

# TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950



The “Stones” lithographs that O’Hara made with Rivers in the late fifties—raffish aphorisms and sketches evoking times in which “it was raining bourbon and (hic) champagne and bop (sic)” — remain the most brilliant of the poet-painter mashups, despite later works that enlist the fey charms of Brainard (a gifted writer himself) and Winkfield, and the rambunctious appeal of Schneeman. The typical New York School collaboration is a carefully nonsensical interplay of visual and verbal vernaculars, as infectious and as frustrating as a lively party overheard through a wall. (You had to be there. You almost are.) The prized sound was arch but avid, with a penchant for quotation marks. I think of lines from a Schuyler poem: “the sinuous beauty of words like allergy/the tonic resonance of/pill when used as in/‘she is a pill.’” The most beautiful collaboration in the show is Joan Mitchell’s orange-and-blue abstract pastel incorporating another poem by Schuyler, “Daylight”: “And when I thought, /‘Our love might end’/the sun/went right on shining.”

Like a teacup under a waterfall, the show is full but fractional; so many careers are sampled so scantily. The most prominent of them is also the most disappointing: that of Rivers, who played the role of the great artist that he was too scattered and self-conscious to be. After exciting Greenberg, among others,

with precocious early paintings that combine snatches of fast, accurate figuration and banks of drifting, ardent color—jazz meets Bonnard—Rivers fell into strangely joyless showoffery, as if advertising his talent could compensate for having nothing to say. O’Hara’s poetry seems easy. Rivers’s painting really is easy—defiantly so, at best, with the chutzpah that made him a hilarious conversationalist. His failure marks the general character of the de Nagy artists, in the fifties, as a transitional crew, between the fulfillment of Abstract Expressionism and the revolutionary maturities of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Those two appear in the show’s catalogue, in a photograph taken in 1958, at a Rivers opening; Rauschenberg looks bored, and Johns like a proudly epicene, watchful dandy. In historical retrospect, they are tantamount to major leaguers dropping in at a minor-league bash.

Of the painters in the show, Porter and his followers, chiefly Jane Freilicher, hold up best. Their reticently poetic realism bespeaks a commitment that is not only aesthetic but ethical, sacrificing formal ambitions to values of authentically experienced nature and domestic life. Freilicher’s “The Painting Table” (1954) makes no pretense to mastery—it is awkwardly composed—but each of the represented studio details strikes the heart, through the eye, as

It shares a sense of cosmopolitan sophistication, as a quality soul-deep, with the poetry of Ashbery, O’Hara, and Schuyler. What it lacks is the poets’ command of surface style, engaging and advancing modern traditions that, in their literary art, stretch from Whitman to Auden and Wallace Stevens. Here’s how Ashbery concludes “*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*”:

... when you write poetry:  
The extreme austerity of an almost empty  
mind  
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like  
foliage of its desire to communicate  
Something between breaths, if only for the  
sake  
Of others and their desire to understand  
you and desert you  
For other centers of communication, so  
that understanding  
May begin, and in doing so be undone. ♦

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such as a double image, from 1957-58, of Ashbery and Schuyler, seated on a couch and a chair and looking fidgety, in tenderly rendered daylight. Porter never dissembled the tedium of holding still to be painted. His art shares with the aesthetically more radical writing of Ashbery and Schuyler a cultivated sense of unhurried immersion in lived time, unfocussed but alert. Ashbery, a prolific creator, has said that writing poetry is like watching television: “There’s always *something* on.” O’Hara and Rivers, his friend and sometime lover, observed a different time signature: breakneck and plunging, but also keyed to dailiness. “Grace/to be born and live as variously as possible,” O’Hara wrote—lines quoted on his gravestone, in the Springs. That sentiment channels a rhythm, combining speed and poise, of New York in the era of existentialism, smart jazz, Balanchine ballets, and Action painting.