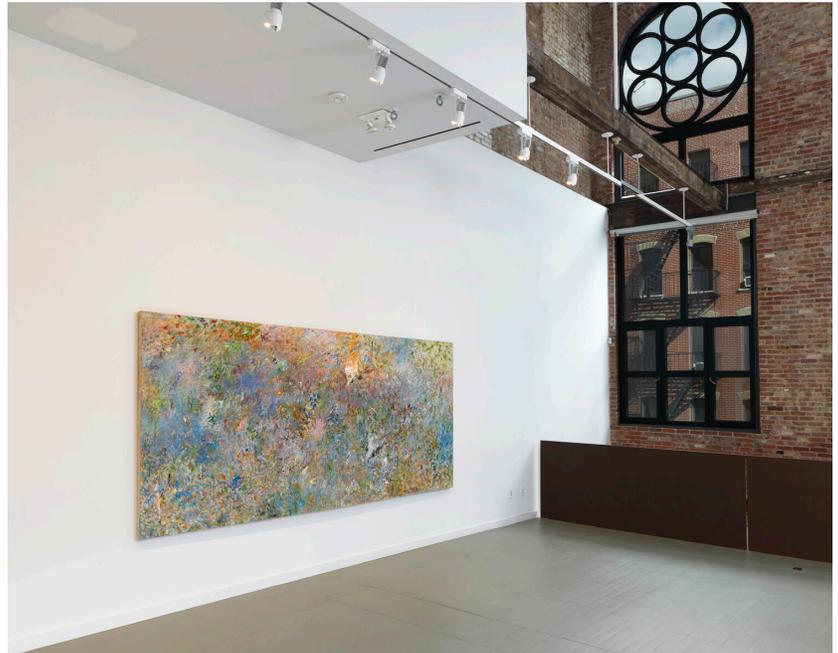


Tenth Street and After

by Raphael Rubinstein

March 2020

What tangible of visible traces remain, apart from the surviving artworks sitting in museums or private collections, of the hundreds of thousands of artists who have resided in New York over the last century? As far as I can see, not very much. In most of the neighborhoods they once frequented, from SoHo to Williamsburg, studios have been converted into luxury residential units, or entire buildings that used to house artists have been torn down to make way for yet more condo towers. Soon, it seems, the only evidence of the city's artistic past will be the foundations set up to preserve a few individual artists. I'm thinking of institutions like the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation on LaGuardia Place, where midcentury sculptor Chaim Gross (1902-1991) lived and worked, and the Judd Foundation on Spring Street, dedicated to preserving the New York residence of Minimalist Donald Judd (1928-1994) as well as the works he permanently installed in Marfa, Texas. The Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation, which opened in 2018



Pat Passlof: *Sky Pasture*, 1961, oil on linen, 68 by 144 inches.

on Eldridge Street on the Lower East Side, is devoted to conserving and showing the work of Resnick (1917-2004) and Passlof (1928-2011), New York painters who were husband and wife. The foundation is housed in a former synagogue that Resnick occupied for several decades, and its renovation was largely funded by the sale of Passlof's nearby studio, also a onetime synagogue.

In October, the Foundation opened its third exhibition, "Pat Passlof: The Brush Is the Finger of the Brain," a survey of Passlof's paintings curated by Karen Wilkin. Comprising twenty-six works on three floors, the show efficiently and effectively samples Passlof's art from 1949 to 2011. Although she showed regularly in New York galleries (in recent decades, primarily at Elizabeth Harris), Passlof often garnered more attention from her active art-scene presence and her associations with other artists than for her own work. Happily, this seems to be changing. In 2017 the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired its first work by Passlof, a ca. 1950 oil on paper that the museum has already shown twice, in "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction" in 2017 and in the current reinstallation of the collection.

The work at MoMA – a horizontal composition in which interlocking, variously colored gestural passages are distributed around a gridlike armature – is related to the earliest painting in "The Brush Is the Finger of the Brain," a 1949 oil on board titled *Gulf*. Both paintings show the strong influence of Willem de Kooning, with whom Passlof studied for several years, first at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1948 and later, privately, in New York. While still an undergraduate at Queens College, Passlof had discovered de Kooning's work through his first solo show, at Charles Egan Gallery in 1948. It's a salutary reminder of the challenges facing the artists who would become known as "first generation" Abstract Expressionists that de Kooning was forty-four years old at the time of his solo debut.

