

WRESTLING WITH THE FIGURE

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**“Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented”
–Willem de Kooning**

The dramatic stylistic shifts over time in Norman Bluhm’s work can make it difficult to believe that the same artist created all the varied works in his *oeuvre*. Many painters have an early period where they grapple with their education, interests, influences and the work of their predecessors and contemporaries, before settling on a mode of expression with which they are comfortable, and it becomes easy to recognize their work. What makes Bluhm highly unusual is that he never stopped grappling, he never settled; when he had solved an aesthetic problem to his satisfaction, he moved on. What was behind this urge to change? What conclusions can be drawn from this opportunity to see a superb group of works from his own collection made over two decades? Many respected critics who knew his work well documented the frequent transformations in Bluhm’s painting as they occurred. Their writings, as well as Bluhm’s own words, suggest ways to explain the stylistic shifts which can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of his achievements.

While Bluhm is rightly considered an American artist, he spent much of his youth in Italy, living with his mother’s family in Florence. As a teenager, Bluhm’s family moved back to Chicago, the city of his birth, and in 1936 he enrolled as a very young student in the architectural program of the Armour Institute (now the Illinois Institute of Technology). Bluhm yearned to be an artist, but his family encouraged him to apply his creative interests toward a degree in architecture, which they felt would provide a more reliable income. Fortuitously, the Bauhaus architect, Mies van der Rohe, joined the faculty there in 1938 and Bluhm became one of his first American students. Van der Rohe espoused a rigorous course of study focusing on understanding the physical and visual properties of materials. These exercises and the close collaborations between faculty and students made a deep impression on Bluhm and stayed with him for the rest of his career.

In 1941, his studies were interrupted by military service in World War II and after the war Bluhm decided that he did not want to be an architect. Instead, he settled in Paris, where, using the income from the G.I. Bill, he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and, as he wanted to do all along, embarked on a career as a painter. In 1950, Bluhm married his first wife, Claude Souvrain, a French artist, and became deeply involved with the Parisian cultural milieu. Living in Paris reinforced Bluhm’s profound childhood connection to European culture and he began to explore artistic ideas from the French *avant-garde* of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Bluhm’s first mature paintings, from the mid-1950s, consist of countless abstract washes and drips that coalesce into dense fields of saturated color above a low horizon line. These demonstrate the artist’s interest in *plein-air* artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Claude Monet, as well as his admiration for much earlier art, like stained glass windows from medieval cathedrals. At the same time, his vigorous gestures glimpsed within and around the veils and washes align Bluhm with the stylistic innovations happening in New York at that moment. Bluhm had been exposed to action painting through exhibitions in France and through his close friendships with expatriate artists, such as Joan Mitchell, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Sam Francis, with whom he shared a studio in Paris in the early 50s.

In 1956, having visited New York several times, Bluhm decided to move there, attracted by the energy of Abstract Expressionism. Less than a year later, Bluhm’s first show was at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1957, where critic Dore Ashton, writing in *The New York Times* perceived his work as “sense experiences...ranging in emotional climate from brooding introspection to uncontained joyousness.”ⁱ Ashton’s observations chime perfectly with Bluhm’s stated intentions, which involved the *plein-air* goals of capturing the light within a landscape and recording personal reactions to nature.ⁱⁱ

By 1958, Bluhm’s paintings had opened up considerably; indeed the break from his work earlier in the decade is

quite pronounced. Hubert Crehan, reviewing Bluhm's 1960 show at Castelli noted that the artist "has introduced a big, swinging arc-like movement into his new work" and, "a great welter of dripping and spatter and paint smears."ⁱⁱⁱ The slashing brushwork which formerly had been subsumed in a dense thicket of color now landed on white ground. While the drips from these gestures (Bluhm always painted his works on the wall, vertically and never poured paint) retain some of the effect of the veils in the earlier works, these paintings feel much more energetic.

space of his earlier work into something that felt much bigger. Through deliberate and precise placement of gesture and an open center, he sought to increase the internal scale of his work, to make it, like Gothic cathedrals, "monumental."

