

## Nicholas Krushenick: Early Paintings

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BY BEN LA ROCCO OCTOBER 3, 2014

It is important to look long and hard at the early paintings of Nicholas Krushenick as they appear on the walls of Garth Greenan Gallery 50-plus years after they were made. When they were painted, they helped deconstruct the notion that the great European traditions and their American successor in the New York School dictated how painting should look. This was no small feat. Think of the resistance Philip Guston encountered to his figurative work, or the way that Warhol riled even the other artists associated with Pop.

But there is more than this path-blazing dimension to Krushenick's importance. It has to do with the difficulty of fitting him into our categories for painting. Al Held, whose friendship with Krushenick is well documented, helped usher in the term geometric abstraction as a descriptive in contemporary art. Held's work as a teacher at Yale further promulgated the cause set forth in his painting, which in turn fits neatly into the category. And while both Held and Krushenick approached abstraction through meditation on how the objective world could be represented in geometric form, Held's fame as a motivating force in 20th-century abstraction grew while Krushenick's star descended.

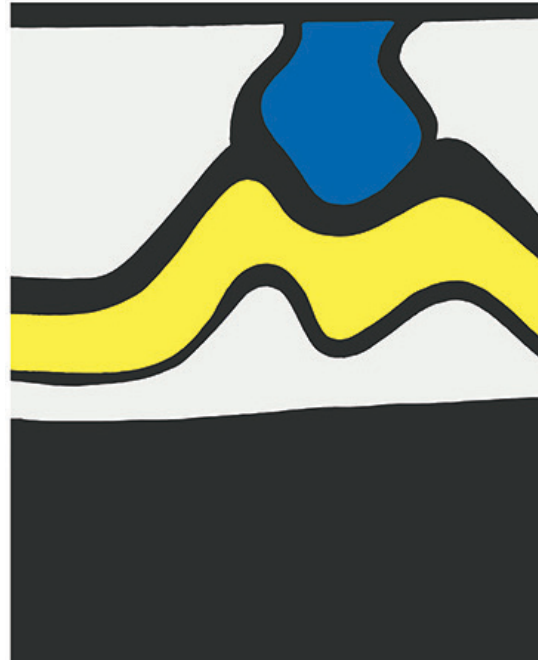
The term pop abstraction has arisen recently in an effort to correct that: a well-intended attempt at the categorization that Krushenick resists. Krushenick's high chroma acrylic palette, his insistence on self-conscious framing devices, his flirtation with colorful explosions of the kind associated with James Rosenquist or Roy Lichtenstein, and the heavy descriptive line to which he constantly returns all jibe with Pop. Consider the painting "Horizontal Stripes" (1963) or "Turn Back Columbus" (1963) in this regard.

But his stubborn ham-handedness and the heavy pentimenti in Krushenick's work do not fit. Nor does the poetry and the good-natured silliness that Krushenick wrings from reductive compositions. They are unevenly painted by hand, undulating with the kind of awkwardness one associates with the untrained. Enchantingly uninflected, not slick, these big, jazzy forms are painted in a humble manner. "Pango-Pango" (1963) is an example.

This is why Krushenick's non-hierarchical style seems to represent so well the spirit of its time. Krushenick was more engaged with what is strange and unpredictable in painting than he was with its coherency. Orthodoxies were constantly in the crosshairs in the '60s. As they should always be. What, Krushenick's work demands, are the contemporary orthodoxies that require our scrutiny? In so doing it perpetuates the process whereby new life rushes into painting, keeping it a living practice.

Consider Krushenick's weave imagery so prominent in the painting "Rousseau Giving Love and Lions" (1962). Rousseau's poetic nonchalance is a good spiritual antecedent to Krushenick's flirtatious relationship with representation: this weave might be the weave of the canvas, or it might be the city's grid. It could just be Krushenick commenting on his own painterly tendencies. He is simultaneously approaching and avoiding abstraction's formal grid.

In the gallery's rear room hangs "Untitled" (1961), which Greenan's press release recognizes as Krushenick first self-proclaimed mature painting. Many small sketches for "Untitled" hang in the back room next to the finished work. Apparently, this is a rare phenomenon in the artist's oeuvre; it was unusual for him to work out his compositions so carefully in advance. Anyway, charmingly, it doesn't seem to have helped, as the uncharacteristically small painting exhibits the same gauche over-painting as all the others. What I love about it is its obvious erotic content. That blue, bulbous form sitting on that yellow, undulating line is unmistakable, but also obscure, mysterious as Eros always is. Which is true of all the works in the show: Krushenick's colorful lines, weaves, blasts, and curves point always outward toward the universe of sensual encounter.



*Untitled*, 1961. Acrylic on canvas, 30 × 24 inches.