

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

PRESS RELEASE

Contact: Alyssa Plummer
Tel: 212/998-6782 or alyssa.plummer@nyu.edu
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Revisiting a Vital Era in NYC's Downtown Art Scene in the 1950s and early '60s

***New York Cool: Painting and Sculpture from the NYU Art Collection*
on view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery from April 22 to July 19, 2008**

This spring, concluding a year-long emphasis on 20th-century painting, the Grey Art Gallery presents *New York Cool: Painting and Sculpture from the NYU Art Collection*. Surveying Lower Manhattan's disparate art world in the 1950s and early '60s, *New York Cool* is curated by NYU professor and art critic Pepe Karmel and is drawn entirely from the New York University Art Collection. The show features over 80 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints and premieres at Grey Art Gallery from April 22 to July 19, 2008, before embarking on a national tour to four museums.

While this period witnessed tremendous creative ferment in the New York art scene, it has been largely overshadowed by the heroic accomplishments of the Abstract Expressionists. By the late 1940s, New York had clearly seized the leadership of the avant-garde, and most American artists were confident that their work mattered as much as, or more than, that of their European colleagues. This new assurance encouraged New York School artists to take risks, to experiment, and to reject accepted styles—including those of their immediate predecessors. By 1965, two new movements—Pop and Minimalism—coalesced out of the ferment of the previous decade. The power and clarity of both have tended to obscure the richness and complexity of the art that came before.

Although the Grey Art Gallery is best known as a springboard for innovative exhibitions, it is also the fortunate custodian of New York University Art Collection. *New York Cool* showcases one of its strongest components. Indeed, the New York University Art Collection—established in 1958 on the Washington Square campus—capitalized on its location, acquiring works by artists living in the immediate vicinity. The NYU Art Collection itself was inspired by the pioneering efforts of A. E. Gallatin, who had founded the Gallery (later Museum) of Living Art. Occupying the same premises as the Grey Art Gallery from 1927 to 1942, it was the first New York museum to collect and show major paintings by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Paul Klee, and others.

New York Cool proposes a fresh vision of this eclectic period. Organized in groupings that explore varied themes—such as “Women, Men, and Other Beasts,” “Primal Landscapes,” “An Art of Memory,” and “Vicissitudes of the Grid”—the show features key works by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Louise Nevelson, Philip Pearlstein, and Robert Rauschenberg. Some paintings and sculptures prefigure the major styles of the mid-1960s and later: a portrait by Alex Katz looks forward to Pop Art; a target painting by Kenneth Noland to Minimalism; and an abstraction by Yayoi Kusama to Post-Minimalism. *New York Cool*, as a whole, demonstrates how a new kind of personal sensibility developed in tandem with a seemingly impersonal geometric style. Allusive instead of expressive, understated rather than declarative, it sets the stage for what art critic and former NYU professor Irving Sandler has dubbed the new “Cool Art” of the 1960s.

“For too long, the later 1950s and the early ’60s have been seen as a mere parenthesis between Abstract Expressionism, on one hand, and Minimalism and Pop Art, on the other,” says Pepe Karmel, the exhibition’s curator. “What we’re going to show is that most of the key innovations of the postmodern era actually emerged in this in-between period. You get the new diaristic collages of Robert Rauschenberg and the poem-paintings of Norman Bluhm and Frank O’Hara. You get the radical simplification of the grid in the work of Agnes Martin and Frank Stella. You get the anti-form randomness of Yayoi Kusama’s infinity nets. You get the sexual imagery of Louise Bourgeois and the hidden religious symbolism of Louise Nevelson. Everyone thinks these were the years when Abstract Expressionism was sinking into senility. Actually, it was a period when a thousand new ideas were being born. Everything that comes afterwards—in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s—is already there in the late ’50s and early ’60s.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue. In his essay “An In-Between Era,” Pepe Karmel traces the artistic and cultural shifts that led from the “hot” art of the early 1950s to the “cool” art of the 1960s. Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, contributes a history of the NYU Art Collection. Lytle Shaw, Assistant Professor of English at NYU, analyzes the social ties that bound together the artistic and literary circle surrounding the poet and curator Frank O’Hara. Alexandra Lange, a journalist and critic specializing in architecture and design, discusses the ways that the Greenwich Village community responded to the threat of urban development.

