Nicolas Carone

Figurative Abstraction—Paintings from the 1960s

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LORETTA HOWARD GALLERY

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Nicolas Carone: Contradiction as Synthesis

by Phong Bui

"I believe that truth has only one face: that of a violent contradiction."[1]

– Georges Bataille

"Perfect two-dimensional form speaks of objects' three-dimensionality better, more fully and more poignantly than shadow painting possibly can."[2]

– John Graham

Nicolas Carone was driven by sheer force of will to find suggestive narratives that embraced both the old tradition of figurative art and the innovations of a century of open-ended abstraction, including Abstract Expressionism's simultaneous distribution of the image and gesture. This particular selection of works, dating from 1959 to 1967 is exemplary, especially in light of the strong social and political upheavals of the period that affected every aspect of the United States' economic and cultural life. Carone was able to create sufficient distance from what was happening in the art world and the world at large during this interval to pursue his own bold vision.

Nicolas Carone, circa 1959, East Hampton

In 1959, Peter Selz's highly idiosyncratic exhibit *New Images of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art placed the figurative work of twenty-three painters and sculptors from Europe, the Bay Area, Chicago, and New York within the context of the larger existential ethos after World War II. What followed was *The Figure in Contemporary American Painting* (organized by American Federation of Arts in 1960), *The Emerging Figure* at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum (1961), and *Recent Painting USA: The Figure*, a juried competition at the MoMA (1962), which according to Judith Stein "was the last year for major exhibitions of figurative expressionism."[3] In 1967, as public support for the Johnson administration waned during the Vietnam War, and as the women's liberation movement and civil rights movement expanded, the art world went through its own changes: *Artforum* moved from L.A. to New York, initiating the fierce debate between formalism and conceptualism. Large minimalist sculptures dominated the critical discourse and were made partly in response to the immense warehouse spaces converted into artist lofts and white-cube galleries in SoHo. Critics began to declare the "death of painting," causing painting culture to go on the retreat. As Katy Siegel notes, the rhetoric became even more pronounced a "decade later [by] academic critics [who] turned that into an entrenched ideological position to support their own claims about postmodernism."[4]

Carone's abstract paintings made during the 1950s reveal the artist's innate response to light and shadow in his studio environment and the natural surroundings of East Hampton, where he lived with his family. Dore Ashton once observed

Untitled, 1965
Oil and pencil on board
26 x 40 inches

"Carone never thought of himself as a 'non-objective' painter. [… He], more than any others of his generation, worked in a grisaille that often suggested moody skies and cloud-shadowed waters."[5] Perhaps the word grisaille offers a key insight into the connections between the different aspects of the artist's work. Grisaille, first of all, is a technique or method of painting in gray monochrome to imitate sculpted form. In this case, the technique could reference Carone's early academic training at the age of eleven at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School, which he undertook before continuing his rigorous training at the National Academy of Design with Leon Kroll, followed by training at the Art Students League.[6] However, the most crucial rupture in Carone's training must have occurred at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, before his eventual gestation period at the Rome Academy of Fine Arts.

Many questions followed from the friction generated by intense academic training rubbing against radical modernism: How can sculptural forms be flattened? How can grisaille co-exist with synthetic cubist two-dimensional planes? How can fast, expressive gestures and slow, tender brushstrokes inhabit a single pictorial field? How can an American be inspired by European art after World War II, when critics declared the "Triumph of American Painting"? These profound questions normally pressure artists to make sudden shifts, compel them to commit to one camp or another. Artists could either choose traditional art and not look forward, or choose modern art and not look back. Contradictory answers are visible on the surface of each picture Carone drew or painted.

