

**Blouin Modern Painters:** 'Revisiting "A New Spirit" Nearly 40 Years Later' by Anya Harrison, October 2018

# BLOUINmodernpainters

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

OCTOBER 2018

LONDON

## Revisiting "A New Spirit" Nearly 40 Years Later

Back in 1981, London's Royal Academy of Arts — a self-fashioned bastion of aesthetic taste and style since its founding in 1769 — found itself at the center of a heated debate that rippled through from its Piccadilly base and into the wider world. The reason? The encroaching opening of a new exhibition, "A New Spirit in Painting," put together by the Academy's recently appointed exhibition secretary, Norman Rosenthal, along with Nicholas Serota — back then the director of the Whitechapel Gallery — and art critic Christos M. Joachimides, that gave itself the challenge of surveying the state of international Contemporary painting in Europe. Speaking on the phone from Madrid, Rosenthal recalls that just two days ahead of the exhibition's opening, "there was a meeting of all the Royal Academicians, among them a progressive group that included John Hoyland, Eduardo Paolozzi and even David Hockney [one of the artists included in the show] who tried to have the exhibition stopped." Despite this call to arms, go ahead it did, although it certainly didn't garner critical or public acclaim.

Fast forward to the present, and Almine Rech Gallery is hosting "A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018" on view until November 17, in its London space, which sits in the heart of Mayfair and only a 10-minute walk from the Royal Academy. Presenting works by 13 artists, it is the second chapter of a transatlantic showcase, the first of which was organized in its New



Rainer Fetting, "Prophet at the Sea of Galilee," 2007, oil on canvas, 210 x 160 cm./ 82 5/8 x 63 in.

York gallery this past spring. The crux of the project is, according to the gallery's press statement, a reconstruction and reinterpretation of that eponymously-titled seminal exhibition of 1981. This review has been spurred on by the gallery's belief that "A New Spirit in Painting" remains as relevant today as it was "revolutionary" in 1981. "[It] was unique in that it challenged contemporary notions of painting, and broke through to the broader public in what had been arguably one of the most conservative galleries in the world," said Jason Cori, senior director of

Almine Rech Gallery, based in London. "It shattered the divide between the art elite and museum-goers, and revealed, exactly as the exhibition's title suggested, a new way of painting, a new feeling behind thinking about and making art." For Rosenthal, who the gallery brought in to curate the two exhibitions (and who recently enjoyed a similar role at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in London, curating "Joseph Beuys: Utopia at the Stag Monuments"), it is less of a reappraisal rather than "a souvenir of a particular period."

Among the list of artists are



Malcolm Morley,  
"St. George and  
the Dragon," 2016,  
oil on linen,  
132 x 132 x 6 cm./  
52 x 52 x 2 3/8 in.



stalwarts of 20th-century painting, and the figures that make up the current "souvenir" have all been pulled from the 38-strong list of artists which made up the original "A New Spirit in Painting." Frank Auerbach, Georg Baselitz, Per Kirkeby, David Salle, Julian Schnabel, all make a re-appearance. Among them are just two women painters, Maria Lassnig and Susan Rothenberg. Neither one made the cut back in 1981. Yet the all-male, white, exclusively European and American roster of artists was enough to garner a furore among the Academicians. According to Rosenthal, whose motive to invite two co-curators was spurred on by just this very realization, "American and British Contemporary art was in order and had been accepted by the public. People loved David Hockney and Howard Hodgkin. They no longer found them controversial. But nobody had heard of the likes of Baselitz, [A.R.] Penck, [Anselm] Kiefer, [Sigmar] Polke or [Gerhard] Richter... To show these artists at a London exhibition was a pretty dangerous move. I was campaigning for a world that I already knew since 1974, which was completely unknown. In places like the Royal Academy, or even the Tate though, people don't like the unknown." And even though the inclusion of Maria Lassnig in the Almine Rech exhibitions can be taken as "a form of quasi-apology" for the conscious decision to omit her in 1981, for Rosenthal this is a concern of artistic merit (no matter how subjective, and he can be refreshingly to the point that it's a question of opinions), rather than a concerted effort to address the lack of diversity in the selection of artists, which the reconstructed versions hardly make a dent in rebalancing. "A New Spirit Then" ... is "a historical show," concurs Cori, and when organizing the exhibition, "we took into consideration [it] was predominantly going to feature male artists," so what becomes strikingly apparent is the

extent to which diversity was simply not the *cri de coeur* in the early 1980s that it so justifiably, and necessarily, is today.

What the original exhibition did then, and what the current reinterpretations may hope to channel, was shift the axis of influence. For Rosenthal, "it was one of the first shows that expanded the dialogue outside of the UK and America, and beyond the London — New York — Los Angeles axis," though he concedes that this expansion went only so far as Europe.

While the earlier New York chapter featured historical paintings from the 1980s, including mature paintings by Picasso completed in the last years of his life, the companion presentation in London offers up works made by those very same artists but from 2000 onward, with the idea that "the

same painters who, at the time, were new and who encapsulated a new spirit in painting, are still making good works now," explains Rosenthal. Not one to hold back his opinions, he argues that "Francesco Clemente is a fucking good painter today... We are also including Howard Hodgkin, who was left out of the New York show, because I actually think that Howard became a much better painter at the end of his life." It might not make as many waves as the original did, but "A New Spirit Then..." is a glimpse into the not-so-distant past, when an exhibition of paintings could still elicit shock and ire.

"A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018" is on view until November 17 at Almine Rech Gallery.

[www.alminerech.com](http://www.alminerech.com)

— ANYA HARRISON