

ArtSeen

Jake Berthot: *The Enamels*

By Phillip Griffith

In 1994, the New York painter Jake Berthot, who died in 2014, relocated his home from the city to a house upstate. The move marked a transition from the geometric abstraction of his earlier career to figurative landscapes painted in response to his new environment. These landscapes reprised the romantic landscape, filtered through images of Catskill forests, often dark scenes in which, for example, a heavy mist blanketing a dale might be mistaken for a fog resting heavily over an ocean. Yet, still, Berthot's work evidenced the geometric structure that undergirds his earlier work, as in the bare trees around which he sketched a fantom scaffolding in *Winter* (1999). The fifteen mostly untitled enamel works on paper on view

at the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, all made between 1981 and 1987 (though including several undated works), flirt in the border territory between abstraction and figuration. Geoffrey Dorfman, who organized the exhibition, calls attention to a similar feeling in Berthot's painting in his essay for the show. "Berthot's work," he writes, "has always hovered between geometry and the weather of sensation."

In a 2006 conversation in this publication, Berthot, who began as a self-taught artist before finding the mentorship of Milton Resnick, spoke of these twin impulses in his creative trajectory. Referring to drawings he completed over a period of two years, he recalled, "As my study of geometry got more complex and far removed from my initial intention, the urge to get back to the sensual activity of painting became more pronounced." The works on view at the Foundation capture something akin to this sensual activity in the intuitiveness of their marks and scribbles traced into and onto the enamel.



Jake Berthot, # 2, undated. Enamel on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Jake Berthot and Betty Cunningham Gallery.

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In some of these works, the rectangular field is an opaque black, scuzzy gray, or burnt peach. In others, a white enamel gives the effect of a sheer layer, with an ice blue showing through in patches. They simultaneously have the effect of revealing an atmospheric or conceptual space beneath the surface, and of something having been erased from the surface. This hint of simultaneity is present in the forms etched into the enamel as well. In one composition from 1986, two human forms, one with male and one with female genitalia, intertwine or are imbricated one with the other, two forms joining or one form metamorphosing into two. In another, what could be the form of a horse partially recorded could also be a dog, or drawn with neither of those images intended. In #2 (the only titled work) and an untitled piece, both undated, flower-like forms verge on blooming. Though the muted colors of the surfaces imply a wintry weather, the forms scored into the enamel indicate the arrival of spring, of transformation out of winter's cold silence. The Saturday I visited the exhibition, I couldn't help but think of an unseasonably (disconcertingly) hot, eighty-degree April Tuesday four days earlier in the week when tree branches still bare had insinuated stark black lines into the warm blue sky above them.



Jake Berthot, Untitled, 1982. Enamel on paper, 19 3/8 x 18 1/4 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Jake Berthot and Betty Cuninghams Gallery.



Jake Berthot, Untitled, 1981. Enamel on paper, 18 3/8 x 15 1/8 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Jake Berthot and Betty Cuninghams Gallery.

Several works also include a script that veers into the abstraction of asemic writing. When I took a photo of one of these, from 1986, my iPhone camera identified the mostly illegible script in a yellow frame on the phone's screen, registering it as writing even if its content remains a visual feature without semantic meaning. The phone's AI-generated frame added a new layer of geometric structure to this composition, one which Berthot may not have imagined but, like his turn to landscape painting, renews how we parse figuration and abstraction in these works.

Four decades after Berthot layered enamel on paper, I found these works buzzing in the weather of our own time, between the intuitions of abstract mark-making and figurative drawing, between the vagaries of technological development and a hot April day in our warming world.

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