

Norman Bluhm, **Coney Island Beauty**, 1974, Oil on canvas, triptych, 84 x 348 inches

Norman Bluhm's Architecture of Desire

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The **Norman Bluhm Estate** through the auspices of the **Loretta Howard Gallery**, 525-531 West 26th Street, New York, NY for the loan of these paintings.

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If you step out of I.M. Pei's 499 Park Avenue and walk six blocks south you will find yourself in front of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building. This 39-story glass-and-steel office building is considered one of the great monuments of modernist architecture. But what does the Seagram Building have to do with this group of sensuous abstract paintings by Norman Bluhm? As it happens, when he was a very young man in Chicago, Bluhm studied architecture with Mies at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Pressured into architectural school by his family, Bluhm didn't last long under Mies's exacting tutelage, which frequently involved correcting scale drawings to 1/16th of an inch. One day, instead of making the required corrections, Bluhm began doodling. "I had messed up the drawing," he recalled in a 1997 interview, "and I was drawing these nudes dancing around, and Mies walked in and he saw this. What are you doing here, Herr Bluhm? I said oh, I'm ruining a drawing, so I just thought I would draw a few nudes dancing around enjoying themselves." As well as displaying Bluhm's characteristically rebellious spirit, this anecdote of him inserting dancing nudes into an austere modernist design captures something of his maverick position as a painter in the 1970s and 1980s. In order to fully appreciate the audacity of the paintings on view in this current exhibition it helps to know something

of Bluhm's development as an artist and of the context in which he made these works.

Bluhm's earliest work, made during his years in Paris (1947-1956), were abstract paintings built up from thin layers of luminous color. These all-over webs of glowing color reflected the influence of Claude Monet and medieval stained-glass windows, but after Bluhm relocated to New York City in 1956 his work became less calm and meditative. Intensely gestural, inundated with drips and splatters generated by his explosive brush marks, Bluhm's early New York paintings adopted a kind of centrifugal structure that may have reflected his experience as a pilot. As the 1960s progressed, the paintings grew larger in size, often painted on multiple panels, and the spaces between his gestures opened up dramatically as long, skittering brushstrokes harried bulkier shapes. With the rise of Pop art and Minimalism, gestural abstraction was seen by many as an outdated style and artists who had emerged in the 1950s such as Bluhm and Joan Mitchell were marginalized. In 1970, Bluhm left New York (and his studio at 333 Park Avenue South) for Millbrook in the Hudson River Valley. It was there that he would reorient his work from a gesture-based, essentially nonreferential practice to a style of painting

that relied chiefly on biomorphic shapes achieved through evenly applied layers of solid colors. Gesture never entirely disappears from Bluhm's work, but after the 1970s it becomes just another element in his growing repertoire of painterly options and compositional devices. **Pinkerton's Lady** (1986) displays another such device that would take on increasing importance in the later work—bilateral symmetry. Bluhm's 1970s canvases acquired an unprecedented degree of sensual form and opulent color. In paintings such as **Hecuba** and **Procris** the canvas becomes the stage for an erotic choreography of undulating, bulging, sinuous forms. Much of this new sensuality came out of Bluhm's practice of regularly drawing from nude models. The 1970s paintings also reflect his increasingly profound dialogue with art history. It was in the European Painting galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the collection of medieval tapestries at the Cloisters that Bluhm found inspiration for his many of his post-1970 paintings. With its drapery-like folds and suggestion of shapely breasts and limbs, a painting like **Procris** could be seen as a more muscular restatement of the Ovidian myth after grand precedents from Piero di Cosimo and Veronese to Fragonard. But it would be a mistake to categorize Bluhm as nostalgic. First, he never resorted to pastiche but always pushed himself to invent

new pictorial solutions. Second, as the title of the triptych **Coney Island Beauty** and the roiling, graffiti-esque energy of his 1970s work suggests, he relished the vitality of American life, a trait he shared with poet friends like Frank O'Hara.

The sumptuous eroticism of Bluhm's painting went against a certain puritanical tendency in modernism. His embrace of art history also challenged the avantgarde fantasy of starting with a perfect tabula rasa. Of course, one of the purest expressions of this dream of a rupture with the past was the modernist architecture epitomized by Mies van der Rohe. This is why that vignette of the young Bluhm doodling dancing nudes in Mies's class is so poignant, as if he already knew that his destiny would be to disrupt such strict geometric regularity with expressions of Baroque exuberance and fleshly desire.

Raphael Rubinstein

For more information about the work in this show, please contact Dorothy Solomon: dorothy@dsafinearts.com (T) 845.838.1020