

April 2011, No. 4



Judith Godwin: *Carnivale*, 1994, oil on canvas, 30 by 36 inches; at Spanierman Modern.

JUDITH GODWIN SPANIERMAN MODERN

This compact but nonetheless exhilarating survey covered Judith Godwin's 60-year career with a selection of 18 oil paintings from the 1950s to the '90s. The early works show the impact of Abstract Expressionism, and indeed, some of its most prominent practitioners, including Franz Kline, James Brooks and Kenzo Okada, were among Godwin's close friends and mentors in the 1950s and '60s. In 1953, with the encouragement of another close friend, dancer and choreographer Martha Graham, Godwin left her native Suffolk, Va., for New York City. Although she was not a dancer herself, a sense of lyrical dynamism enlivens each of the paintings on view.

Godwin had already exhibited abstractions before she studied with Hans Hofmann in New York, where she quickly asserted herself with works such as *Echoes, No. 2* (1954). Here, she demonstrates an ebullient sensibility in which curving brushstrokes and straight, slashing lines of blue, red, purple and black are individuated yet nestle together in almost geometric formations. In two works from 1960, *Green Mountain* and *Black Cloud* (each over 4 feet high), the brushstrokes are much wider and create broad swaths of color. The compositions feature heightened contrasts between earthy, somber tones and central expanses of creamy, light-emitting white.

Several motifs recur in the exhibition: a curving arrow, a rough circle

and short, right-angled patches of lines that often form irregular squares. With fluent gestures and an overriding transparency, Godwin lays out the basic elements of her visual grammar in each composition. *Infidel* (1979) is a tour de force that combines the pictorial and the painterly. A central three-quarter circle is painted in a long, rounded stroke of dark umber. Not completely free-floating, it is linked by a short, thick band to the top of the canvas and surrounded on the upper left by an expanse of deep red. In the lower portion, several arched forms emerge behind the umber, one outlined in gray. This shape resembles the twin arches of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the subtle drawing helps trigger an exciting oscillation between image and abstraction.

Godwin approaches figuration in a similar way in *Carnivale* (1994). In this work, four repetitions of an abstracted head appear atop what looks like a lunging purple torso. The heads face left, and the torso leans right; a thin blue line tracing the top of the angular torso culminates in the tip of an arrow on the left. The colors and shapes evoke the exuberant dazzle of a dancer or an ice skater, while linear passages of the same colors suggest a vibrant upheaval. This work and the show as a whole prove the sustained vitality of Abstract Expressionism by one of its early practitioners. Godwin continues to use physical gesture to convey metaphorical spaces.

—Gerard McCarthy