

**PERROTIN**

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**PRESSBOOK**

Gregor HILDEBRANDT

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the framework of his buildings, followed by a layer of black ink tracing the graphite underdrawing, on top of which additional colored inks and minutiae are applied. His plans for vast cities, often dwarfed by a single monumental structure, are largely symmetrical, evoking the aura of a monarch's vision for his domain. Indeed, who could build these cities without first leveling one, and who could inhabit a place devoid of domiciles, bursting with ever-taller aspirations toward the sky? While *Diptyche* includes hordes of people having arrived in propeller cars and double-decker buses to stand on the vertiginous balconies of a cathedral, the vibrant megalopolises are crossed by superhighways, labyrinthine pathways, and lagoons dotted with dragon boats, all cowering under tessellated Eiffel Towers and pagodas. No longer do these imply that Storr is looking up at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette from the avenue—the grandeur has been tainted by the sinister. Far from New Babylon, these Escheresque urban spaces evoke not deities but dictators, protected by watchtowers and Brutalist fortresses.

—Mira Dayal

## Ilya Bolotowsky

WASHBURN GALLERY

In 1936, the painter Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981) cofounded American Abstract Artists, an organization instrumental to the advancement of European abstraction at a time when the form was “met with strong critical resistance” (according to the AAA) in the face of the then-dominant regionalism of artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. The Washburn Gallery's presentation of Bolotowsky's work, a selection of eight paintings created between 1935 and 1980, showed us an artist who was a staunch believer in the experimentalism and ideals of modernism, as well as a master of both the geometric and the biomorphic strains of abstraction.

Of the latter in this exhibition were *Small Biomorph*, ca. 1935; *Cobalt Violet*, 1938; and *Umbra*, 1938–39. *Small Biomorph* seemed the most chthonic image of the bunch—something like an Arthur Dove painting that was left out in the rain. Woolly-edged shapes in mostly lugubrious colors—dark green, rust, dirty golds, and a scratchy white, for instance—rest suspended in a blue that is as maudlin as it is regal. Fine examples of geometric abstraction included *City Rectangle*, 1948; *Black Light*, 1950; and *Architectural Diamond*, ca. 1952. As this trio of canvases made clear, Bolotowsky was a devotee of Piet Mondrian.



Ilya Bolotowsky,  
*Small Biomorph*,  
ca. 1935, oil on  
board, 12 × 15 1/2".

In 1944, he traveled to the modernist's funeral in New York, all the way from Alaska, where he was working as a translator during World War II. *City Rectangle* is quite a beauty: a quasi grid with lively patches of color and moments of radiant white, set firmly into a procrustean bed of rigid black lines. This ternion of dynamic paintings owes a debt to the strict verticals and horizontals of Mondrian's “New York City” compositions, 1942–43, even as they subtly allude to the soberer, airier structures of the Dutch painter's “Tableau” series, 1914–15. Yet Bolotowsky's paintings are so much more exuberant, color-saturated, and expressive than Mondrian's ever were, despite the latter's avidity for dancing and jazz. Bolotowsky blatantly complicates and dramatizes Mondrian's formalistic precepts, overdoing them in order to show their limitations. He is triumphantly grand, whereas Mondrian is discreetly beautiful.

Bolotowsky was a member of the Ten Whitney Dissenters, a coterie of artists who in 1938 exhibited at New York's Mercury Galleries to “protest against the reputed equivalence of American painting and literal [representational, descriptive] painting.” It is noteworthy that the Ten—Bolotowsky, Adolph Gottlieb, Lou Harris, Yankel Kufeld, Ralph Rosenborg, Markus Rothkowitz (aka Mark Rothko), Lou Schanker, Joseph Solman, Nahum Tschacbasov, and Ben-Zion—were mostly Jewish artists. I imagine that Bolotowsky's Judaism may explain, at least in part, his preference for abstraction over representation. The Jewish God is unrepresentable; indeed, his name cannot be spoken, suggesting that he has no name, just as he has no body—he is pure creative spirit. When Moses, in the Book of Exodus, asked who the entity was, God simply replied, “I am who I am.” This is what the abstract work of art says: It has no identity other than itself and references no reality beyond its own. This point is also made by Ad Reinhardt's concept of art-as-art (Reinhardt, who was also Jewish, belonged to the AAA, too). It's not difficult to fathom that the relationship between Bolotowsky's early biomorphic (or “naturalistic”) images and later geometric (or “transcendental”) works is indebted to the Kabbalistic distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds—the spiritual being a contraction or condensation of the physical. Nonetheless, Bolotowsky's paintings confirm Robert Motherwell's view that “abstract art is a form of mysticism.”

—Donald Kuspit

## Gregor Hildebrandt

PERROTIN

If unheard melodies are sweet, as John Keats says, there was abundant sweetness in the imposing “total environment” Gregor Hildebrandt realized for his second New York exhibition. The Berlin-based artist has long specialized in outdated recording media—most notably cassette tapes and vinyl records—focusing not on their capacity for storing and conveying sound, but instead employing them as mute materials, elements with which to create paintings and sculptures that have music buried within them. The choice of media would seem restrictive, but by showing the impressive range of formal effects he can draw from them, Hildebrandt justified the biblically resonant title he gave his exhibition, “*In meiner Wohnung gibt es viele Zimmer*” (In My Apartment, There Are Many Rooms).

