

Ad Reinhardt

November 1–December 16, 2023
34 East 69th Street, New York



Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, c. 1940. © Anna Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2023. Courtesy David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of work from the 1940s by Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967) at the gallery's East 69th Street location in New York. Organized in collaboration with the Ad Reinhardt Foundation, this will be the third solo exhibition of Reinhardt's work at David Zwirner, following major presentations of his black paintings in 2013 and his blue paintings in 2017.

Reinhardt charted a unique and radically experimental path in his art during the 1940s, thrusting himself, from the outset of the decade, into the project of completely non-objective painting. While many of his contemporaries treated the canvas as a stage for depicting archetypal forms, mythic iconography, and the representation of the subconscious, Reinhardt pursued and achieved a degree of directness in his exploration of color, line, and form that would not be matched by his fellow American abstractionists until the end of the decade. As art historian Yve-Alain Bois notes: "Reinhardt was perhaps the only American artist in the forties ... to understand what the real issues were at the time. In this sense ... he was already (even before the fifties) an artist of the sixties."¹

Among the works in this presentation are collages and gouaches from the early 1940s that signal Reinhardt's ambitious progression and reaction against geometric order, which might surprise viewers primarily familiar with the artist's later work. Writing in 1960, art historian Martin James noted of this period: "The early 'forties see a destruction or 'breaking up' of the geometry.... Anything chaotic or phantasmagoric in this Surrealist-influenced moment remains imageless, and has to do with the naturalism of ambiguous, shredded textures.... Works of 1940–1941 clearly reveal the over-all quality that was to become a stylistic feature later in the decade, and Reinhardt may well claim to have been its

¹ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost," *Ad Reinhardt*. Exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 17.

earliest practitioner in its sheerly abstract form.”² The vibrant arabesques and expressive calligraphic lines of Reinhardt’s work from later in the 1940s is exemplified by the artist’s seminal 1946 canvases *Painting* and *No. 4*. Reinhardt’s gesturalism in these works is sensitively balanced by his sense of structure and the richness of his palette, which includes surprising incidents and applications of pink, teal, royal blue, and yellow.

This exhibition underscores the range of Reinhardt’s colorism during the 1940s. The assertive reds in *Gouache Painting* (1949), for example, are sensitively counterbalanced by grayish blues and yellow-greens, making the contrast between the high-keyed warm tones and the cooler shades a study in the visual effect of complementary color placement. This work also sees Reinhardt shifting from the use of calligraphic and expressive lines and brushwork to deploying a loose matrix of overlapping and interlocking rectangular “brick” forms, which he would continue to develop into the early 1950s. Signaling future directions in his art, *Abstract Painting* (1948), Reinhardt’s first all-black painting—and likely the first all-black painting made in the United States—shows the artist’s ability, several years before his well-known series of black paintings, to visually articulate the subtle differences in the luminosity and sheen of oil paint when applied at various levels of density.

Also on view is a seminal modular-grid painting from 1940, a work that precedes Reinhardt’s disassembly of the geometric regime through collage and gesturalism but which stands as a transition point for the artist. This modest-sized canvas recalls some of Piet Mondrian’s most ambitious early paintings as well as the vivid colorism of Paul Klee’s Bauhaus grid compositions. It also shows how, even at the very beginning of the decade, Reinhardt already had an advanced and nuanced understanding of opticality and color relationships. As Bois writes of this painting, “In 1940 ... Reinhardt launched what amounted to a sort of time bomb (one that took a while to explode, but the sheer threat of which produced immediate effects in his own work): a perfectly modular grid painting, the first, to my knowledge, on this side of the Atlantic.”³ A related and similarly avant-garde grid painting from circa 1940 features a cruciform arrangement of rectangular units, a compositional format that Reinhardt would subsequently return to in his red, blue, and black paintings of the 1950s and 1960s.

The variety of approaches reflected in this presentation elucidate Reinhardt’s embrace of immediacy, the formal and material conditions of the support, and all-over compositional formats. Taken together, Reinhardt’s exuberant experimentalism during this decade stands as a testament to his vast and singular achievements in abstraction. As the artist once asserted of the importance of abstract painting, “In its dissatisfaction with ordinary experience, the impoverished reality of present-day society, an abstract painting stands as a challenge to disorder and disintegration. Its activity implies a conviction of something constructive in our own time.”⁴

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967) is among the most significant American artists of the twentieth century. His paintings encourage the viewer’s active engagement in the act of looking at and experiencing “art as art.” As he declared, “Art is art. Everything else is everything else.”

² Martin James, “Today’s Artists: Reinhardt.” *Portfolio & Art News Annual*, no. 3 (1960), p. 54.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ Ad Reinhardt, unpublished 1943 lecture, *Art as Art, The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 49.

Born in Buffalo, New York, and raised in Queens, New York, Reinhardt was recognized for his skill as an artist from an early age. He attended Columbia University on a scholarship, where he studied art history and graduated in 1935. In 1936, Reinhardt was hired by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project to paint abstract paintings in the Easel Division. In 1937, he joined the American Abstract Artists, with whom he would exhibit through the early 1950s. These formative experiences demonstrated an early dedication to the cause of abstract painting, to which Reinhardt would devote himself for the rest of his life.

He had his first solo show in 1943 at The Artists' Gallery, New York, and was included in a number of important group exhibitions of abstract painting throughout the 1940s, alongside artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Hans Hofmann, and others. During this time, Reinhardt studied with Alfred Salmony at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and developed a keen interest in Asian art, which he would continue to explore in his writings, slide shows, and teaching.

Around 1950, Reinhardt began paring down his compositions. He ultimately arrived at a reduced color palette of blue, red, and black, which he explored in symmetrical and geometric monochrome canvases. At the time, he considered his blue, red, and black paintings equal parts of a general investigation into subtle chromatic variations and the perceptual properties of color, originally exhibiting these works together.

In 1965, Reinhardt staged concurrent exhibitions of his blue, red, and black paintings at three galleries in New York: blue at the Stable Gallery, red at Graham Gallery, and black at Betty Parsons Gallery. At the end of 1966, Sam Hunter, with the assistance of Lucy Lippard, mounted a major retrospective of Reinhardt's work at The Jewish Museum, New York.

Among the notable posthumous exhibitions of Reinhardt's work are retrospectives and major surveys at the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, which traveled to Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, Kunsthaus Zürich, Centre national d'art contemporain, Grand Palais, Paris, and Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna, in 1972 and 1973; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1980; The Museum of Modern Art, which traveled to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1991 and 1992; and Fundación Juan March, Madrid, in 2021 and 2022.

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