The Scroll, 1963
Oil and pencil on paper mounted to board
28 x 41½ inches

Two other prominent figures, in addition to Kroll and Hofmann, were indispensable to Carone's art: John Graham and Matta. The group itself reflects Carone's tremendous capacity for assimilation: be it the academic training that gave him a love for drawing, an appreciation for the purity of line, similar to that of Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning; the famous "push and pull" dictum that Hofmann invented, a cross-pollination of Cubism and Fauvism; John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art* that provided an ongoing Socratic dialogue which reflected on the artist's self-transformation (in response to both past and contemporary art) as a liberating process; or even the work of Matta, whose "cosmic mysticism" was an indispensible exteriorization of interior space that revealed personal images as metaphors through psychic automatism.

Contradiction as synthesis is audaciously rendered in this exhibition's selection of works (and is the sole reason why Carone has kept almost all of his paintings untitled). While each picture suggests a palpable narrative of vaguely anthropormophic forms, displayed in a compacted space, each also repudiates any legible or specific narrative. The three untitled charcoal drawings (1960 – 1962), for example, are irregular cubist grids (intervened by occasional strong diagonals) with quasi-abstract/figurative forms, which mediate the positive and negative elements in an otherwise densely compressed space. This spatial construction is explored further in numerous iterations—with unpredictable collisions of images. "The Scroll," one of the most complex paintings, and one of few titled works, lays bare all of Carone's

Untitled, 1965
Oil and pencil on board
25 1/4 x 41 1/4 inches

personal interests and compounds them in their extremity. Everything is left unfinished and vulnerable to emotive *incompletion*, exacerbated by an uncontrollable appetite to embrace all things—yet gaping with a mouth too small to devour. An unfinished nude may recall Michelangelo's last slaves, while another evokes Neo-Classical form, but both versions lay undone. Carone once wrote, "it was through the metaphoric process of automatism that I discovered the constant growth and infusion of historical synthesis, which engendered, in my work, the psyche and the imagery as one and the same."[7]

The most compelling facet of Carone's pictorial language is the full permission he gave himself to aggressively excavate a democratic, social *and* personal space. Carone, like Bataille, considered the ultimate aim of intellectual (or religious) practice to be the annihilation of the rational individual in the transcendental act of communion. In his hand, strength, vulnerability, time past and time present coexist in the gripping embrace of human emotion.

(Endnotes)

1. Bataille, Georges, *The Deadman*, preface (1967), reproduced in *Violent Silence: Celebrating Georges Bataille*, ed. Paul Buck, (Georges Bataille Event, 1984)
2. Graham, John, *System and Dialectics of Art* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1971) p. 105
3. Stein, Judith and Paul Schimmel, *The Figurative Fifties, New York Figurative Expressionism* (Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1988), p. 47
4. Bui, Phong "In Conversation with David Reed and Katy Siegel," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2007, p. 31
5. Ashton, Dore, et al., *Nicolas Carone, The East Hampton Years, Paintings from the 1950s* (Pollock–Krasner House and Study Center, 2013), p. 7
6. Leonardo da Vinci Art School was founded in New York City (1923 – 1942) at St. Nicolas of Myra, Christian Orthodox Church, located at 288 East 10th Street. Isamu Noguchi and Peter Agostini were among Carone's classmates.
7. *New York School, Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists*, edited by Marika Herskovic (New York School Press, 2000), p. 94

