

HYPERALLERGIC

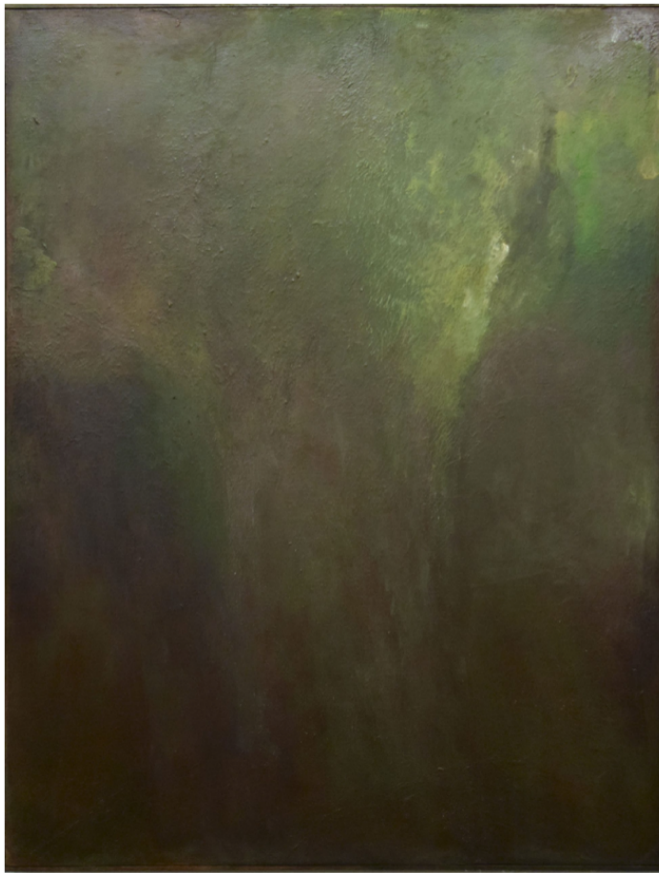
Art **Reviews**

Raging Against the Dying of the Light

Jake Berthot's paintings are haunted by an awareness of mortality and, beyond that, a feeling that no light awaits in the darkness.



John Yau March 2023



Jake Berthot, "Forest, Moon, Tree" (2014), oil on linen, 41 inches x 31 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery)

In an [interview](#) between art critic Jennifer Samet and artist Jake Berthot (1939–2014), Berthot reveals that he had a hardscrabble life. He grew up with his grandparents on a truck farm in central Pennsylvania. One work of art was in the house — a double-sided piece. On one side was a line drawing of the horse; on the other a Victorian print of the Last Supper. When he describes his attraction to the drawing, he asks rhetorically, “How could someone make you feel a drawing that is not there?” He cannot believe that you can make a drawing of a real-life subject without having it in front of you. His puzzlement about the relationship between form and absence, what is there and not there, haunted him his entire life.

During a career that began in the early 1970s, at the height of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, Berthot doggedly examined the entanglement of materiality and immateriality in paintings and drawings. A notoriously slow painter, he could look at a small canvas every day and find something to add, cover, shift, or scrape away. Even after he abandoned abstraction and began painting gloomy landscapes, his preoccupation continued; despite the change, critic David Carrier observed, “Berthot’s late art [was] an exercise in small discriminations.”

That insistence on working slowly, on not striving for certainty, and on investigating the relationship between solidity and dissolution binds together all of the work in the exhibition *Jake Berthot: What Happened To Abstraction?*, at Betty Cuningham (February 2–April 15, 2023). Of the 20 paintings, all made between 1971 and

2014, half are abstractions dating from the 1970s and the other half are what the gallery press released termed “his late ‘tree/landscape’ paintings dating from 1996 to 2014.”



Jake Berthot, “Last” (1996), oil on gessoed panel, 12 1/2 inches x 12 inches

Historically speaking, artists tend to move from representation to abstraction. This was regarded as progress in the case of someone like Jackson Pollock. Philip Guston demolished that narrative when he forsook abstraction for cartoony depictions of hooded figures, such as “Edge of Town” (1969). What is clear is that there is no overarching narrative an artist must adhere to, nor model to follow. You make it up as you go along. You develop a signature or you resist one. Berthot realized this after he left New York in 1992 and began making heavily worked, small-scale, fiery red monochromatic abstractions, including two in the exhibition, “Grief for that Past” (1992–94) and “Last” (1996). In these two paintings, the red evokes heat and fire, destruction and cleansing, grief and joy.

The palette marks a break from Berthot’s use of moody greens, blacks, and grays. Working in areas explored by Mark Rothko and Milton Resnick, the latter of whom took the young artist

under his wing, he recognized that his true subject was what Dylan Thomas addressed in his famous villanelle, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” which contains the stanza:

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Facing mortality and infinity, Berthot pondered the “dying of the light.”

Although Berthot is associated with Minimalism, the exhibition’s earliest paintings, “3 Columns in Memory of Gertrude Stein” (1971) and “Egypt” (1972), both on shaped canvases with flat extensions built out from three or all four sides, are animated by a tension between the artwork as a geometric object and as a dissipating field of mixed colors: dark greens and grays and dark greens and rust browns. Attention vacillates between the physical shape and the minute tonal shifts within the field, and, in the case of “3 Columns in Memory of Gertrude Stein,” between the painting’s square or its abutting squares and the extensions. In these, as in all of Berthot’s subsequent work, he invites viewers to slow down their looking and reflect upon their experience. In this regard, he shares something with Ad Reinhardt, particularly his *Blackpaintings*.

Whereas Reinhardt pursued the idea of *via negativa* and the impossibility of naming, Berthot struggled to find out if any names were viable. This, as much as his childhood and his move from the Bowery to rural upstate New York, shaped the trajectory of his career. From the beginning, he was not interested solely in formal concerns, but in recording his attempt to name the ineffable. He was never aligned with the various

orthodoxies dominating the art world during the '70s, but was an outlier constantly seeking a way to express his feelings of doubt while facing mortality and the effects of time.

His use of an elaborately torqued grid that he devised enabled him to convey multiple vanishing points, which signified infinity, the beginning of an immensity that can neither be conceived nor comprehended. In "Night, Sea and the Rock" (2004), viewers are guided by the title to look at the ocean, waves, night, and a rock, yet they might feel that they are giving shape to indeterminate forms within an ambiguous abstract space — and this would also be true. He was driven to focus on the tension between the nameable and unnamable. Even when the form is more apparent, like the tree trunk in "Forest, Moon, Tree" (2014), the stripped trunk seems to be in a state of disintegration, as if the body is losing its shape and muscular structure.

The paintings are haunted by an awareness of mortality and, beyond that, a feeling that no light awaits in the darkness. This is not something that Berthot came to late in life; it was there from the beginning of his career. By not turning away, he infused his paintings with a current of joy; he would learn to watch himself pass from the material to the immaterial and even embrace it. Somewhere in himself he found it possible to go gently. Jake Berthot: *What Happened to Abstraction?* continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 15. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.



Jake Berthot, "Night, Sea and the Rock" (c. 2014), oil on linen, 34 1/2 inches x 41 1/2 inches