

VAN DOREN WAXTER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

James Brooks: Familiar World 1942 – 1982 May 3 – June 23, 2017



James Brooks, *Aamo*, 1981. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 20 x 26 inches (50.8 x 66 cm).

But I think my whole tendency has been away from a fast moving line either violent or lyrical into something that is slower and denser and more wandering and unknowing

— James Brooks

Van Doren Waxter is pleased to present *James Brooks: Familiar World 1942 – 1982*, an exhibition of small-scale paintings by the masterful Abstract Expressionist James Brooks. On view from May 3 through June 23, 2017, this historic survey traces the evolution of the artist's career over a period spanning four decades.

James Brooks (1906–1992) began his career as an artist during the Great Depression, moving to New York City in 1926, where he worked as a muralist under the Works Progress Administration and studied representational painting at the Art Students League. His career as an artist was briefly disrupted when he was drafted to serve in the United States Army as an Art Correspondent in the Middle East in 1942. Brooks' time in the Middle East directly coincided with the rise of Abstract Expressionism as an established movement in the United States. Upon returning to New York in 1945, Brooks turned away from representational painting toward abstraction, drawing inspiration from his friendships with peers such as Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

During the mid-1940s, Brooks' work was largely influenced by the synthetic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, which is most apparent in the composition of his early paintings, such as *Bad Intentions* (c. 1942-43) and *Christmas Fantasy* (1946). Over time Brooks became increasingly inspired by the Surrealists, in particular their preoccupation with using art as a

means of accessing the unconscious. While paintings such as *Z* (1954) may suggest to the viewer landscapes or other natural forms, Brooks claimed, “It never occurs to me in painting that I am taking either from nature or manufacture; everything pools into one source, I suppose, and is unconsciously drawn on.”¹

Popularly known for his restrained approach to creating rhythmic, Abstract Expressionist paintings, Brooks’ most inventive practice developed out of a chance discovery, when he accidentally dripped paint onto the reverse of an absorbent Bemis cloth to discover fragmentary forms had seeped through on the front. Finding these stains to be more visually compelling than what was originally painted on the front, Brooks would employ this method throughout the his career, applying paint onto the reverse of absorbent cloth and squeegeeing the paint with cardboard.

Utilizing similar working methods to those of his contemporaries—such as the spontaneous drip paintings of Pollock—Brooks adapted his process through a range of more mannered techniques. Rather than dripping paint directly onto an entire canvas in the manner of Pollock, Brooks would sparingly drip paint onto only a small region of the canvas, at times vertically rotating the canvas to force drips in different directions. In works such as *Aamo* (1981), he used brush strokes to create the illusion of drips so convincingly that it is difficult to distinguish between the real drip and the artificial. Navigating these two extremes—the semblance of instantaneous gesture on one hand and a controlled mediation of materials on the other—Brooks’ work is entirely distinct from that of the other Abstract Expressionists.

James Brooks: Familiar World 1942 – 1982 presents a unique view into the history of Abstract Expressionism through the vantage point of this crucial figure.

About the artist

James Brooks was born in St. Louis, MO in 1906. He studied art at the Southern Methodist University from 1923-25. In 1926, Brooks moved to New York City, where he studied at the Art Students League with Kimmon Nicolaidis and Boardman Robinson. Brooks married Mary MacDonald (1938-42). He served in the United States Army in the Middle East as an Art Correspondent, with headquarters in Cairo and traveled in North Africa, Palestine, and Egypt (1942-45). He married the artist Charlotte Park in 1947. James Brooks died in East Hampton, NY in 1992.

Museum exhibitions include *James Brooks at the Dallas Museum of Art: A Celebration*, Dallas, TX (2006); *Rediscovering James Brooks: WPA Murals & Other Figural Works*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY (1997); *James Brooks: A Retrospective*, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME (1983); and *James Brooks Retrospective*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1963), traveled to Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Washington Gallery of Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.; University of California Art Galleries, Los Angeles, CA. Selected museum collections include Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Contact Information

23 East 73rd Street
New York, NY 10021
Tel: 212-445-0444

¹ Irving H. Sandler. “James Brooks and the Abstract Inscape,” *Art News*, vol. 61 (February 1963), p. 63