

Art **Reviews** Weekend

The Second Act of Andrew Forge

After finding success in England, Forge walked away from everything he knew how to do and started over.



by John Yau
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Andrew Forge, "Heavy Hemlocks II" (2000), oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches (all images © Estate of Andrew Forge. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery)

The English-born painter Andrew Forge (1923–2002) could have continued along the respectable path that he had established for himself by 1950, when he started teaching painting and drawing at the Slade School in London. From 1964–70, he was head of the Department of Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and in 1971–72, he was a lecturer in the Department of Art at the University of Reading. In addition to teaching, he became a highly regarded writer on art and began exhibiting his observational paintings, which were well

received by critics. In 1964, he had a 10-year retrospective at City Art Gallery, in Bristol, England.

All of this changed when Forge moved to America after receiving an invitation to be a visiting critic at Cooper Union (1973–74), and continued teaching on this side of the Atlantic until shortly before his death. This included a long stint in the School of Art at Yale, from 1975 to '94, where he served as dean from '75 to '83.

Looking back over Forge's reviews, one senses that he was becoming dissatisfied with his approach to painting and subject matter long before he came to America. In his review of different exhibitions in London, Forge made the following observations about Giacometti:

His work questions every orthodox view of stylistic development. [...] He is not in dialogue with his own previous statements, but with the hours and the minutes of the present working experience: the look across the studio, the shift to the clay on the stand, the return to that figure, still mysteriously present, still that distance away. The difficulty of finding words for Giacometti is analogous to the difficulty of imagining the present extended in time. (*Artforum*, October 1965)



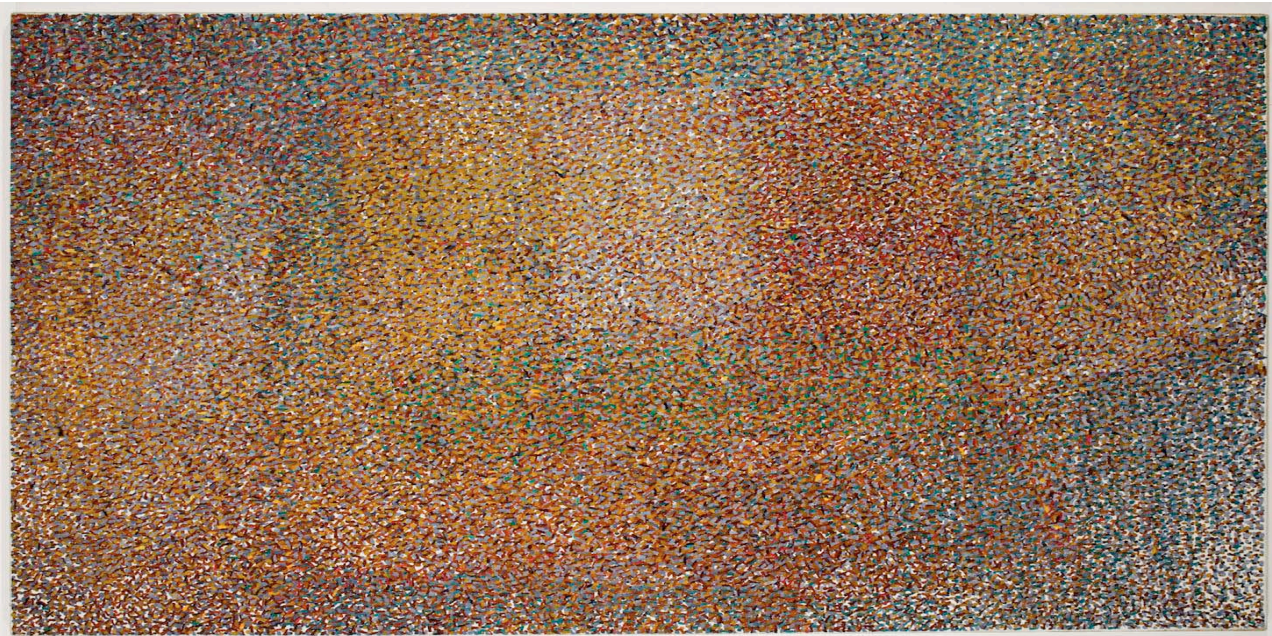
Andrew Forge, "December" (2002), oil on canvas, 64 x 48 inches

According to Forge, meeting John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns precipitated a radical change, which his statements about Giacometti suggest was inevitable. He went from being a perceptual painter who based his work on what was in front of him to being a

painter of perception focused on what he was putting in front of himself. Necessity, as the ancient proverb tells us, is the mother of invention.

