

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

PARIS - BRUXELLES

ROGER-EDGAR GILLET

June 12 - July 24, 2021

3, rue du Cloître Saint-Merri, 75004 - Paris



Roger-Edgar Gillet
La Grande fête chez Pollak, 1968
Oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm
Courtesy of the Fonds Roger-Edgar Gillet and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to present Roger-Edgar Gillet's work for the first time. The artist (1924-2004), a painter of the Second School of Paris, followed a singular trajectory, embracing, at first, the lyrical abstraction of the 1950s, before turning to an expressionistic figuration akin to that of Eugène Leroy, Jean Fautrier, Paul Rebeyrolle and Zoran Mušič. An exhibition of Roger-Edgar Gillet will take place in parallel at rodolphe janssen in Brussels.

In collaboration with the Estate, the exhibition at Galerie Nathalie Obadia presents an emblematic group of Roger-Edgar Gillet's figurative paintings from the early 1960s all the way through to his mature, late 1990s works. Attesting to his absolute engagement with painting, this exhibition sheds light on an artist who was on the fringes of the avant-garde and who left a very personal mark on the postwar artistic landscape.

A graduate of the Ecole Boule, Roger-Edgar Gillet first worked as a decorator before dedicating himself to his painting practice, which he pursued for half a century between Paris, Sens and the region of Saint-Malo. After meeting critics Charles Estienne and Michel Tapié, theoretician of informal art, the artist turned to abstraction in the early 1950s, a period of time when the movement was booming. His work was exhibited by Galerie Evrard in Lille, alongside paintings by Georges Mathieu, in 1952; and he was also given his first solo exhibition at Galerie Craven in Paris, in 1953. The following year, Roger-Edgar Gillet was awarded the Fénéon Prize, followed by the Catherwood Prize in 1955, which gave him the opportunity to spend several months exploring the United States and visiting many of the great American collections. His encounter with El Greco, by way of the gaze of *Cardinal Fernando Niño de Guevara* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, left him deeply moved and played a decisive role in his shift toward a figurative art, where portrait took center stage. At the turn of the 1960s, knowing he was ready to move away from abstraction, the artist progressively embarked on this new aesthetic adventure with an open mind that was untethered to the dictates of fashion. After having shown for many years at Galerie de France, which also represented Hans Hartung, Pignon, Alechinsky or even Maryan, he joined Galerie Ariel, founded by art dealer Jean Pollak who believed wholeheartedly in his work and represented him exclusively as of 1964.

*"Everything happens as though the artist's hand dreamed of a world on the verge of erasing itself with all its comings and goings."** Even though Roger-Edgar Gillet turned toward figuration with the desire to "reconnect with the gaze," at first glance, a number of his portraits seem to be deprived of this, much like many of his contemporaries ("the gaze enters the bodies"). Each work sheds light on the precise moment when the subject emerges or dissipates, as is evident in the 1991 portrait where three knife slashes erase a face—which prompted the artist, who had discovered Francis Bacon in the 1960s, to say that he "tyrannized

the portrait." A fine tension between abstraction and figuration is at play in his work, through the thick pictorial matter from which silhouettes emerge and a scene materializes. In a similar spirit to Eugène Leroy, Roger-Edgar Gillet shows a primordial rapport with the painterly gesture, which, from inert matter, draws out the representation. Treated expressionistically, the paint takes on the appearance of a paste, molded, squashed, worked, mistreated with an assuredness that reveals the essence. There is also a question of light, which, in a muted palette of natural hues, ochres, browns, burnt umber, blond, beige, emerges from the figures that detach themselves from the depths of a dark background in a nod to Flemish primitives, or, conversely, plunges these silhouettes into shadow with a chiaroscuro that recalls Jean Fautrier's work. This indecision of the line, in its struggle with the primordial amorphousness, is echoed also in Georg Baselitz's famous metaphysical nudes.

*"A carnivalesque parade, at once tragic and farcical, of figures whose unlikely appearances remain true to reality, bursts forth from the body of the paint, like strange tumors."***

An ironic and biting vision of humanity emanates from this powerful germination, bringing to mind Daumier's caricatures and study of behaviors, as well as Belgian painter and printmaker James Ensor's disquieting crowds. Distant descendants of Dutch group portraits, Roger-Edgar Gillet's irreverent compositions feature bigots (1975-1976), church folk, magistrates performing their duties (1971-1981), "Philosophers" and a whole gallery of characters who weave the framework for a type of human comedy. The somber and caustic mood of a number of these canvases reveals an assumed affiliation with Francisco Goya and, in particular, with his Black Paintings, part nightmare, part satirical visions of religion and society: we find the same twisted, amassed, grotesque faces in a chromatic palette that brings side by side darkness and light. Bursting forth from the impastos, the human figure, with its substantial deformations or malformations, resembles a bizarre bestiary, which is not surprising when we know that the artist's first attempt at figuration was imaginary animals that looked like insects, coleoptera.