The exhibition really did have rooms, with freestanding walls made from thousands of LPs that were folded into bowl-shaped forms that, when stacked, became the “bricks” making up these temporary structures. (The black records were found in flea markets, but the artist also had white ones pressed expressly for this purpose.) A Brancusi-esque “endless column” of these LP vessels could be seen in the gallery's



View of "Gregor Hildebrandt," 2018. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

stairwell, penetrating all the floors of the building. Hung within the enclosed spaces were a multitude of quasi paintings—only some of which actually featured paint. The least prepossessing, in my view, were the smaller pieces for which cassette tapes and leader along with minimal amounts of red, yellow, or blue acrylic were used to create neoplastic compositions à la Piet Mondrian. In some cases, we could guess that the work's title indicated the music on the tapes; *I miss the kiss of treachery (Cure)* (all works 2018) takes its name from the lyrics of the 1989 song "Disintegration" by the Cure. But while the skinny lines of white leader or dark-gray tape lent the painting a refreshingly tactile quality, the familiarity of the art-historical reference kept it, and similar pieces, from being much more than cute. Far more engaging were the works constructed from small rectangles and triangles cut out of colored vinyl records. *Mit Henkeln aus Nephrit* (With Pot Handle Made Out of Nephrite), with its various hues of yellow, is derived from a couple of rather obscure drum-and-bass and electronic/dance EPs, as well as from a record by PAAR, a band that includes one of Hildebrandt's students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and that the artist released on his own label. But more important are the intricate patterning and the way the grooves' arcs reflect the ambient light, giving the work an effect quite distinct from that of any modernist geometrical abstraction it might evoke. Paintings woven out of cassette tape, such as *Dein Kissen umarmt Dich* (Blumfeld) (Your Cushion Hugs You [Blumfeld]), were full of unexpectedly subtle tonal variations. More impressive still was a giant black-and-white gestural painting executed on VHS tape, hanging like a curtain in front of an entire wall. Several rectangular apertures in the curtain are filled with tape-on-canvas paintings that continue the painterly gestures visible in the work that encompasses them, but in the negative. The painting was produced through a complex process that strips the magnetic coating from the tape's plastic. This procedure renders it possible for Hildebrandt to make two works out of every such action, one positive and one negative. The installation at Perrotin, *Die Notwendigkeit der Hoffnung* (The Need for Hope), is the negative of one that was exhibited simultaneously at the Kunsthalle Recklinghausen in Germany.

Painting and sculpture are normally silent, of course, yet paradoxically Hildebrandt's tactile evocation of music renders his works deafening. Likewise, his exhibition of the negative imprint of an image erases the image it conveys. Fossilized in some impalpable elsewhere, its absent energy teases us out of thought.

—Barry Schwabsky

## "Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works"

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Anna Atkins, the Victorian botanist widely considered the first female photographer, created thousands of cyanotypes depicting white negatives of flora, often seaweed, suspended in atmospheres of Prussian blue. She made the pictures in the service of science, each one a spectral ode to the bounty of life and to what was then an innovative photographic technique. Like those of so many women of the time, Atkins's breakthroughs fell into obscurity; she was "rediscovered" in the 1980s. The New York Public Library's exhibition "Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works"—curated by Joshua Chuang and Elizabeth Cronin and staged in tandem with a cozier, astutely researched display of Atkins's photograms—gathered nineteen artists informed by her legacy. While the contributors to "Refracted" ended up having little in common with Atkins (most make nonrepresentational images, prize visual poetry over science, and actually identify as artists), the show succeeded in offering an oblique survey of recent cameraless photography, much of which expressed anxieties about loss, climate change, and the medium itself.

For *Sun/Screen/Scan*, 2018, Penelope Umbrico scanned smartphone, tablet, and computer screens while leaving the copier's lid ajar. The leaked light made visible the sundry human traces left on her subjects such as fingerprints, scratches, and dust. In homage to Atkins, Umbrico then applied Photoshop's cyanotype filter to the scans. The outcome, a large and ethereal mosaic depicting panes of dark, grimy glass, indicated the downright unnaturalness of contemporary vision. This was echoed in Alison Rossiter's *Compendium*, 2018, for which she developed an array of expired photo papers from 1898 to 1919. Bearing light- and temperature-based blemishes and at times resembling monochromes or spirit photography, Rossiter's rectangular portraits of nothing were one of many works circumscribed by absence. These also included María Martínez-Cañas's ghostly "X-Ray" photogram series, 1999—gray, vaporous abstractions made in the shadow of a friend's death—and Kathleen Herbert's beautifully titled sound/video installation *Everything Is Fleeing to Its Presence*, 2018. In the latter, a pair of monitors cycle through various azure abysses reminiscent of cyanotype plates as we hear anecdotes recounted in voice-over—including one about a chemist and the "divine" experience of touching the gilded pages of Atkins's *Cyanotype Impressions* (1843)—along with essayistic passages concerned with "light-induced loss," personal erasures, and Atkins's blue: a shade "so deep it has seeped through to my skin." (The color, Herbert suggests, is perhaps akin to that of Homer's famous "wine-dark sea.") The work, with its mesmerized obsessiveness and easy mixture of mundanity, science, and majesty, was a smart way to open the show.

While Atkins used a novel medium to catalogue the natural world, some of these artists resort to older technologies to address its current

Roy Arden, *Hoard 2*, 2018, cyanotype on cardboard packaging, 12 × 6¾". From the series "Hoard," 2018. From "Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works."