Bluhm continued to evolve. Just after 1960, he abandoned all-over abstractions, and the paintings from this time contain a great deal more negative space and fewer gestures, now organized along the sides of the canvas. Bluhm reinforced these strokes, creating a thick impasto with repeated flings of paint, one on top of another, imparting a sense of great power and energy. The massive gestures join up into rigid L-shaped forms which oppose one another, creating a sense of abrupt tension by playing off the rectangular configuration of the support. Bill Berkson, writing in 1963, made note of Bluhm's more deliberate arrangement of form. In his 1963 profile, "Bluhm Paints a Picture," part of the long-running "Paints a Picture" series in *ARTNews*, he observed that "Bluhm's paintings of the last two years have a stiff-lipped glamour—like Bogart eyeing Bacall—'I'm good-looking, but armed and dangerous'...Bluhm's romantic attitude, [and] the projection of personal athleticism and passion, arrives... at a classical sense of structure." Berkson went so far as to call Bluhm's new sense of organization "Mondrianesque."^{iv} While this might have been too strong a word, it is clear that by the early 1960s, Bluhm had moved away from his Abstract Expressionist roots by discarding the idea of spontaneity for something more ordered.

Later in the 1960s, Bluhm again surprised his audience by bending his rectilinear strokes into arabesques and coils. Bluhm had used curved gestures previously, but usually these were feathery, flicked marks, which served as almost playful counterparts to the brooding power of the authoritative intersecting diagonals. Now, while retaining the powerful attack of action painting, Bluhm's forms became curvilinear. The other surprising alteration that occurred around this time was in the use of color. Not only was Bluhm now putting down a ground of color instead of using the white, primed canvas as background, he expanded his coloristic range. No longer limiting himself to black, white and a few primary colors within each painting, Bluhm began to use earth tones and pastels, and, notably, introduced a fleshy pink into many of his works, which, along with the curves, more than hint at a human presence.

Looking back at this moment, Bluhm explained that, as in his earlier work, his inspiration came from observing nature, albeit from a different viewpoint. "I suddenly decided to look in the landscape...for something monumental...to take a kind of Gothic idea and [leave] that space open...and just let paint drip to the center."^v What Bluhm here seems to be saying is that he was attempting to transform the dense pictorial

The introduction of the figure coincided with a new approach. Around 1967, Bluhm began to emphasize drawing from a nude model in his practice, executing numerous sketches in intensive live sessions. He encouraged his models to take short poses and reposition often, the idea being to capture movement as well as form. Drawing had always been important to Bluhm. There are many extant sketches of nudes from his time at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and he continued to work from models from that time forward. His training at *Armour* also included a lot of drawing as Mies drilled his students, requiring them to be able to render architectural spaces and forms convincingly. But from the mid-1960s onward, drawing took on a new importance for Bluhm and he would take periodic breaks from painting to focus exclusively on studies of the nude, done both in black-and-white, using ink, and in color, using pastels and water-based paints on large sheets of paper. These concentrated periods usually marked the end point of specific bodies of work and significant moves towards new ones, where he used the ideas gained from these sessions to invigorate his paintings.

(right) Norman Bluhm.
Photograph by Denise Colomb.

The earliest descriptions of this new focus on studying the human figure appear in Natalie Edgar's 1967 *ARTNews* profile on Bluhm. Alongside a photograph of the artist surrounded by nude studies on the walls of his studio, and a stack of sheets at his feet [see page 29], Edgar wrote, "What does drawing from the figure give his abstract paintings? Timing the eye with the hand, catching crossing lights and crossing motions, building a space...On paper emerge new forms and new contours and in his mind new ideas...After drawing and drawing he is ready for the painting without subject matter." Edgar's opinion was that Bluhm, like other abstractionists who drew the figure such as de Kooning and Hofmann, was trying to elevate abstract painting "to heights equal to those achieved in figure painting in the past."^{vi}

Edgar's descriptive, lyrical piece recognizes that the process of drawing inspired Bluhm, allowing him to hone his considerable technical skills and was tied to his ambition to engage with great art of the past and present. However, she downplays what, with the ability of hindsight, can be seen as the most important effect that Bluhm's drawing practice had on his paintings: from this point onward, he would be preoccupied with assimilating the figure into his abstractions. His work was no longer "without subject matter;" for the rest of his career Bluhm used biomorphic line and color to suggest a human presence. As Lawrence Alloway, in a 1972 piece on Bluhm, noted, "His painterly means are now used in the construction of imagery, not in the release of motor power...Gesture has been solidified into form..."^{vii}

Bluhm said of this transformation, "...I suddenly began to do the nude again. I hired a model and I worked a great deal from the nude...and then... [I got it] in my head that I wanted to do the figure or the nude or the form of the flesh in the landscape."^{viii} It is interesting to note that even within this significant change, Bluhm, as he always did, mentions nature as being important to him. By overtly integrating a human presence, Bluhm makes clear his desire to link the two in a forceful, passionate manner. Bluhm imagined that the landscape is capable of reacting to deeply held emotions, as well as evoking them, an idea which recurs throughout art history.

