

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

514 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 929 3265
info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

Figure Ground

Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, Raoul Hague

April 18 – June 6, 2015

Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10am – 6pm

Figure Ground revisits an exhibition that we presented twenty years ago. After seven years in our first location in Soho, we moved to a new, and better, space at 560 Broadway. Our first exhibition there was born of the serendipity of some very special artworks that we had on hand. There was Joan Mitchell's *Grande Vallee IV*, 1984, along with a big, strong painting from 1970 from the estate of Xavier Fourcade, Mitchell's former dealer and my employer and mentor. Also from his collection, we had a series of black and white lithographs by Willem de Kooning, and as our gallery continued to represent the sculptor Raoul Hague, several classic works were waiting in the warehouse. It was a satisfying show of works in diverse mediums by three important artists associated with the canon of Abstract Expressionism.

A different set of circumstances gave rise to the impulse to reprise the 1995 exhibition this spring. In the course of pulling it together, a unifying theme guided the selection of works and that is the compositional relationship of figure and ground. Each of these three artists, in different ways and in various mediums, have created works in which what is not there achieves an equivalence with what is.

A concern with figure and ground seems to have been enduringly important to Joan Mitchell. In 1973, she said addressed it in this comment, "*I do think about how it's working, and by that I mean making the background equal to the subject in weight*". And in 1985, "*I think that if the figure/ground doesn't work in a painting, I'm not very satisfied with it. Now if I have a blank space in there and it isn't working as a positive space, as well as an unpainted space, then I'll take it out or paint it in.*"

Untitled, c. 1957-58, is a perfect example of what she later described. Between bold and varied brushstrokes in a chord of red, green, umber and ochre colors arrayed across a suspended center-weighted composition, Mitchell painted the enclosed spaces with subtly warm or cool neutrals that flicker back and forth between the foreground and the underlying canvas. The pale tones connect them to the primed linen ground; that they are painted makes them part of the figure. The painting is a *sotto voce* variant of the Whitney Museum's *Hemlock* and the Phillips Collection's *August, rue Daguerre*.

She addressed the figure ground dynamic overtly in her work of the mid-sixties, represented in the exhibition with charcoal drawings in which dense forms are surrounded and interpenetrated by the neighboring expanses of paper. And in the late lithograph diptychs published by Tyler Graphics in 1992, there is an interplay between drawn lines and intervening space that strongly, and somewhat surprisingly, echoes the spare architecture of the earlier painting in the show.

In Willem de Kooning's work, the emphasis on the balance between figure and ground is most prominent in the biomorphic paintings of the 1940s, again at the cusp of the 60s, and finally in his last paintings of the 80s. We are representing de Kooning in the exhibition with selections from his 1970-71 lithographs in which he exploits the properties of the medium in the execution of works in which the figure and ground achieve a delicate balance.

The refined outlines of the brushstrokes of *Wah Kee Spare Ribs* were created by rinsing the printing plate before the lithographic medium had fully dried, which reincorporated the ground into the fluid gestures. Inspired by Sumi ink drawings, the discrete marks that populate *Weekend at Mr. and Mrs. Krisher, Love to*

Wakako and *Reflections to Kermit on my trip to Japan* allow the beautiful Akawara rice paper itself to become a prominent feature of the finished works. In *Landscape on Stanton Street*, unlike the other prints executed on stone rather than aluminum plates, the light of the paper shines through the modulated tones of the ink. The impression of this work in the show is a rare trial proof, on a paper brighter than that chosen for the finished edition.

As a sculptor, Raoul Hague recasts the figure ground relationship as that of volume and void. His carved stone or wood sculptures of the 1930s and 40s were self-contained volumetric figures that stood independent of the space around them. He departed from literal figuration and embraced abstract form in the 50s, and it was not long after that he began to open up his masses and introduced negative space into his increasingly complex shapes.

Hague's raw materials were four to six foot sections of tree trunks and in time he started to favor sections of the tree where the trunk separates into branches. In *Garrison* from 1967, he worked into the solid mass of the trunk, dramatically opening up two opposing diagonals that echo a small remnant of a branching trunk. It is a work in which it is difficult to decipher what might have been the original shape of the wood.

It is during his late work of the 1980s and 90s that Hague most radically explored the voids within the volumes. *Sycamore, Summer*, from 1992, is his last finished work and has never been exhibited until now. The sculpture has one vertical spine that shows the original outer contour of the trunk, on either side of which the volume of the wood has been opened up all the way to its core. It is a multifaceted shape that presents remarkably different compositions depending on the viewer's vantage point.

A central concern with the compositional dynamic between figure and ground was not always in the forefront of the many artworks made by Willem de Kooning, Raoul Hague and Joan Mitchell during their long and productive lives. Their command of color and tactility, their resourcefulness as masterfully inventive visual artists, and their sheer powers of creative expression are prodigious. We found a new measure of serendipity in reimagining an exhibition that was originally presented shortly after the deaths of Mitchell and Hague, and not long before de Kooning's, and are glad to have an opportunity to show these works to a largely new audience in a different context of time and place.

For additional information, please contact Mary Shah at 212-941-0012 or mary@lennonweinberg.com