

depicted a regal atmospheric still life or provided a glimpse into some uninhabited but marvelously furnished interior. *Perfume* (all works cited, 2021) is a portrayal of a desolate-looking dressing table in an airless room, bathed in satiny oranges, golds, and umbers. Atop the vanity sit a menagerie of scents and an eerily sentinel-like mirror. *Stairway I* presents a rather baroque version of the titular architectural feature. The steps are upholstered with crimson carpeting, and the elaborately carved newel at the stairwell's entry is crowned by a heavy ormolu lamp. Perhaps the image is based on a scene from an old Hammer horror film or on some weepy eighteenth-century period piece.

An air of luxury pervades all of Wilson's pictures. His chambers are high-class personages in their own right—their lonely appointments eternally in place and immovably dignified. The spectator is an honored guest, a transient yet implicit presence, in each setting. Wilson invites us into his regal compartments by way of their hues and grandeur: Sundry mirrors wait for us to appear in them, bottles of *recherche* fragrances demand to be worn, and the paintings within Wilson's paintings ask that we carefully scrutinize them, too. If art offers us the illusion of what historian Sigfried Giedion calls “the eternal present,” then Wilson's work places us (or, rather, abandons us) there. The temporal space of a Wilson painting offers up a specious present or a “short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible,” as philosopher William James would say.

Wilson uses film stills the way portrait painters use faces—as excuses for making a picture. The artist is giving us access to his inner life, just as portraitists offer us theirs when they projectively identify with their subjects. Wilson's tableaux also set the stage for the sensuous soft-focus handling of his chosen medium; he eschews the glossy hyperchromatic facture of film, the warts-and-all vividness of HD digital. His oils seem antique, otherworldly. I believe he is, in certain ways, subverting film by appropriating it—for him, the effort involved in making a painting is more to the artistic point than all the technical wizardry and logistical drama that come with the creation of a cinematic work. Like Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, Wilson is drawn to intimate spaces, private scenes of the good life far from the public eye. That he is a romantic rather than a realist is confirmed by the fact that his objects are emblematically marvelous—bouquets of flowers, brocade wallpapers, and all those mirrors. Wilson's images show the expressive, evocative power of paint and color when applied with exquisite subtlety—something the naively materialistic Hobsbawm would have never understood.

—Donald Kuspit

Arthur Monroe

MALIN GALLERY

Suppose you had never heard of San Francisco Bay Area painter Arthur Monroe (1935–2019). He might be obscure, but his work, which was on display in a solo presentation at Malin Gallery, speaks for itself. It was immediately apparent that the large-scale gestural abstractions, produced between 1980 and 2012, were extremely accomplished. The viewer was drawn in by their rhythmic intensities, the linear storms of calligraphic black strokes, the honeycombs of vibrant color, and the grids that wove in and out of forms vaguely suggestive of Mayan hieroglyphs or tribal markings, influences cultivated over years of travel. Vestigial traces of Monroe's body in motion clustered in overlays of sweeping, muscular strokes that further animated his restless, expressive style. Consistently, a sense of lyric grace was coupled with struggle, wherein one sensed the rigorous demands of making a painting in a purely spontaneous and direct way.

Why aren't Monroe's highly accomplished canvases better known? And why isn't his story in all the history books? The artist, whose painting practice spanned sixty years, was African American. He was just a teenager when he started exploring the New York art scene—in those days an elitist society of white men—and hanging out in Harlem and Greenwich Village. He developed his painter's chops throughout the 1950s at various art schools within the city and with mentors who opened their studios to him. He completed a brief stint at the Art Students League, where he endured a couple of critiques from Hans Hofmann (whose accent was so thick, Monroe once recalled in an interview, that he couldn't understand what the older artist was saying). He counted renowned saxophonist Charlie Parker as a friend and frequented the Cedar Tavern, where he met Franz Kline. Monroe also lived in a studio across the street—or in the same building, depending on which history you read—from Willem de Kooning's space. As a young man, Monroe frequently traversed the boundaries between the white art world and the Black jazz scene.

The AbEx painters were thirty years older than Monroe, but their style of gestural abstraction was new and energetic. And despite the discrimination and the racism, there he was, rubbing shoulders with the greats and living the bohemian life. Monroe further ratcheted up his cool when he relocated to the Bay Area in the late '50s and took up with the artists and poets of the Beat generation (Lawrence Ferlinghetti gave him his first show of paintings, in 1962, at San Francisco's City Lights Bookstore). He remained on the West Coast, pioneered the Oakland Cannery artist studios, and became an active force in the cultural scene, which was a nexus for Black artists, poets, intellectuals, and musicians. He didn't have a gallery or institutional support, but he did have a very engaged and informed community. With his day job as the registrar at the Oakland Museum of California, teaching gigs, and a secure live-work space, he was able to devote himself entirely to problem-solving with paint. One great example of this in the exhibition was *Untitled*, 1983, in which a loosely constructed black-and-white grid offers up a moment of relative stasis against a frenetic field of teeming, spinning strokes in jade, ruby, and ecru that dive into the composition's pockets of shallow space and blast their way into calligraphic intensity.

Monroe's output has been described as Black Abstract Expressionism, the somewhat pigeonholing term suggesting the necessity of yet another “un-telling” of the story of midcentury American painting—a massive revision to include all the women, artists of color, and others who were marginalized but who nonetheless persisted and produced important work. Much of Monroe's early work didn't survive evictions from storage units and dispersals at auction. But he never wavered in his conviction. In 1990 he stated, “As a Black artist I have two purposes: I have an indebtedness to my heritage; and as a Black artist I might have a tow to carry. I'm prepared to do that.” That's what Monroe's bold and bravura paintings are talking about. We need this art and this history. *Now*.

—Jan Avgikos



Arthur Monroe, *Untitled*, 1983, oil on canvas, 96 × 84½".