocker paintings.

History catches up to artists of all kinds. Witness the posthumous success of singer **Nick Drake**, who died in 1974 at age 26, when he was well known among other British musicians but had sold very few records. The first sentence of BAMPFA's accompanying catalogue is this from Lawrence Rinder, the museum's director and chief curator: "Harvey Quaytman was an artist's artist." Here's an example of what Rinder means: Artist Philip Guston, a seminal figure in 20th-century art, whose work was collected and catalogued early in his career, called Quaytman one of his favorite artists. Guston died in 1980.

"Philip Guston was talking to [New York art dealer] David McKee, who represented both Guston and Harvey Quaytman, and they were talking about artists in the gallery," DiQuinzio says, "and Guston said, 'Well, I like Frank Stella and Harvey Quaytman because I don't understand them.' "

More people are beginning to understand Quaytman now. How much BAMPFA's exhibit will propel or even popularize Quaytman's work is an open question. But as DiQuinzio says, the exhibit "helps give him his due."

"Harvey Quaytman: Against the Static," through Jan. 27, 2019, at BAMPFA, 2155 Center St., Berkeley.