

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

JANUARY 2012

Nicholas Krushenick

GARY SNYDER

I would be surprised if there was a more exciting painting exhibition in a New York gallery this season than the concentrated four-decade survey of the paintings and works on paper of Nicholas Krushenick (1929–1999) at Gary Snyder. The artist was known for black-outlined abstract forms on flat grounds of hot color, sort of like Lichtenstein if the puckish Pop genius had gone abstract and rather nasty. So, not like Lichtenstein at all, really—though Krushenick endured the comparisons, admired him and they were friends. In his trenchant catalogue essay for the show, John Yau terms Krushenick “the father of Pop abstraction.” An early convert to the speed and brightness of acrylic primary colors, he bent Pop to his own purposes, which were to declare a clear break from Abstract Expressionism, as Pop was already doing, and to infuse the graphic punch of posters and hot rod decoration into high-minded abstraction.

His earliest paintings and paper cutouts from the beginning of the '60s are a little more free-form than the work that followed, even as they lay out the distinctive forceful color that he was to retain throughout his career. In an untitled work from 1961, a bulb of blue dangling from the top of the painting is cradled by a cavity in a black-bordered undulating band of yellow that runs horizontally across a white field in the center. This all hovers above the gently curving swell of a flat black plane, which fills the lower third of the canvas. The image is outrageously sexual, but it's impossible to decipher anything explicit: the beauty of abstraction is its ambiguity.

The beating heart of the exhibition was a row of five large vertical paintings, all from the '60s, hung on a long wall. The images ranged from woven yellow bands with dark blue interstices on a hot red ground (*Quick Red Fox*, 1963) to enclosed spaces framed by intestinal or labial folds (*Battery Park* and *Flying Circus*, both 1965). Similar folds become positive, tonguelike shapes in *Son of King Kong* (1966); in *Outspan* (1968) the folds appear in what looks like a red curtain with a yellow ruffle being pulled away from the bottom corner of the canvas. Collectively these paintings exhibited an astonishing range of forms and spatial readings within the consistencies of the color.

Krushenick was something of an irascible, and vigorously anti-academic. He left Pace Gallery in 1977 and subsequently turned his back on the art world. But he never stopped painting, and the work from the '70s through '90s in this exhibition demonstrates unflagging invention. The inclusion of a group of felt-pen preparatory drawings was especially illuminating. While underappreciated in his lifetime, he has been an influence on many painters, including Tom Nozkowski, Peter Halley and Mary Heilmann, to name only a few. A major museum retrospective is richly deserved.



Nicholas Krushenick, *Battery Park*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 70 inches; at Gary Snyder.

—Stephen Westfall