

# HOLLIS TAGGART

## **Hollis Taggart to Open Survey of Artist Michael West, Positioning Her Work Anew Within the Trajectory of Abstract Expressionism**

**On View November 7 – December 21, 2019  
Opening Reception November 7, from 6:00 – 8:00 PM**

On November 7, Hollis Taggart will open a survey of Abstract Expressionist painter Michael West (1908-1991), marking the first solo presentation of the artist's work since the gallery took on exclusive representation of her estate earlier this year. Michael West—born Corinne Michelle West—is recognized by art historians as a vocal and active participant in the development of Abstract Expressionism, bringing a highly developed personal philosophy and vision to her work. Despite her substantive participation in the dialogues and artistic innovations that shaped the movement, West is best remembered for her intense personal relationship with artist Arshile Gorky—her own narrative obscured by the sexism of the period and subsequent passage of time.

In line with recent renewed investigations of the critical contributions of female artists within the art historical canon, Hollis Taggart's upcoming survey of West's work aims to rectify the omission of her practice within our understanding of Abstract Expressionism. This follows the gallery's work in bringing to light and deepening scholarship on other 20<sup>th</sup> century women artists, including Audrey Flack, Grace Hartigan, Kay Sage, and Idelle Weber, among others. The exhibition, *Space Poetry: The Action Paintings of Michael West*, will feature a selection of paintings and drawings that spans the breadth of West's production, from the early 1940s through the 1980s. It is accompanied by an essay exploring the trajectory of West's practice, written by art historian Ellen G. Landau. *Space Poetry* will be on view at the gallery's W. 26<sup>th</sup> Street location through December 21, 2019.

Born in Chicago and raised in Ohio, West moved to New York in 1932, where she became a member of Hans Hofmann's first class at the Art Students League. Hoffman's teachings on the "inner eye" and emphasis on capturing the essence of things would serve as a fundamental tenet of West's work throughout her career. Shortly thereafter, in 1935, she was introduced to Arshile Gorky, with whom she developed a relationship that would last for nearly a decade. Her visits to Gorky's studio would also prove essential to West's development of her own stylistic approach. Her prolific writings on their discussions of art as well as their correspondence—which is retained in part in her estate—captured the philosophical underpinnings of her work, providing essential context for the re-examination of her career.

Although Gorky tried to convince West to marry him, she declined, citing her drive and desire for a career of her own. In 1939, West, who was determined to find artistic success despite her gender, began using the masculine name, Mikael West, later shifting to Michael West and joining other female Abstract Expressionists like George (Grace) Hartigan and Lee (Lenore) Krasner. While West had taken to heart Hofmann's commitment to drawing out the internal spirituality of external physical elements, her earlier works, represented in the exhibition by *Egian Girl* (1942), retained the color and form developed by the earlier generation of Cubist artists, such as Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris.

In the mid 1940s, several important threads within West's learnings and experimentations coalesced into what would become the vision and approach that would guide her work from the next several decades. At this time, West began to experiment more with free-form gesture, taking cues from the

# HOLLIS TAGGART

all-over paintings of Jackson Pollock and developing entirely abstract compositions of her own. An avid reader throughout her life, West, concurrently became engaged with *Art and Poetry*, a book by French philosopher Jacques Maritain, which evoked for West new considerations of art, nature, and spirituality. These formal and philosophical elements—supported by her time under Hofmann’s tutelage— then further fused with her belief in the importance of the contemporary moment to the development and experience of art. She was deeply connected to current events and wrote about the world’s happenings extensively in personal journals.

Her examination of the relationships between global events, the individual, and creative process yielded a personal philosophy, which she referred to as the “new mysticism.” She penned several essays on the subject in the 1940s, including a text titled, “The New Mysticism in Painting”—making her a rare example of a woman writing on the philosophy of art during the ascendance of Abstract Expressionism. Her works, then, from the mid 1940s through the 1950s were guided by this vision and were characterized in turn by both vibrant, arabesque-ing lines and sharp and aggressive brushstrokes. *Space Poetry* will feature a wide selection of paintings as well as drawings from this particularly fertile and productive period in West’s career, capturing her stylistic evolution and the power held within her assertive gestures.

As her style developed further, she was rewarded with solo exhibitions of her work at Manhattan’s Uptown Galleries in 1957 and at DC’s Domino Gallery in 1958. Reviews of these exhibitions in *Arts Digest*, *Times Herald*, and the *Washington Post* spoke to the vibrancy, vitality, and strength of West’s work and actively positioned her alongside some of the greatest artists of the period. The relationship between life and spirit continued to occupy West’s works through the remainder of her career, and she participated in a wide array of group and solo exhibitions. Despite the initial outpouring of interest and critical support from the press, though, West would not gain much further notoriety or scholarly assessment during her life.

In 1976, West suffered a stroke, and while she continued to paint until her death in 1991, she mostly withdrew from the art world, exhibiting rarely. *Space Poetry* will also include several works from this late period in West’s life, engaging audiences with the full arc of her practice. Five years after her death, the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center mounted an acclaimed retrospective of the West’s work, titled *Michael West: Painter-Poet*. With the upcoming exhibition, Hollis Taggart further reveals the intricacy and depth of West’s work, providing audiences a new opportunity to connect with West’s singular approach and putting forward another female voice that should be considered within the dialogue of Abstract Expressionism and the modern and contemporary art movements that have since followed.

## **About Hollis Taggart**

Founded in 1979, Hollis Taggart presents significant works of American art, showcasing the trajectory of American art movements from the Hudson River School to American Modernism and the Post-War and Contemporary eras. Its program is characterized by a deep commitment to scholarship and bringing to the fore the work of under-recognized artists. The gallery has sponsored several catalogue raisonné projects, most recently for the American Surrealist artist Kay Sage, and has been instrumental in advancing knowledge of such compelling artists as Alfred Maurer, Arthur B. Carles, and more recently, Theodoros Stamos, Marjorie Strider and Michael (Corinne) West. In the summer of 2019, the gallery announced the formal expansion of its primary market business and focus on the presentation of contemporary work, operating under Hollis Taggart, Contemporary. The

# HOLLIS TAGGART

gallery's flagship space is located on W. 26th Street and its contemporary division is based at secondary location on W. 25th Street. The gallery also has a private viewing and storage facility in the neighborhood. With 40 years of experience, Hollis Taggart is widely recognized by collectors and curators for its leadership, expertise, and openness, on matters of art history, and market trends and opportunities.

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