Bluhm always made a point of saying that he was a "romantic," by which he meant that he unabashedly admired the past and was pursuing a range of artistic goals that would have been familiar to generations of previous painters, including ones that involved sentimental feelings. While a hallmark of the New York School was always "the shock of the new," Bluhm never sought to make a deliberate break with the tradition of European painting. Rather, he tried to find different ways to engage that tradition, using his own skill, training and insights.

Figure and landscape stayed with Bluhm until the end of his career in 1999, but he carried on innovating, constantly introducing new motifs and ideas, developing at least two significant, different bodies of work which lie beyond the scope of this exhibition.

In the 1980s, Bluhm was fortunate to attract the attention of two important writers, John Yau and Raphael Rubinstein, who continue to champion his work. In a variety of contexts, their observations about his art have provided valuable insights into Bluhm's intentions and accomplishments.

John Yau interprets Bluhm's evolution as a deliberate attempt to incorporate disparate ideas from throughout art history with an emphasis on conveying the idea of physical love. Writing in 1986, Yau stated, "The major shift that takes place between the 60s and the 70s is the artist's growing interest in the erotic. In order to explore this realm, he feminizes his own vocabulary by transforming his gestural approach into soft, billowing forms."^{ix} In Yau's opinion, Bluhm's interest in space, light and sinuous shape align him with the Venetian tradition of Tintoretto and Tiepolo, but he also notes Bluhm's ability to draw upon the ornamentation in Islamic art and the formats of Japanese screens, among many sources. Yau later observed that "Bluhm's knowledge and love of art was deep and passionate. He went to museums every chance he could and carefully studied...different cultures and epochs. Art history was for him...something he could make use of."^x Yau's views imply that Bluhm's relentless shifting stems in large part from a need to continually synthesize the ideas he was gleaned from his ongoing absorption of art history and that integrating the figure into an abstract expressionist idiom was a huge challenge requiring decades of innovation.

(right) Norman Bluhm, Springs, New York, 1958.
Photograph courtesy of the Bluhm Family.

(below) Norman Bluhm at a picnic at Coast
Guard Beach, East Hampton, 1958.
Photograph courtesy of the Bluhm Family.

Raphael Rubinstein also makes the case for synthesis being at the root of Bluhm's changing practice. In an essay written in 1998, just before the artist's death, Rubinstein, noting Bluhm's wide range of influences, his interest in the erotic and his embrace of decorative ideas, wrote that he "has single-handedly reconciled the emotional directness and raw energy of Abstract Expressionism with the visual symphonics of old master European painting."^{xi} Rubinstein also points out that the evolution of his work, while significant, was gradual. In a later text, Rubinstein reiterated that it is possible to see from one painting to the next, how Bluhm introduced new ideas, building on his previous work, stating, "It's sometimes hard not to imagine that Bluhm...knew all along...that he would finally arrive at an approach that combined his early architectural training, his debt to Abstract Expressionism, and his passion for old masters" concluding that his work "was always about reconciliation."^{xii}

Reconciliation would be an unlikely word to apply to Norman Bluhm for those who knew him personally. He was famously gruff—a handshake from him was so strong that the after effects could last longer than the ensuing conversation. Bluhm was pugnacious and contrary towards dealers or anyone else that he thought wielded power in the art world. For example, in 1960, he contentiously withdrew from Leo Castelli's gallery because Leo was continually displaying the work of other gallery artists in front of Bluhm's during his solo show to present them to clients. Bluhm later said that when the dealer tried to collect on money owed from his stipend, Bluhm replied "Leo, what would you rather have, \$9,000 or your life?" and refused to pay.^{xiii} Unfortunately, while he was able to harness his inner anger to stoke his creativity, this adversarial stance hindered the development of his career.^{xiv} On a very rudimentary level, Bluhm's ornery attitude, and his willingness to challenge even his own conclusions, gives insight into his restless stylistic variation. He told one interviewer "I don't

(left) Norman Bluhm returning to
New York from Paris, 1956.
Photograph courtesy of the Bluhm Family.



like to go backwards to go forwards,” and another “I hate repetitions”, and a third, “You can’t paint the same goddamn painting over and over.”

Bluhm’s obstinate personality, however, is only part of the story. His spirit of opposition should be seen in the context of the New York School’s ethos of privileging the artist in every instance and its default position of the avant-garde being in conflict with mainstream society. It is difficult for contemporary observers to reconstruct the New York art scene of the 1950s, where a relatively small group of artists formed a subculture of experimentation and innovation which was of little interest to outsiders. In Bluhm’s telling, artists were treated almost like panhandlers, unwelcome in polite circles. What mattered most was the admiration of one’s peers; there was a shared sense of camaraderie born of the hostility with which their challenging artistic ideas were met by the world at large.