Untitled, 1959
Oil on paper mounted to board
20½ x 28 inches

Untitled, 1966
Oil and pencil on board
28 x 41¼ inches

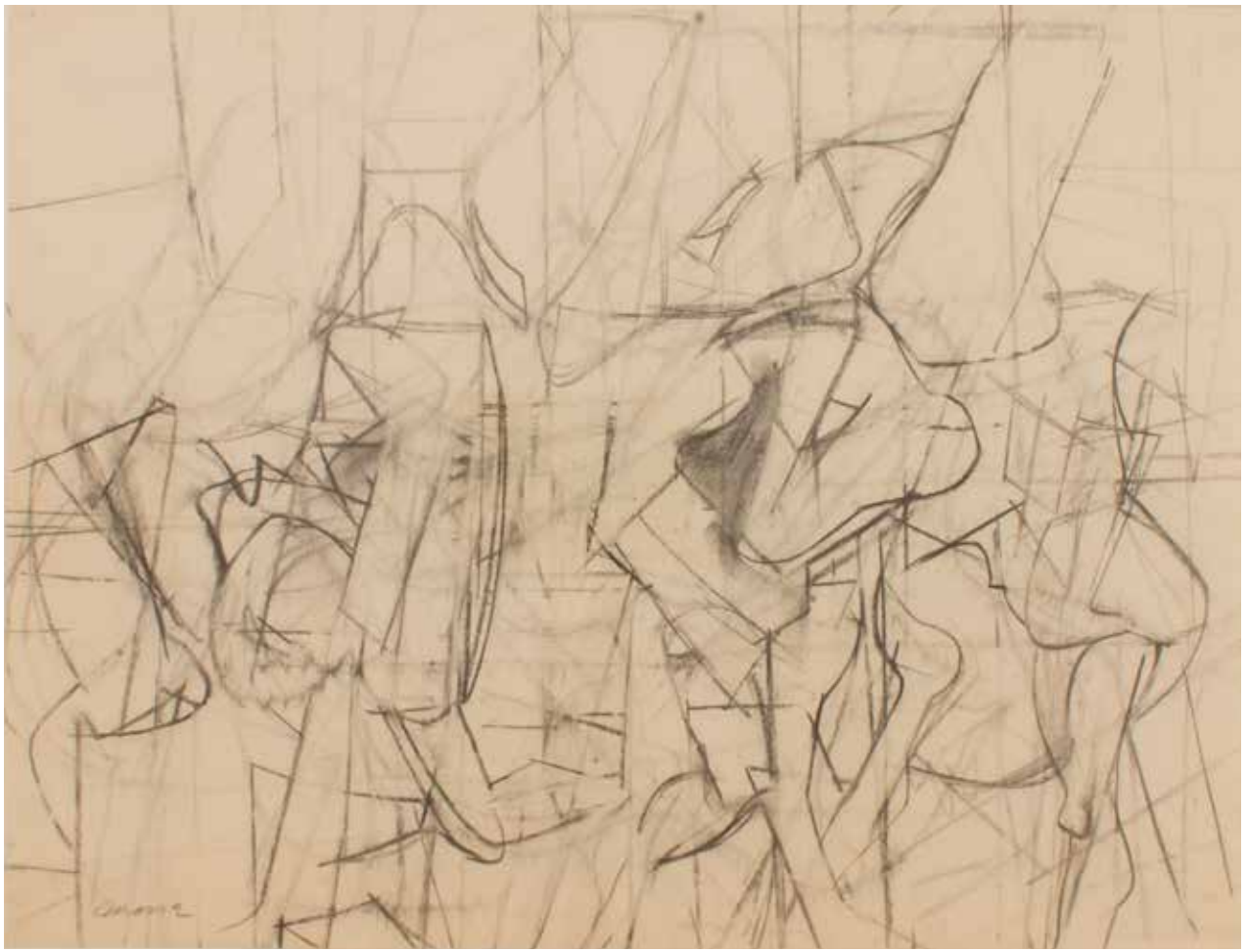
Untitled, 1959
Oil on paper mounted to board
21 x 28 inches

Untitled, ca. 1959
Oil and pencil on board
18 x 22 inches

Untitled, 1961
Oil on paper mounted on board
25 1/4 x 22 1/4 inches

Untitled, 1959
Oil and pencil on board
27½ x 41⅛ inches

Untitled, 1965
Oil and pencil on board
24 1/4 x 40 inches



Untitled, 1960
Charcoal on paper
18 7/8 x 24 3/4 inches

Untitled, 1960
Charcoal on paper
19 x 24 3/4 inches

Noon Veil, 1967
Oil and pencil on board
26 x 40 inches

Untitled, 1965
Oil and pencil on board
25 1/4 x 41 1/4 inches

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