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ART

A Life in the Abstract

War hero. Blue-collar worker. Friend of Rothko and De Kooning. Michael Goldberg has seen and done it all. But it's his Abstract Expressionist paintings that are his lasting legacy.

March 15, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Michael Goldberg has lived the life of a painter both blessed and cursed by the label "second-generation Abstract Expressionist." Now 74, he waxes philosophical, 'I don't like it and it lumps people together who are dissimilar. But at this point, there is little you can do about it, and I'm not going to waste my time trying to. Critically, there has been a need to invent 'isms,' to get people into categories they can define. The first generation was so successful, that younger people got this pejorative label. By now, it doesn't bother me a hell of a lot."

Recent abstract paintings by Goldberg, who lives in Mark Rothko's former studio in New York, are currently on view at the Manny Silverman Gallery through April 4. In addition, Edizione Primaprint has just published a monograph on the artist's work, "Goldberg Variations," with essays by Los Angeles painter and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, New York poet David Shapiro and Italian art historian Elisabetta Longari.

Although Goldberg had flown in from New York an hour before meeting with a reporter at the Sunset Marquis hotel, he shows no sign of fatigue. "I'm not frail," he quips. He teaches several times a week at New York's School of Visual Arts and, with his third wife, artist Lynn Umlauf, he spends five months a year at a hilltop home in Tuscany. Proof of his unflagging energies can be seen in his canvases slathered with thick brush strokes of black, white and naturalistic color, often supporting a loopy calligraphy. They are clearly the work of a seasoned artist and, indeed, Goldberg has been considered a success in terms of both exhibitions and sales for nearly 50 years.

Sturdily built, with cropped gray hair, Goldberg has a raconteur's demeanor. He sits by the hotel pool in the late afternoon, sipping a glass of red wine, puffing on a Cuban cigar and musing about his past. Asked about the enduring popularity of abstract painting, he says, "I think it's a miracle! But there seems to be enough content in various kinds of abstraction to pursue it. There seems to be a resurgence lately, which is satisfying."

"I'm enough of an old-fashioned Modernist to think that painting can change the world. In terms of our Western society, we have faster means of communication so people don't recognize that they have the need for painting, though the need exists. As an artist, one would like to sell one's work, but to make an art that is believable, that has a presence one can't deny, that, for me, is still very challenging."

A Bronx native, at age 13 Goldberg took Saturday drawing classes at the Art Students League. "They kicked me out after three months for having a fight with the teacher about Titian. I'd seen more Titians than he had and knew more about it," he snorts.

Goldberg's father was a vaudeville dancer, but his mother's family was both wealthy and prominent. As a boy, Goldberg was taken during the summers to Europe with his grandparents. "It was like the Grand Tour. We went to Germany, France, Italy, looking at Old Master paintings," he says.

He attended the abstract painter Hans Hofmann's School of Fine Art in 1941. But, at 17, with his parents' permission, he enlisted for duty in World War II. "I wanted to make the world safe for democracy," he says, slyly. As a first sergeant in the Paratroop Infantry, stationed in North Africa and Burma, he was wounded three times before being discharged in 1946.

Only 21, Goldberg went to Venezuela for nine months to work in the demolition of oil wells. When he returned to New York, he married a dancer with the Martha Graham company.

Complications from his war wounds left him paralyzed on the right side of his body. During his recovery, a physical therapist suggested stone sculpture as a method of reconditioning and retraining his muscles. For eight months, he used a two-pound hammer to chisel at a chunk of Tennessee granite. He regained use of his hand and arm muscles, but the stone proved resistant to his efforts. "I had barely dented it, so I sold it for as much as it had cost me eight months before," he says.

In 1948, the New York art world was polarized. "The uptown camp was socially conscious but figurative and successful. The downtown camp was radical, accessible and there was a camaraderie that made you feel significant," he recalls. He resumed his studies with Hofmann, living off his disability payments. In part, he avoided figurative painting because, he says, he didn't want to deal with his war experiences. "I never thought I'd get out of the war alive."

"At that time, in Hofmann's school, one had the feeling that what one was one doing was vitally important. I couldn't understand what Hofmann was talking about, but he generated a love of art."

An admirer of New York School artists like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, Goldberg pursued a series of canvases entirely covered with blunt, choppy strokes of color. After three years, his first marriage ended, and he had a four-year relationship with another second-generation Abstract Expressionist, painter Joan Mitchell.

"Joan is an extraordinarily gifted artist," he says. "Probably a more interesting painter than I am, by the way."

By 1956, he was living near the studios of De Kooning and Milton Resnick. He joined them and other regulars at the illustrious hangout, the Cedar Bar, because in addition to the friendship of fellow artists, the bar advanced credit for food, and beers only cost a dime. He was working on the loading platform of a paper manufacturer but quit to live on unemployment.

