

# eric firestone gallery

**For Immediate Release:**

## **Elise Asher: The Vintage Years Paintings of the 1950s and 60s**

**Eric Firestone Gallery**

**40 Great Jones Street | New York, NY**

**October 27 – December 22, 2023**

**Opening Reception: Friday, October 27, 6:00–8:00PM**

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce the solo exhibition *Elise Asher: The Vintage Years, Paintings of the 1950s and 60s*. This is the first exhibition in New York to survey Elise Asher's early paintings. In this period, Asher (1912–2004) incorporated calligraphic handwriting and text into clouds of color and brushwork. The personal style of these linear abstractions was Asher's unique contribution to post-War abstraction. Asher was also a noted poet who published three volumes of poetry in 1955, 1994, and 2000. This exhibition serves to re-introduce Asher's work, which is both historically significant, and also feels fresh and newly relevant as many contemporary painters utilize the combination of text and image.

Asher's calligraphic paintings are suggestive, rather than literal and legible. However, Asher did cite from a variety of sources, including her own poetry, that of her husband, Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, and Yeats, Keats, and Blake. 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



Elise Asher | *The Vintage Years* | 1960  
oil on canvas  
70h x 52w in

described her artistic pursuit as a search for a condition of "otherness" and "a concrete universe of my own, mythic land of my own making."

Born in Chicago, Asher was raised primarily by her father following her mother's early death. Her father was an intellectual and a journalist, and writers were frequent guests in her family home, a particularly memorable guest for Asher being the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. The Chicago literary scene centered around *Poetry Magazine*, the oldest journal devoted to verse, was

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Elise Asher | *The Summing Up* | 1961  
oil on gesso board  
24h x 30w in

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 the 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 was introduced by mutual friends to the painter Nanno de Groot. They took a long trip together to Big Sur, where Asher drew inspiration from the dramatic and strange landscape and continued her story-telling painting style with poster paints. They enjoyed spending time there with novelist Henry Miller. She and de Groot were married in 1949. They would spend their summers in Provincetown, MA, where her neighbor was the painter and celebrated teacher Hans Hofmann. Back in New York in the early 1950s, she and de Groot became involved with the legendary artist-run space, the Tanager Gallery. This would be the site of Asher's first solo exhibition in 1953.

Asher's work of the 1950s on view in the exhibition utilizes expressive, energetic linear brushwork and is composed in tight color families to create paintings that evoke or reference trees and plants. In her work of the late '50s, Asher tended to create masses of brushwork at the centers of her composition against an otherwise open canvas. By 1961, Asher introduced text into these masses—blurring the line between brushwork and writing. As O'Doherty wrote, “the poem lies half-exploded in an energized lyric bouquet.”

Meanwhile, Asher was still writing poetry. She published her work in literary journals and magazines, and in 1955 published a collection titled “The Meandering Absolute.” She separated from her husband De Groot in 1956. Mutual friends, including Charlotte Park and James Brooks, suggested she meet the poet Stanley Kunitz. They married in 1957 and he remained her husband until her death in 2004.

In the 1960s, Asher began experimenting with plexiglass as the support for her paintings, rather than canvas. Almost by chance, she started painting on an old-fashioned 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

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transparent book structures composed of acrylic leaves fanning out from spiral binding. The pages 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, 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.” Many of her poems correspond to the titles of her paintings.

Asher was the subject of a retrospective in 2000, curated by Varujan Baghosian 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; and the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, among others.



Portrait of Elise Asher  
Photo by Hans Namuth

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