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# Harvey Quaytman: *Against the Static*

by David Carrier | December 11, 2018

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Harvey Quaytman, *Little Egypt*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 49 1/4 x 113 1/2 inches. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Gift of David and Renee Conforte McKee (Class of 1962)

This, the first museum retrospective devoted to the New York painter Harvey Quaytman (1937 – 2002), includes more than seventy works, many of them large. He was certainly always well known, at least in New York, in part thanks to the persistent advocacy of his long time dealer, David McKee. Now a bountiful selection of art from his entire long career provides a splendid opportunity to understand his entire development. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, with essays

by artists and critics; by a symposium moderated by Jennifer Gross in which I participated with Apsara DiQuinzio, who curated the exhibition; the art historian Suzanne Hudson; and Quaytman's daughter R. H. Quaytman, who also is a very well known painter. My account draws on all of these materials and, also, on the marvelous informal discussions prompted by the exhibition.



Harvey Quaytman, *Studio Still Life (London)*, 1962. Oil on canvas; 31 × 31 inches. Collection of Renee and David McKee.

Quaytman lived in an era when painting—especially abstract painting—was under siege in the New York art world. And so it's most important to learn how a very gifted, totally willful man who always was an abstract painter, responded. The earliest painting in this exhibition, *Studio Still Life (London)* (1962) shows Quaytman, already a skilled artist, very much under the spell of Willem de Kooning's fleshy colors and biomorphic drawing. But then, rather quickly, he finds himself. He worked with shaped canvases and also drawings of these shapes. *Jake's Gray* (1969), a large major early work juxtaposes the elegant curve (he was fascinated by Ingres) against a support, which holds it in place. Quaytman never theorized—he didn't write manifestoes but was still a bookish person and a great reader of literature—he was a completely intuitive artist. It's revealing that he loved making pre-World War I model airplanes, collecting Islamic calligraphy, and playing the piano. And that he admired the bentwood furniture of Michael Thonet, a Biedermeier-period designer whose chairs has been shown at MoMA.



Harvey Quaytman, *Kingston*, 1973. Acrylic and pigment on canvas; 104 3/4 × 107 1/4 inches. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of funds from the Bockley Brothers Family Fund of The Minneapolis Foundation in memory of Paul and Marilyn Bockley.

Quaytman didn't work in series but, looking at this show, it's possible to find a certain order—a logic if you will—to his development. Early on he did highly original two part pictures—*Little Egypt* (1969) is one, *A Street Called Straight* (1970) is another—in which one irregularly shaped panel supports a curve or a curved panel. Some abstract painters deal with shape, while others are concerned with color. Quaytman wanted to do both, all at once in each picture. In his “rocker” works, the support below, like the curved base of a rocking chair, supports the form above, as if it was the person sitting in the rocking chair. (When his daughter Rebecca was young, he built a swing for her in his studio; there's a photograph of it in the catalogue.) Thus in *Kingston* (1973), which has a blue base and a blue shaped canvas, that large upper panel rests on the narrow base. And sometimes, *Araras* (1973) is an example, the two parts of the rocker have different colors—a pink base, and a yellowish upper panel. Then after what seems a transition period, in which he painted shaped canvases like *WHrondo* (1981), which is a near square with the bottom right edge extended beyond the base line, Quaytman did cruciforms. Some, like *Blue Line* (1986), were squares; others, *Span* (1991) were black and red with rust, is a fine example, have irregular shapes. And late in his career he painted large, very thin late cruciforms—*Half and Half* (1997) is a great one. For him, the equilateral cross was a purely structural form. As Leo Steinberg wrote, in a marvelous tribute to Quaytman's 1998 show at McKee Gallery, for him the cross is not an emblem: “On the contrary: its intersecting coordinates, the arms variously challenged and fortified, seemed to withstand differing weights—immovable limits to match irresistible pressures.” How astonishing, Steinberg adds, “to see the most familiar of signs de-semanticized, de-centered, de-Christianized, and emancipated to exercise its own territorial power.”



Harvey Quaytman, *Half and Half*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 108 1/2 × 108 1/2 inches. Harvey Quaytman Trust.

The title of this exhibition, *Against the Static*, is a note perfect characterization of this body of art. Keeping the viewer's eyes moving, never simply repeating, Quaytman develops his basic concerns with color and shape, playing them against each other in very original, highly unpredictable ways. In deconstructing the traditional rectangular-shaped easel picture, his shaped canvases never seem to be fragments. Rather often, one has the sense that the picture we actually see is only the portion of a harmonious larger composition, extending beyond the frame. In *Dumka* (1987), for example, behind the rust colored cruciform we see a black rectangle shifted leftwards, as if the full picture extended in that direction. Many of these later works are colored with iron fillings, sprayed with water to rust, placed on the surface. What defines an aesthete, I would argue, is the desire and ability to look at the world as if it were a work of art. Figurative art does this when it depicts an illusionistic space, which seemingly runs beyond the picture frame. Or when real scenes call up reminiscence of depicted places, as happens with Canaletto's images of Venice or Camille Pissarro's pictures of Paris. And Quaytman achieves the same effect by composing his hard edge abstractions—containers for colors—in shapes that appear to go beyond the physical boundaries of his works.