One week, he was too drunk to remember to sign up and hadn't received any check, so he was completely without funds. It was then that another of the group, painter Norman Bluhm brought art collector Walter Chrysler to his studio.

"He bought 17 of my paintings for \$10,000, which was a lot of money then," he recalls. "He paid in installments so he gave me a check for \$2,500. I cashed it at the bank and bought an electric blanket. I spent the weekend huddling under that blanket with all this cash."

A few months later, art dealer Martha Jackson came to his studio and bought another \$10,000 worth of paintings. Asked how it felt to be catapulted into

stardom, Goldberg says, "I thought it was normal. After that, I sold pictures regularly."

Goldberg and Bluhm spent the summer in great comfort in a rented studio in Springs, East Hampton. Painter Lee Krasner introduced Goldberg to the wealthy writer Patsy Southgate, whom he married in 1958, becoming stepfather to her two children.

Goldberg showed with Jackson, who also represented Alfred Leslie, Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell. His friendship with poet Frank O'Hara led to a collaboration on a book of poetry and silk screens called "Odes" in 1960. In 1962, he took over Rothko's studio at 222 Bowery.

"That's a story," says Goldberg. "It's a 1925 gymnasium, with 25-foot ceilings, part of a YMCA building. Rothko told me that if I took it, the rent would be increased to \$150 a month. Plus, he wanted \$300 for the carpentry, meaning a rickety, movable painting wall he'd installed. Then, he told me that he could only sell two or three paintings a year to avoid paying huge taxes. So I asked, 'Why don't you just give the loft to me, as a young painter?' He put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I'd love to, but it's the principle of the thing.' "

Then, Goldberg and Rothko went to a cheap Chinese restaurant for lunch, had a couple of whiskeys, and before Goldberg had finished eating, Rothko said, "Come on!" They took a cab to the studio, Rothko rushed in and opened a drawer of glowing watercolors. "Take one!" he told Goldberg.

"It was beautiful," says Goldberg. "I still have it. I guess he felt guilty." Did Goldberg have to pay the \$300 for carpentry? "Oh sure," he says with a laugh. (About 15 years ago, Goldberg also bought the building.)

By 1965, Goldberg was living the "American Dream." Money, cars, houses, family, pets, celebrity. "The dream was empty for me," he confesses. "I felt I'd lost track of reality." After a nervous breakdown, Goldberg spent 18 months at the New York Psychiatric Institute. He left Jackson's gallery and divorced his wife. He underwent 24 hours of therapy a week. "It was the most important thing that happened in my life," he says. A year after he left the institute, he met Umlauf and started to rebuild his life.

This dramatic account seems in keeping with the larger reputation of the Abstract Expressionist painters, who have been celebrated for their hard drinking and womanizing ways. "It was a macho world," admits Goldberg, who has driven race cars and piloted planes as hobbies. "But the group called Abstract Expressionist was diverse. Reinhardt and Rothko were disciplined thinkers. I think the stigma of the gestural need to get to the inner self kind of crap is overblown by the critics. These were serious thinkers who were working along different paths," he says.

"I think Pollock was the most important artist we have produced so far in this country but it was a dead end. You couldn't take anything from it."

"What I'm doing now is related to that which I was doing in the '50s, but done differently. I don't think of myself as gestural. I don't expect to gain meaning from the force of the stroke or the direction of the stroke. I think one of the great unfortunate things about Abstract Expressionism was the idea that one can discover something that one can hang a painting on. I'm against that. The great problem we have in painting today is not how to do it but what it's about."

What is the attraction of abstract painting after half a century? "For me, it's that constant frustration, an irritation that there is something you are getting close to, but you are not getting to that point." He adds, "Clement Greenberg, the critic, proposed all kinds of restrictions on what a painting could be. I reacted against those restrictions. I felt they were unnecessary. I don't think the first generation Abstract Expressionists felt any restrictions."

He says his concerns now are about salvation, sin and redemption, order and chaos. "These are long-standing concerns of mine. A painter is always in competition with other painters of the past, though there are a few people you are not going to compete with at all--Titian, Velasquez, Picasso. You can't beat them."

"I am looking at earlier paintings constantly, because I really enjoy the complexity of it, the facility. I get nostalgic for the direct role of the artist, where you painted out of common knowledge, [subjects] like the New Testament. The audience knew these stories. That hasn't existed for over 100 years. It was a cozier time, when a painter had a definite role in society."

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* "Michael Goldberg: Recent Work," Manny Silverman Gallery, 619 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood. Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Ends March 28. (310) 659-8256.