ALMINE RECH

Larry Poons

Jun 3 — Jul 31, 2021 | London

Larry Poons and Painting: An Epic Journey

Works from 1976 to the Present

When the preeminent curator Henry Geldzahler featured Larry Poons' work in the landmark exhibition *New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970,* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which opened in late 1969, he devoted the show's culminating gallery to the artist — at 32, Poons was the youngest included. The room glowed with Poons' early "Dots and Lozenge" paintings, as well as several then-recent expansive, colorful abstractions, later regarded as iconic works in the Color Field movement. Geldzahaler thereby positioned Poons as heir to the heroic era of American painting, following in the footsteps of Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, whose seminal works preceded Poons in the exhibition plan. Poons was regarded as the promising, guiding and rising star who could lead the way toward exciting new possibilities for contemporary painting.

Over the course of five decades since the Met exhibition, Poons has more than fulfilled that promise. His trajectory was, however, not what most critics and art-world observers were expecting, or perhaps were even equipped to understand. Poons, as it turns out, was a much more radical painter than anyone could have imagined. Indifferent to the demands of critics, curators, and the marketplace, he remained steadfast on his own, inimitable path, constantly evolving and always surprising his audience.

The present exhibition at Almine Rech London constitutes a concise Larry Poons survey that picks up where Geldzhaler's show left off. It includes a representative work of the 1970s, *Yellow Cat on Hand* (1976), a marvelous example of his richly textured "Throw" paintings. Here, cascades of innumerable rivulets of pigment flow down the large canvas like a mesmerizing waterfall. In these works, Poons embraces chance, as well as the laws of gravity. With prolonged viewing, the composition's intense vertical thrust, combined with the constantly shifting range of indeterminate color, becomes arresting. Its dazzling sense of up-and-downward motion provokes a visual sensation not unlike the flickering optical effect of the contrasting colors in his earlier "Dots" paintings.

By the 1980s, Poons was renowned as one of the pioneers of Color Field painting, but defying expectations, he shifted away from a focus on pure color, and furthered his experiments with texture, enhancing the already rich impasto of his surfaces. In works such as *The 4 Fenton Bros* (1985) and *Carioca* (1986), he applied bits of foam rubber and crumbled paper to the canvas in order to slow the movement of the numerous layers of thrown paint. The results are enthralling allover compositions of richly nuanced textures and often earthy colors that recall rocky cliff faces or lichen-covered hillsides on a rainy day.

The large 1990 composition *Music* is a key work in Poons' evolution. The surface of this sumptuous, prismatic-hued canvas has been built up with clusters of hemisphere—bisected rubber balls of varying diameters, and bits of rolled and crumpled paper fixed to the canvas and ensconced beneath many layers of shimmering pigment. This unique palimpsest indeed conveys a pulsating rhythm befitting the work's title. *Music* alludes to Poons' background in music, as well as his lifelong interest in it, and the work introduces a new, idiosyncratic type of pictorialism within his oeuvre. It represents a bold step forward, away from the constraints of Greenbergian formalism associated with the early days of Color Field painting, with its emphasis on flat surfaces and pure, unmodulated color.

I have long regarded *The Hanged Man* (1994) as one of Poons' masterpieces, and therefore, one of the best paintings by anyone in the 1990s. The painting encompasses a Poons retrospective to that date unto itself, so it requires some knowledge of and an appreciation for a number of Poons's earlier achievements. The title calls to mind *The Hanged Man's House* (1873) by Paul Cézanne — with its dramatic diagonal lines, and eccentric, multiple perspectives. Poons' composition is equally complex, arcane, and full of self-referential humor.

Atop a series of elongated, hooklike shapes and irregular rectangles of foam collaged onto the surface, Poons has applied thrown and poured passages of pink and purple, highlighted near the top of the canvas with painterly flourishes of purple and blue, redolent of his poured-paint works of the late 1960s, and the "Throw" paintings of the 1970s. Scattered across the surface is a hyper-active network of colorful hard-edge dots and lozenge shapes, which hark back to his early "Dots" paintings, which established his career.

In works of the early twenty-first century, Poons developed a distinctive pictorial language—in compositions of heightened color and crisp drawing—that often suggests landscape. In fact, the imagery of undulating geometric shapes, organic and architectonic forms, and searing color in works such as *One Inch Less Wild* (2001) and *Ash Nobody* (2000) was inspired by his many cross-country motorcycle trips. A senior-division champion, Poons would annually traverse the United States on motorcycle, accompanied by his wife, artist Paula De Luccia. These works may be viewed as an homage to the various desert vistas and mountainous terrain of America that Poons knows so well. The artist, however, has transposed these landscape memories into his own painterly vocabulary of light and color. "Painting *is* color!" Poons often proclaims.

In his more recent works, Poons largely abandoned the three-dimensional elements that often served as the underlying drawing or armature for each composition. For the most part, he also abandoned brushes, and many recent works, including *No Home* (2010), and *Bye Bye Corinthian* (2016) were painted primarily with hands and fingers. It seems as if Poons has returned painting to a realm of primordial artistic expression, in which the basic human emotions, and the physical and psychological sensations of living, are embodied in the fundamental mark-making capabilities of the human hand—the artist's hand.

In recent masterful efforts, such as *Happy Carlo* (2017) and *Centaur* (2020) with their frenetically shifting clouds of light and color, realized by means of countless bravura touches of pigment, Poons demonstrates his virtuosity with seemingly effortless panache. Already an art-historical figure, widely regarded as among the foremost colorists of the latter half of the twentieth century, Poons is as relevant today as ever. With the vibrant, energetic, and surprising works he continues to produce, he reinforces his stature as one of the most significant artists of this moment.

- David Ebony, Author

This exhibition is organized in association with Yares Art, New York