

VAN DOREN
WAXTER

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

James Brooks: *Rendez-vous Paintings 1972–1983*

By Robert C. Morgan | July/August 2022



Installation view: *James Brooks: Rendez-vous Paintings 1972-1983*, Van Doren Waxter, New York, 2022. Courtesy Van Doren Waxter.

Although I have encountered the paintings of James Brooks sporadically in various group exhibitions focused on Abstract Expressionism, it has been relatively rare to encounter his works shown together in a context all their own. As such, the collection of works included in the current exhibition from the 1970s and early eighties suggest a somewhat timely occasion, providing the uncommon opportunity to understand Brooks solely through his own work and ideas.



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There is no doubt that Brooks was friendly with artists such as Bradley Walker Tomlin, Philip Guston, and the Pollocks, with whom he frequently shared visits at his Montauk and 8th Street studios. In fact, the 8th Street studio previously belonged to Pollock prior to the latter's move to Long Island. Given my curiosity in viewing this seemingly privileged exhibition, Brooks's visual connection with these artists appears evident. Their influence, however, is a fact that the artist himself has acknowledged, and to which reviews of his paintings have often given a great deal of attention. But Brooks was always careful to work in accordance with his own point of view. This is ultimately made clear in the exhibition of his "Rendez-vous Paintings," virtually all of which were painted in acrylic, consistently employing an absorbent Bennis cloth with which he would apply paint from the backside to the front, often working directly on the floor.

There is a quality in Brooks's work that has intrigued my visual sense over the years. Some have referred to the spatial relationships resulting from the relative flatness of his forms, a quality we see in paintings such as *Irro* (1982), *Raritan* (1980), and two earlier paintings, *Jorah* (1976) and *Leen* (1974). To some extent, this primary aspect in his work was shared with Brooks's wife, the painter Charlotte Park. Even so, it is difficult to calculate in any concrete way what gives these paintings their heartening presence. Speaking to this ambiguity in 1952, more than twenty years earlier, for the *Contemporary American Painting* show at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Brooks wrote: "My paintings start with a complication on the canvas surface, done with as much spontaneity and as little memory as possible."



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This presumed absence of memory would appear to function in a beneficial way. Clearly, the consistency of form and color found in the ten paintings on view at Van Doren Waxter suggest an inherent, immanent style despite their clearly refined alterations. It occurred to me that the two largest paintings in this exhibition, *Yarboro* (1972) and *Leen*, hold nearly the same dimensions. While the earlier is painted two-thirds white and one-third blue, black, and red, the latter is virtually covered in deep ultramarine with a biomorphic shape on the far left edge and a white “feather” floating back towards it from the right. As different as they might appear, the sensibility in each of these paintings suggests an organic grace and painterly incisiveness that remains prevalent throughout. Another curious but characteristically sharp inclusion in this exhibition is a smoothly articulated 30-by-30-inch painting breached on a diagonal composition, as if a white curtain were dropped from the upper right corner. Titled *Falafia* (1974), this relentless painting extends beyond itself as if to conceal a gesture of gratuitous spatiality.

There is no rational basis for any of these paintings other than the sensibility that carries them forward, one to another, largely by way of the unconscious. Ruthless, Brooks appears to have found a method by which to dispel any evidence of a theory. The object was to feel his paintings happening in the present tense. Brooks made every attempt to ignore—insofar as possible—labels from critics or from other artists. As far as we know, “Rendez-vous Paintings” was his title for a particular group of paintings that belonged to no one other than himself. No paradigms were necessary. It was all about wanting to paint—on his own terms