For Forge, this meant shifting away from knowing what he was going to depict to applying one dot of paint on a large canvas, which he did with the smallest brush he had. He began adding more dots, changing the colors, and, in some cases, adding short stripes. Recalling his observations about Giacometti, one could say he developed a way of painting that extended the present.

Although Forge relied on a pared down vocabulary of dots and stripes for the rest of his life, he was neither a Neo-pointillist nor a Minimalist. He was not interested in the pairing of complementary colors or in working monochromatically. As a result of this radical change in his approach, he produced two entirely separate and distinct bodies of work. More importantly, he did not change in order to align himself with a group or stylistic tendency. Rather, he walked away from everything he knew how to do and started over.



Andrew Forge, "November" (1980–81), oil on canvas, 50 x 80 inches

While we will have to wait for another show to see the work that Forge did in England, the exhibition *Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight* at Betty Cunningham Gallery (June 1–July 30, 2021) consists of 15 paintings and six works on paper dated between 1973 and 2002, which spans the second period of his career.

Although Forge worked with two basic marks, a dot and a line, he seems never to repeat

himself. Some paintings appear to contain a form, while others are resolutely abstract. Their scale always seems based on the limits of his reach.

Forge's direct contact with the canvas did not follow any plan. His incremental way of working started with the smallest mark, a dot. He would make a series of dots; after making the first, it was never obvious where he would make the second or third, nor was it apparent when he would change colors or what colors he would use. By working this way, he continually had to make decisions without ever relying on a brushstroke, a gesture, something that would carry his mark across the canvas. His lines are short; he was only interested in what was directly in front of him.

These paintings are records of thousands and thousands of decisions, all of which feel as if they are visible. He seemed to proceed purely on his nerve. One can see relationships between the colors and/or tones, but Forge often added a series of unconnected lines or dispersed dots in no apparent pattern to interrupt any visual rhythm that might occur in his paintings. The balance between rhythm and dissonance is always tightly calibrated. We don't look at these paintings; we look into them, while being conscious of the surface.



Andrew Forge, "Monreale" (1985–86), oil on canvas, 44 x 36 inches

The closest analogy I can think of is that it is like looking into a storm of confetti that has been stilled. Is that column-like shape that I see different from the confetti or made of it? Instead of transporting us to a view, as he did in his earlier landscapes, he brings us to that juncture of mind and eye: what are we seeing and how do we know it?

While Forge credits Cage and Rauschenberg with inspiring him to change, chance plays no role in these paintings. Every mark is the result of the artist's decision regarding size of the dot, placement, and color. In his rejection of chance, gesture, accident, systematic processes, and procedure, he implicitly criticizes Minimalism, hard-edged abstraction, and Color Field painting, something for which he has never received credit. He came to America and did not become an American-style painter.

Done near the end of his life, "Heavy Hemlocks II" (oil on canvas, 40 by 60 inches, 2000) evokes the base of a wide tree spreading out along the bottom edge, set against a yellowish light. And yet, as I write this, I know that I have conveyed a simplified view of a complex experience. I also cannot say the painting is purely abstract. This is one of Forge's great accomplishments: he makes a painting that pushes back against description, even as it courts it.



Andrew Forge, "Winter, Kent" (1973), oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

At the same time, knowing of Forge's erudition, we might consider whether or not the title is a reference to Socrates, who was sentenced to death by the Athenian court for corrupting the youth of Athens, and chose to drink hemlock while his student Plato was in the jail cell with him.

This exhibition could easily have been titled *The Limits of Language*. By resisting discursive language, Forge underscores his devotion to abstract painting, which does not pay obeisance to various theories, as does Formalism, for instance. By rejecting the aid of critical discourse,

he wanted viewers to see his paintings on their own terms as well as invite them to ponder seeing, and how and what they see.

Even in the paintings where a distinct form seems to exist, Forge's work hovers in an in-between state, neither dissipating nor coalescing into an image or shape. In this way, the paintings become riveting. Both philosophically and physically speaking, we all exist in an in-between state.

Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight *continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Manhattan) through July 30.*