

Abstract Expressionism – the second wave



Cesare Lucchini, *Venti di guerra*, 2024, oil on canvas, 172x176cm

gallery rosenfeld is delighted to present this dual exhibition featuring Cesare Lucchini and Stephen Pusey — two artists who have reinterpreted the legacy of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, bringing fresh relevance to this monumental artistic movement.

Academic and art critic Camille Paglia has argued that Pop Art fundamentally altered the trajectory of art, replacing the epic and often tragic paintings of the Abstract Expressionists with a mass-oriented, popular art form. However, this exhibition seeks to demonstrate that the principles of Abstract Expressionism were not permanently eclipsed by Pop Art but have endured and evolved over time.

Abstract Expressionism – The Second Wave focuses on the work of Swiss-Italian artist Cesare Lucchini and British artist Stephen Pusey, who has lived in New York for many years. Both embrace spontaneity and the pure practice of painting, where gesture and colour take centre stage. Yet, in distinct ways, they also draw on certain tenets of their predecessors, placing their own unique stamp on this artistic lineage.

The first generation of Abstract Expressionists prioritised the language of painting itself — gesture and colour, or their deliberate absence. Artists such as Pollock, Still, Kline, Krasner, and Mitchell used the sheer force and beauty of the painterly gesture to captivate viewers. De Kooning and Hans Hofmann combined dynamic gestures with a rich colour palette, while for Rothko, colour became the defining feature that guided viewers on a spiritual journey.

While the focus has traditionally been on American artists, Europe also had a remarkable response to Abstract Expressionism. In Paris, a group of extraordinary artists emerged under the umbrella of 'Tachisme' — often considered Europe's counterpart to Abstract Expressionism. Also known as 'Abstraction Lyrique,' this movement included figures such as Wols, Hans Hartung, Serge Poliakoff, Jean Fautrier, Pierre Soulages, Nicolas de Staël, Georges Mathieu, and Jean-Pierre Riopelle.

As American art transitioned towards Pop Art, the emphasis shifted from form to narrative. The seduction of pure painting waned, with few exceptions. Today, even narrative has been overshadowed by a focus on the artist's identity as the primary defining element of contemporary art.

Pusey's works reside within abstraction, yet like Lucchini, spontaneity is central to his process. He speaks of 'recognising the potentiality of the accident' and describes painting as a process of discovery — revealing what the artwork will ultimately become. His canvases weave intricate, web-like layers of intertwining brushstrokes, immersing the viewer in a rhythmic and almost trance-like experience. His fine, precise lines create a sense of movement, evoking a musical cadence that draws us into the intricacies of his compositions.

Lucchini, on the other hand, resolves his paintings directly on the canvas with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The richness of his colour application captivates the viewer before the underlying narrative fully emerges. He frequently leaves sections of the canvas bare, juxtaposed with layered drips of paint and interspersed red dots, guiding the viewer's entry into the work.

The fundamental distinction between these two artists lies in their thematic concerns. Lucchini's work is deeply engaged with the human condition, using his paintings to explore the struggles of existence. As he himself states, his art reflects 'the difficulty of being a human being.' His vibrant, expressive technique serves as a vehicle to awaken audiences to the tragedies surrounding us.

While Lucchini embraces a sense of freedom in his brushwork, Pusey, despite his spontaneity, maintains a remarkable level of control.

In an art world that often prioritises youth and the latest emerging voices, it is vital to recognise two seasoned artists who have dedicated their lives to painting — remaining steadfast in their belief in the medium's power to move us and, in its own profound way, to change the world we live in.