Roger-Edgar Gillet
Les Apôtres, Vers 1998
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 116 cm
 Courtesy of the Fonds Roger-Edgar Gillet and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

Western painting permeates Roger-Edgar Gillet's work more or less consciously. In fact, very soon after his return to figuration, it is through religious subjects that the artist pays tribute to old masters, like Titian, whose work he examined attentively. The canonical scenes, crucifixions, entombments, punctuate his pictorial production, marked in 1963 by a very large *Last Supper* for which the first portraits of the Apostles served as preliminary studies. Certain profane themes, such as *La Piscine* (1970), appropriate, with a certain dose of humor, classical masterpieces, such as, in this case, Ingres's *Turkish Bath*. The world of live spectacle is the subject of numerous paintings and, for once, of an approving gaze, echoing, here too, a long pictorial tradition.

Roger-Edgar Gillet digs into the material, scrutinizes and strips man naked with a caustic eye. And so he always returns to deep nature, with regards to painting, gesture and material. Following a trajectory that summarizes and interrogates a whole era, the work of Roger-Edgar Gillet is there, beyond the borders separating abstract from figurative, classic from modern, proposing *"a total existential experience of painting."****

* Anne Tronche, *R.E. Gillet*, Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris, 1987

** *idem*

*** Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, *R.E. Gillet*, Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris, 1987

Born in 1924, in Paris, Roger-Edgar Gillet lived between Paris, Sens and the region of Saint-Malo, where he died in 2004.

A graduate of the Ecole Boule and student of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Roger-Edgar Gillet first worked as a decorator, before dedicating himself to painting. Soon championed by Michel Tapié and Charles Estienne, he was part of the generation of postwar French painters, the Second School of Paris specifically, and set himself apart with his practice, which went from lyrical abstraction to expressionist figuration in the vein of Jean Fautrier, Paul Rebeyrolle and Jean Dubuffet.

From 1951 to 1957, Roger-Edgar Gillet participated in numerous exhibitions held at historic galleries such as Craven, Claude Bernard, Rodolphe Stadler and Jeanne Bucher, until he joined Galerie de France who represented him from 1956 to 1963; then Galerie Ariel, helmed by art dealer Jean Pollak, from 1964 to 2002, where he was given 18 solo exhibitions.

The artist also collaborated on a regular basis with Stéphane Janssen Gallery in Brussels from 1967, and with many foreign galleries including Lorenzelli Arte in Italy and Galerie Nova Spectra in The Hague. Roger-Edgar Gillet also participated in several group exhibitions of artists from the Parisian scene at the Redfern Gallery in London, at Marlborough-Gerson Gallery in New York, and even at the Bussola Gallery in Milan.

In addition, Roger-Edgar Gillet was the subject of important institutional shows, in France and abroad: *Gillet-Dodeigne* at the Musée Galliera (1971, Paris), *Rétrospective* at the CNAP (1987, Paris), *La Marche des oubliés* at the Centre d'art contemporain of Saint-Priest (1989), *Roger-Edgar Gillet, Cinquante ans de peinture* at the Musée du Palais Synodal (1999, Sens), *Je Garderai un Excellent Souvenir de vous !* at the Musée Estrine (2005, Saint-Rémy de Provence), *Un Regard* at the Centre d'art contemporain of the Parc Caillebotte (2009, Yerres), *Exercices de survie, oeuvres graphiques* at the Musée du Mont de Piété (2017, Bergues); and in the United States, *March of the Forgotten* at the museum of the University of Oklahoma and *Stéphane Janssen Collection* at the Scottsdale Art Center (1990).

The artist was also included in important group exhibitions such as: *10 ans d'art français* at the Musée de Grenoble in 1956; *Les uns par les autres* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille in 1979; *Aspect de la peinture contemporaine 1945-1983* at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Troyes; *Face à face, tête à tête* at the Musée Ingres in Montauban in 2004; *L'Envolée Lyrique, Paris 1945-1956* at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris; *Salah Stétié et les peintres* at the Musée Paul Valéry in Sète in 2012; and, abroad, in numerous exhibitions at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, including *The New Expressionists* in 1985.

More recently, Roger-Edgar Gillet's work was presented in the exhibitions *Construire une collection* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes, *De Tíépolo à Richter* at the Art and History Museum in Brussels in 2018, and *Acquisitions récentes du cabinet d'art graphique* in 2018 and *Galleries du XXe siècle* in 2019 at the Centre Pompidou.

Roger-Edgar Gillet was also the recipient of the 1954 Prix Fénéon and the 1955 Catherwood Prize.

His work is held in major public collections: in France, at the Musée National d'Art Moderne – Centre Pompidou, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Centre National des Arts Plastiques (Paris), the Musées des Beaux-Arts of Lyon, Rennes, and Rouen and the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, the Musée de Sens, the Musée Estrine (Saint-Rémy de Provence), the Musée Paul Valéry (Sète), the LAAC Musées de Dunkerque; in Denmark, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Humlebaek); in Norway, at the Oslo Museum (Oslo); in Belgium, at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts (Brussels), the SMAK City Museum for Contemporary Art (Ghent), the King Baudouin Foundation, Neyrinck Collection (Mons); and in Brazil, at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo.

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