



Edvins Strautmanis, *Low Sky*, acrylic on canvas, 1981

Front: Edvins Strautmanis, *Yellow*, 1982, acrylic on canvas



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## Acknowledgements

499 Park Avenue and Hines, through their exhibition program, actively contribute to the cultural community as an expression of ongoing commitment to excellence in the visual arts and architecture.

## We wish to thank

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## EDVINS STRAUTMANIS: ACTION PAINTER

There's a mythic quality about Edvins Strautmanis, both the man and his decidedly large-scale, brawny, gestural paintings.

For one thing, Strautmanis died young at 58 in 1992, always too young to be included in the now-reblossoming Second Generation of the Abstract Expressionist/New York School. Although he was an Ab-Ex man by training and temperament, he didn't fit in any school other than that of a freelance Action Painter.

He cobbled together a career that included thirty solo exhibitions between 1963 and 1991, including four at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York, where the late gallerist also championed Willem de Kooning in the early 1960's.

That hardscrabble career was quite an accomplishment for an immigrant from strife-torn Latvia, who came to the United States with his family when he was sixteen years old. Strautmanis grabbed hold of the American Dream and became a painter, journeying at the storied School of the Art Institute in Chicago in the Post-War years of 1952-56.

# EDVINS STRAUTMANIS: ACTION PAINTER



Edvins Strautmanis, *Six Winds Change*, acrylic on canvas, 1981



Edvins Strautmanis, *Firestones Blowing*, acrylic on canvas, 1972

Over six-feet tall and beefy in appearance, Strautmanis was in many ways larger than life, even with one eye, a result of a rare cancer that had attacked his retina during his youth.

With his strong features, scraggly beard and noticeable disability, Strautmanis resembled a battle-worn Viking, albeit one who frequented the cobblestoned streets of SoHo where he found many of the used, heavy duty brooms he painted with.

Honed as a painter in the brief heyday of Abstract Expressionism, before Pop Art obliterated that movement and made it instantly obsolescent, Strautmanis stubbornly admired the work and painterly philosophies of Willem de Kooning and Hans Hofmann. But in his heart of hearts, his passion for painting veered closer to Francisco Goya and Chaim Soutine.

In fact, during a brief interview with this writer at the painter's SoHo studio back in 1987, on the occasion or close to it of a group exhibition, "8 New York Artists" at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University in Ithaca New York, an exhibition bringing together Strautmanis and seven of his contemporaries, including Alcopley, James Bohary, Herman Cherry, Dorothy Dehner, Elaine de Kooning, Reuben Kadish and Richards Ruben, Strautmanis said of his paintings: "You have to be an engineer and at the same time, rely on nature. You don't try to control; you must be open to the situation."

He also named those seminal art heroes of the past, along with Zen calligraphers, as his major influences.

If you think of Soutine's paint handling and raucous, almost uncontrollable surfaces, whether a landscape or a ruddy cheeked valet, you come very close to Strautmanis's fearsome surfaces, with brushstrokes built as wide as a motorcycle tire, thanks to his patently eccentric use of found push brooms instead of delicate sable brushes.

In some of his greatest works, such as *Jute Light Green* from 1983 in the present exhibition, despite the churning surface and massive scale, the inner light emanating from the painting, low voltage but constant, also reminds this viewer of the late and menacing paintings of Goya, works seemingly dominated by demons and frightful dreams.

Although Strautmanis painted and printed his fair share of skulls and roosters in other media and on a smaller scale, his forte and formidable vocabulary was all about abstraction, looming vertical works executed on the floor of his battle-scarred studio.

Despite the slashing geometry of his compositions and penchant for darker colors, a luminous light always moors his best work.

During my first encounter with his large-scale paintings in that long ago studio visit on Greene Street, the surfaces resembled the aftermath of a spewing volcano, lamp black, goose-bumped and massive. You felt and witnessed the power of the stroke and nervously looked behind your shoulder to make sure you weren't caught by another eruption.

The late Frederick Ted Castle, a noted art critic and experimental novelist, championed Strautmanis's work and wrote extensively about it. Castle quoted Strautmanis during one of his studio visits about the artist's mission to create works that were 'calligraphic, immediate and direct.'

"My painting," Strautmanis told Castle, "is a calligraphic stroke, suspended in time and space, that defines as it seeks a structure for emotional power. The image that it forms does not become an object, but a subject." He also revealed a belief system about his work that remains true today: "Art has to be as convincing as a fairy tale to a child," said Strautmanis, "a painting has to have that kind of conviction, and it only has that conviction if the brushstroke that the artist makes has that conviction."

It is relevant and unquestionably vital to hear the artist's words uttered for the occasion of back-to-back solo exhibitions in 1991 at the Haus Schönblick in Eifel Germany and the Stephen Rosenberg Gallery in New York, in order to recapture some of the bristling passion and eloquence he reserved for his power-packed and brilliantly constructed action paintings.

**Judd Tully**  
New York City  
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Edvins Strautmanis, *Jute Light Green*, acrylic on canvas, 1983