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Press Release

Ardent Nature Arshile Gorky Landscapes, 1943 – 47

Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street

2 November – 23 December 2017

Private view: Thursday 2 November, 6 – 8 pm



New York... 'Ardent Nature. Arshile Gorky Landscapes, 1943 – 47,' is Hauser & Wirth's inaugural presentation of works by Arshile Gorky, a seminal figure in the shift to abstraction that transformed twentieth-century American art. By the early 1940s, Gorky had already begun to liberate himself from artistic convention, forging a powerful, if enigmatic, visual language that built upon the freewheeling lyricism of Surrealism and anticipated the concerns of Abstract Expressionism. His breakthrough came in the summer of 1943, during an extended stay at Crooked Run Farm, the Virginia homestead owned by his wife's parents. Here, the artist became enchanted by the bucolic surroundings, and his response to the fields, blooms, patterns, and colors around him began to manifest in vibrant compositions. The resulting works from this period, filled with organic forms and infused with extraordinary expressive freedom, are among the most moving of Gorky's career.

Curated by Saskia Spender, the artist's granddaughter and President of the Arshile Gorky Foundation, the exhibition features over fifty landscapes – including paintings and works on paper – from this critical time in the artist's life and work. 'Ardent Nature' is the first New York exhibition exclusively dedicated to the artist's mature works, and presents Gorky at the very height of his artistic powers.

Gorky's time at Crooked Run Farm marked a profound reawakening of his connection to nature. During his first summer in the countryside in 1943 (he would return for extended stays in 1944 and the summer of 1946), Gorky spent day after day in the open pastures, producing scores of 'plein air' drawings. Infatuated with his

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surroundings, he discovered the complexities of natural forms. The trees, milkweed, haystacks, and brackish river were rife with activity, and served as points of departure for new works. It was here, among the flora and fauna, that Gorky revisited his early experiments with automatic drawing, courting free associations with nature and its endless metamorphoses.

In these primal responses to nature, Gorky granted as much presence to the relationships between the objects he observed as the objects themselves. Returning to sometimes idealized memories of his early life on the shores of Lake Van, in Ottoman Anatolia, Gorky incorporated fragments from his childhood into the reality of his surroundings. In this conflation of truth, memory, and desire, the observational yields to an essence rendered in vivid, incandescent auras that reverberate within outlined forms, as seen in the magnificent 'Waterfall,' (ca. 1943), on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. His compositions seemingly pulsate between the interior and the recessive spaces of the work, culminating in a sense that the paintings were created from the center, simultaneously inwards and outwards. Gorky's highly personal form was crystallized in these works, where his own 'otherness' empowered him to forge a unique place in the history of art.

In Gorky's 1943 work on paper, 'Untitled (Virginia Landscape),' biomorphic symbols, swollen and rounded, allude to botanical or human sex organs, and are complemented with wiry lines evocative of vines or stamen. In his later work, such as the masterful 'Gray Drawing for Pastoral' (ca. 1946 – 1947), these instinctive symbols – still amorphous and suggestive – harden into something of a personal vocabulary comprised of distinct recurring forms.

Gorky often used his works on paper as studies, shifting configurations and colors before further interpreting a composition on canvas. His process of intense contemplation and refinement rarely left anything to chance, yet the resulting works brimmed with a sense of immediacy and spontaneous energy. This characteristic mix of restraint and wild abandon can be seen in his two 'Pastoral' paintings from 1947, where Gorky's gestural planes of color give shape to the negative space and seem to emerge from within the canvas. Alternatively, in the related large-scale drawings, Gorky takes a more reductive approach, by covering his paper with a thin ground of charcoal and carving out the shapes with an eraser until they emerge eerily through the smoky ground, a technique that heightens the ambiguous nature of the vaguely anatomical forms that float across the page.

While made at a professional peak, Gorky's late works are situated within a period of profound personal tragedy. In the two-year span of 1946 to 1947, the artist suffered a catastrophic studio fire, a painful operation for intestinal cancer, a debilitating automobile accident, and increasing marital troubles. The trauma that colored Gorky's final years inspired shifts towards a bleaker palette and a more abbreviated line, and his paintings became increasingly enigmatic.

On view through 23 December 2017, the exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated publication, 'Ardent Nature. Arshile Gorky Landscapes, 1943 – 47,' from Hauser & Wirth Publishers. The book features newly commissioned contributions by Saskia Spender and Edith Devaney, Senior Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

About the Artist

Arshile Gorky emigrated from Ottoman Anatolia to the United States in 1920, fleeing the Armenian genocide. After five years living under strained conditions with relatives in Massachusetts, Gorky moved to New York and became absorbed into the cultural milieu of a city on the brink of modernism. He changed his name and consciously assumed the persona of an avant-garde artist, in an assertion of independence from all national categories, and assimilation with the new emerging New York culture in which he found himself. Committed to the social, if not the political, causes that engaged many of his contemporaries, Gorky taught at the Grand Central School of Art and busied himself with questions of artistic theory in the pursuit of a personal vision. He passionately studied

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modern masters, absorbing the work of those he admired: from Paolo Uccello to Paul Cézanne, and Giorgio de Chirico to Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and André Masson. This practice taught him to understand their artistic processes and eventually to surmount their techniques with his own. He forged close formative friendships with his New York school colleagues John Graham, Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning and later, Roberto Matta.

In spite of his early engagement with European art, Gorky remains a profoundly American painter, and the success with which he reinvented his identity upon his arrival is a tribute to opportunities afforded by the United States. Gorky's work is represented in museum and private collections worldwide, including: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas TX; Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge MA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles CA; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; The Menil Collection, Houston TX; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York NY; Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy; The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia PA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York NY; Tate, London, England; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY, and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven CT.

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Gallery hours:
Tuesday to Saturday,
10 am – 6 pm

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Caption and Courtesy Credits:

Arshile Gorky
Pastoral
ca. 1947
Oil and pencil on canvas
112.1 x 142.2 cm / 44 1/8 x 56 in
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