

ROY LERNER

Overtures and Bebop

By John K. Grande

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Eternity is a brief instant when it comes to Roy Lerner's art. Each and every painting is a journey. Exclaim!, Roy Lerner's paintings seem to say. The gesture extends, expands with a neo-Baroque style. Lerner engages his medium, builds thick impasto surfaces. They can be so thick that Lerner incorporates metal mesh to sustain the weight of paint. Paint and weight! The light and surface colour variations change as you move around them.

Curves and Spaces, 2006
101,60 x 76,20 cm





Getting Traction III, 2008
119,40 x 106,70 cm



Black Magic, 2004
71,10 x 304,80 cm

Early on, Lerner shared his forays into New York to encounter the jazz music scene with painter Kenneth Noland. While a student at Franconia College in New Hampshire (1974-1977) Lerner learned from Peter Bradley, who introduced him to Anthony Caro. As Caro's studio assistant, Lerner was exposed to a broader range of influences, and was encouraged to travel. In Europe, Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) and Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1920-1926) seized his attention for their passionate, heroic dedication to painting. Lerner exhibited alongside Ross Bleckner, Barry LaVa, Keung Szeto, Gary Stephen and Deborah Remington at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1987. Larry Aldrich, founder of the Aldrich Museum, phrased American lyrical abstraction in 1969 into a movement.

Abstract neologisms, places where the contours meet light and color, each element clashes, forging forward. The vitality is so explosive some consider it over the top. In the 1983 Abstract Art in New England show at the Danforth Museum, Jill Nathanson, who exhibited alongside Roy Lerner, generated this surface gel effect and gained recognition for her new abstract vernacular. The next year, in 1984, at Pine Plains' Triangle Workshop, Lerner's thick yellow gel paintings (inspired by Nathanson's innovations) drew the attention of guest critic Clement Greenberg who declared them to be the best paintings of that year's camp.

At Galerie d'arts contemporain, *Curves and Spaces* (2006) carries cadences of Arshile Gorky's use of lines with colour, but the feeling is lighter, a searching exposure of the painterly process. *Ode to Kandinsky* (2005) builds patterns, leaves the surface tonal, and then suggests this painting is part of a greater revolving rhythmic sequencing. With its deep blues, swirl of palette

knife markings and colour integrations, *Black Magic* (2004) references the 1942 Glenn Miller jazz classic *That Old Black Magic*, later to be recorded by Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald and many others. *Flourish* (2008) is like a series of repetitive drumbeats or variation on drum solos in improvisational jazz done with painting. Using transparent gels, mineral paint, and acrylic, Lerner generates an incredible array of propulsive artworks. *Trout* (2012) has Delaunay-esque swirls that recalls the fish scale patterns on a walleye trout, but done with a sequential decorative, vivid coloration/animation. It also references Franz Schubert's Piano Quintet in A major, D. 667, sometimes called *The Trout Quintet*, Lerner's mentor Sir Anthony Caro's favorite piece of music.

Roy Lerner's abstraction is as freeform as John Cage's musical scores, though the Jazz-fusion allusions are even closer to his art. Jackson Pollock-like transitions can be seen in Lerner's painting but his staccato-like reverberations with palette knife or brush are likewise informed by the post-media Pop vernacular. Lerner's is a meta-language of painting born of an age where all media - material, synthetic and digital - contribute to a new fusion. In jazz-fusion, world beat, even rap, this global hybridity and communal interchangeability of sources and streams of creativity is part of an ever-present give and take vernacular re-combination. Lerner begins with what abstractionists like Arshile Gorky, de Kooning, and others sought but is neither totally lyrical, nor realistic. His approach is closer to rap, for its raw textural immediacy. Experience is transposed directly onto canvas as the artist interprets his feelings. In this way, each moment is a decision in the ongoing "act" of painting. This is how Lerner "edits" and "composes". Colour field painters like Jules Olitski, were a point of departure for Lerner and the New New Painters,

but as the writer/theorist James Elkins has commented, New New Painting, despite Clement Greenberg's occasional affirmative support, still has no critical framework to define its departure from abstraction's origins. With *Ode to Hans* (1999) we see the original influences, notably Hans Hofman in the upper areas of the painting, but there is a kind of phrasing of this within the overall composition that makes us aware this was painted in another era as homage.

In *Getting Traction III* (2008), Lerner engages in a stutter step brushwork that parallels jazz repetition, and even scat singing. The colour splays in waves, an expressive surface tactility... There is no recourse to art history in Lerner's gestures. One senses this innocence, a truthful love of painting for the joy of the action, the brush, engaging in freeform, gestural art. *Higher Ground* (2006) has a bold, iconic tachiste flair, with its reds, and whites. His art mirrors Miles Davis' jazz-fusion experimentation; when it comes to Lerner, who knew Miles Davis, process, the engagement between music and art is interchangeable. Understanding where the art and music came from enables the artist to take leaps of faith others couldn't imagine. As Lerner says, "It always struck me as strange that two monumental people that I knew, Clement Greenberg and Miles Davis, both dismissed any correlation between painting and music. That always struck me as wrong. So, armed with this knowledge, one can enjoy to a greater degree the reading of these paintings. Though it's not entirely necessary to understand this to look at my paintings, certainly this perspective can open up a door." Lerner's art is about the flux you find in patterns, rhythms, tones, the sort of fusion you find in art, and you can find in jazz. This major catalogued exhibition of Lerner's painting is being held in conjunction with the Montreal Jazz Festival. ●