“We are so pleased to present *New York Cool* featuring the NYU Art Collection,” notes Lynn Gumpert. “Both the exhibition and the accompanying publication are informative, lively, and scholarly—just what a university art museum should provide. Indeed, the show began as a seminar taught by Pepe Karmel in Spring 2006 in NYU’s Department of Art History.”

New York Cool also functions as a prequel to the Grey Art Gallery’s heralded *Downtown Show* from Winter 2006 which focused on the eclectic art scene from 1974 to 1984. Organized in conjunction with Fales Library, the repository of NYU’s special collections, *The Downtown Show* featured many items from its Downtown Collection, the most extensive archive relating to New York’s downtown scene from 1970 to the present. Like Fales, the Grey Art Gallery is committed to documenting and researching the art of Lower Manhattan. In addition to shedding new light on a less-analyzed period, *New York Cool* also explores how the environment of Greenwich Village, including the notable presence of New York University, created a fertile milieu for artists living and working there in the 1950s and early ’60s. The exhibition is made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin M. Rosen, and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. Public programs are supported by the Grey’s Inter/National Council.

History of the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery occupies a prime location on Washington Square East in the heart of Greenwich Village. Housed in the Silver Center (formerly Main Building), on the site of NYU's original home, the legendary University Building (1835–94), the Grey Art Gallery's location has a very rich history. Many famous artists and writers—including Samuel Colt, Winslow Homer, Daniel Huntington, George Inness, and Henry James—maintained studios there. It was also here that Professor Samuel F. B. Morse established the first academic art department in America.

Between 1927 and 1942, the space now inhabited by the Grey Art Gallery was occupied by A. E. Gallatin's Gallery (later Museum) of Living Art. NYU's first art gallery, this was also the first New York museum exclusively devoted to modern art. In exhibiting work by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, and other European modern masters, along with artists associated with the American Abstract Artists group, Gallatin created a forum for intellectual exchange and a place where the public could acquaint themselves with the latest developments in art. NYU remained without a permanent museum until 1975, when a generous gift from Mrs. Abby Weed Grey enabled renovation and improvement of the historic space, and the doors reopened as the Grey Art Gallery.

The New York University Art Collection

The New York University Art Collection, of which the Grey Art Gallery is guardian, was established to continue and extend A. E. Gallatin's pioneering concepts. The Collection was founded in 1958 with the acquisition of Francis Picabia's *Resonateur* (c.1922) and Fritz Glarner's *Relational Painting* (1949–50). Today the Collection includes approximately 4,800 objects and is primarily composed of late-19th and 20th-century works, ranging from Picasso's monumental public sculpture *Bust of Sylvette*, sited in the plaza of Silver Towers apartments, on Bleecker Street, to a stained glass window from Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House, in Buffalo, New York. The Collection's particular strength is American painting from the 1940s to the present, with works by the artists included in *New York Cool* as well as paintings and sculptures by Romare Bearden, Joseph Cornell, Jim Dine, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Robert Indiana, and Ad Reinhardt. European prints are also well represented, with works by Henri Matisse, Miró, and Picasso, to name a few. A unique component of NYU's holdings is The Ben and Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art, which includes works by artists from countries ranging from Israel to Japan. Especially strong are Iranian works from the 1960s and '70s, which were shown in the exhibition *Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture*, at the Grey Art Gallery in Fall 2002.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003

Tel: 212/998-6780, fax: 212/995-4024

E-mail: greycastle@nyu.edu

Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart>

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11am–6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm

Saturday: 11 am–5 pm

Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU staff, faculty, and students: free of charge