

eric firestone gallery

Elise Asher (1912-2004) was a painter and poet whose integration of poetry into her works – first thematically in her early abstractions, then by integrating text into her compositions – represents a meaningful contribution to New York School painting. Her canvases of the 1950s and 1960s blend calligraphic handwriting with color and brushwork. The personal style of these linear abstractions was Asher's unique addition to the movement.

Asher's calligraphic paintings are suggestive, rather than literal and legible. However, Asher did cite from a variety of sources, including her own poetry, which she began writing in her 20's, later submitting to literary journals and eventually publishing three volumes of poetry: in 1955, 1994, and 2000. She also drew from the works of her husband, Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, as well as W. B. Yeats, John Keats, and William Blake. Asher's work of the early 1950s utilizes expressive, energetic linear brushwork and is composed in tight color families to create paintings that evoke or reference trees and plants. By 1961, Asher introduced text into these masses—blurring the line between brushwork and writing. The words blend into atmospheric clouds of brushwork. Critic Brian O'Doherty, reviewing a 1964 exhibition, wrote of her paintings: "In a Rimbaud type of association of color and symbol, words flick in and out of recognition, briefly suggesting a thought or image." Asher described her artistic pursuit as a search for a condition of "otherness" and "a concrete universe of my own, a mythic land of my own making."

Asher, who was born in Chicago, was raised primarily by her father after her mother's death. Her father was an intellectual and a journalist, and writers were frequent guests in her family home. In particular, Asher recalled a visit from Edna St. Vincent Millay. The atmosphere around *Poetry Magazine*, the oldest journal devoted to verse, which was published in Chicago, was formative to her development.

Asher studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and later graduated from the Simmons School of Social Work in Boston, MA. Following her graduation, Asher settled into her first marriage in Rochester, NY, but felt stifled by suburban life. In 1947, she and her young daughter Babette left Rochester for Greenwich Village in New York City. Using her daughter's poster paints, Asher began making Miro-esque works on shirt boards and drawing paper. Her social circles included poets E.E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams, and she attended readings at the YMHA poetry center on 92nd Street. At the end of 1948, she met the painter Nanno De Groot, who she would marry the following year. They took a long trip together to Big Sur, where Asher was inspired by the dramatic landscape and enjoyed spending time with novelist Henry Miller. Returning to New York, Asher became involved in the legendary artist-run space, the Tanager Gallery. Along with de Groot, Angelo Ippolito, Alex Katz, and William King, she was a founding member of the artists' cooperative, which positioned itself as an alternative to the mainstream uptown galleries. She spent summers in Provincetown, where her neighbor was the painter and celebrated teacher Hans Hofmann.

Meanwhile, Asher was still writing poetry and in 1955 published a collection titled "The Meandering Absolute." After separating from de Groot, mutual friends, including Charlotte Park and James Brooks, suggested she meet the famed poet Kunitz, who she would marry in 1957. Rejecting the dogma of abstract expressionism, Asher seamlessly merged her poetic and painterly practices,

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introducing text into canvas at a moment when artists in other circles were experimenting with text in Neo-Dada, Pop, and Conceptualist practices.

In the 1960s, Asher began experimenting with plexiglass as the support for her paintings. Almost by chance, she started painting on a cookie jar, painting the jar both inside and outside. This piece was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in an exhibition called Greetings, alongside Saul Steinberg's faux phonograph records. She made transparent book structures composed of acrylic leaves fanning out from spiral binding, filled with her illegible calligraphic brushwork. When closed, the transparent layers intermingle. In the 1970s and '80s, Asher returned to canvas, making suggestive, metaphysical landscapes and scenes populated by recurring motifs of clocks, locks, keys, tombs, marshlands, and strange birds and other creatures. Asher referred to her paintings as emanating from poetry. Lines of text are "jumping-off points, parts of a text that makes music for me and extend the life of the poem." She stated, "I try to translate the poetry of existence, its beauty and its terror, into a vocabulary of the visual imagination."

Asher was the subject of a retrospective in 2000 at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. She had solo exhibitions at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, MA, 1992; the Washington Women's Art Center, Washington, D.C., 1976; and the Benton Museum, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, 1988. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, she showed at Ingber Gallery in New York. She was included in two exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in the 1960s, and also showed at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1966; the Jewish Museum, New York, 1970; and the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1976. Her work is in the collections of the Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, NY; Tougaloo College, Jackson, MS; Berkeley Art Museum, CA; and the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, among others.

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