From this perspective, Bluhm’s penchant for change can be seen as stemming from a suspicion of anything that looked or felt comfortable, lest it veer into something easily absorbed by consumerist society. The idea of a signature style, a “look,” would have been anathema to him, a sign that he was atrophying as an artist. By the same token, Bluhm was, perhaps, suspicious of his own talent, unwilling to simply supply the market with what he could effortlessly create. In short, the continual search for new challenges comes out of his avant-gardist attitude, formed in the 1950s.

As the 60s went on, economic prosperity coupled with a growing interest in contemporary art changed the downtown scene. The loss of this culture affected Bluhm deeply. No longer home to a small cadre of artists bound together in pursuit of aesthetic goals, New York became an active commercial center where gallerists and collectors could speculate on art. This disgusted Bluhm because it imparted greater power to dealers, who, he thought, could be spun by financial or personal concerns in ways in which artists, educated in art and committed to aesthetic concerns would not be. The networking and socializing that professional development increasingly entailed turned him off. Bluhm felt that good art should be judged on its own merits and to butter up decision makers to advance one’s career was, on some basic level, cheating.

Given his personality and his desire to challenge both himself and his audience, it is not surprising that Bluhm mentions loneliness in many of his interviews. He was certainly gregarious and charismatic; his years in Paris and New York City consisted of intense engagement with the artistic milieu that has justifiably become part of art history, so clearly he was never a shy man. But as time went on, Bluhm’s interests diverged from mainstream trends, which increasingly gravitated towards Pop Art. It should also be noted that supporters and friends such as Frank O’Hara, Franz Kline and later, Tom Hess died while still very young. The loss of O’Hara, in particular, hit Bluhm hard as the poet was a staunch and articulate advocate of his work. From 1970 onward, he lived outside of New York City, moving first to Millbrook and later East Hampton and finally to rural Vermont.

It would not be correct to explain Bluhm’s constant stylistic change as solely a reaction to the turn in taste away from Abstract Expressionism or to the rise of the art market in New York. After all, his work was changing even before he moved back to the United States in 1956. But the loss of the culture, friends, and supporters who nurtured him correlates to his desire to break away from his previous work. Part of Bluhm’s urge to expand his field of reference, to include disparate, diverse ideas about space, light and form can be seen as coming from a growing realization that art history itself was the only thing he could rely on. Unwilling to discard the energy and ideas of Abstract Expressionism, as he felt much of the art world (and specifically his contemporaries) had, Bluhm continued to embrace its essence while embarking on a dialogue with a great number of other artistic ideas and moments.

The appreciation of experimental painting is difficult. It requires some education, a willingness to encounter unfamiliar ideas, and time to absorb the intellectual history that led to its creation. Bluhm understood that high art was not for everyone, and his own quirky take perhaps even less so. He figured out that not many people would get his painting or be sympathetic towards his aesthetic stance. Being difficult to categorize was not a good career move, but Bluhm was willing to pay the price, both professionally and personally, by pursuing his own vision without accommodating his work or himself to the art market. But he also had an abiding belief in classical ideas and knew that time was on his side. For while his paintings make

(right) Norman Bluhm with his new figure drawings from the model, 1967. Photograph by Jerry Schatzberg/Trunk Archive.



Norman Bluhm in his studio with Joan Mitchell.
 Photograph by Felix Roulin.

demands on the viewer, they reward continued study and contemplation. Also rewarding is the opportunity to see a large group of Bluhms together, as his own work creates a context conducive to understanding his pictorial language, development, and the ideas he was trying to communicate.

Style, as the term is used by art historians, connotes something over which the artist has no control. The term refers to the many aspects of creating a picture (line, color, form, composition, gesture and so on) which are unique to that maker. While painters may well deliberately alter their technique, the inimitable quirks that are specific to them never disappear; their "style" will always shine through. From this perspective, then, Bluhm's constant change isn't surprising at all. Given his immersion in European culture as a child and later as a young man, his early training under Mies, his profound engagement in the intellectual excitement of New York in the 1950s and his own prodigious talent and romantic personality, Norman Bluhm's work is exactly what one would expect: intense, dramatic and connected to the sweeping span of cultural achievement.

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Norman Bluhm in his studio 333 Park Avenue with Yellow Rock, New York, 1967.
 Photograph by Daniel Frasnay/ akg-images.