After Black Mountain, Passlof, who was then twenty, followed de Kooning's advice to return to New York to pursue the artistic life, though she subsequently bowed to her parents and spent two years at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, where she acquired a bachelor's degree that would help her find teaching jobs. (For much of her adult life, Passlof taught at colleges around New York City. An inspiring instructor, she often penned letters to her students, some of which were collected in a small volume titled *To Whom the Shoe Fits: Letters to Young Painters*, published by the Foundation

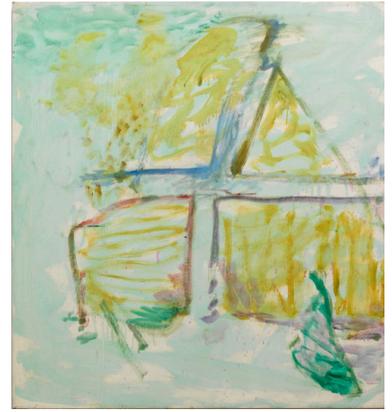
in 2018.) Interestingly, de Kooning's educational method was grounded in the traditional training he had received in Holland. While her artist friends imagined that de Kooning was teaching Passlof how to paint abstractly, under his instruction she was actually making, as she later recalled, "large, tight still lifes" and being "tutored in the ways of the Rotterdam Academy."

Even as she was absorbing de Kooning's lessons and marveling at the work of Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, Passlof was keenly aware of the differences between the artists of de Kooning's generation and her own. For one thing, the younger painters weren't prepared to languish for decades in obscurity and poverty, working arduously until a sympathetic art dealer came along. During the 1950s, in what was then a novel approach, they banded together to create cooperative galleries, many of which were located on East Tenth Street between Third and Fourth Avenues. (It was this block that Clement Greenberg blamed for the decline of New York Painting when he wrote, "If Eighth Street in the late thirties and early forties meant catching up to Paris, Tenth Street in the fifties has seen New York falling behind itself.") Passlof, who helped found one of these spaces (March Gallery), later observed that by "flouting the proprieties of waiting to be 'discovered,' artists broke the mystique of the galleries." She also recog-

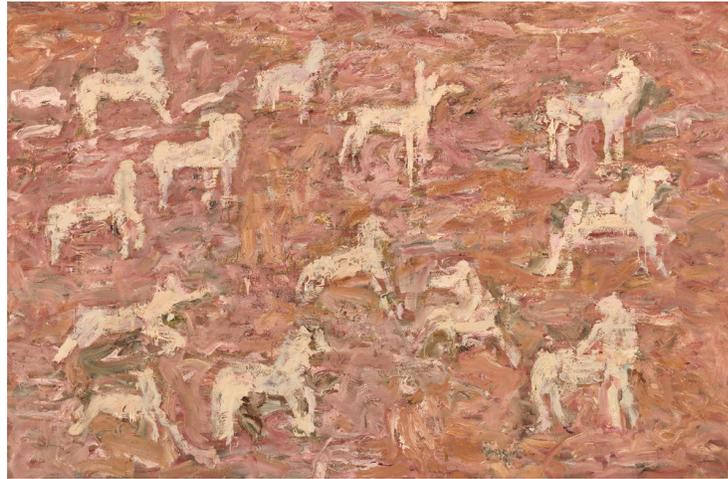
nized that by the mid-1950s the era of manifestos and ideological battles had come to a close. Comparing herself with older artists, many of them immigrants who were formed by the 1930s, she recalled, "I was young and free of their years of investment in tradition and free as well of the pressures of doctrine, whether political or aesthetic."

As the 1950s progressed, Passlof forged an approach to painting that borrowed from de Kooning's post-Cubist gestural abstraction yet possessed its own distinctive properties. She sometimes introduced quasi-figurative elements, as in the 68-inch-square oil on linen *Promenade for a Bachelor* (1958), which is centered on a birdlike shape embedded in loosely woven gestural patches. Here one can already see a feature that would be a constant throughout her career, across many different compositional strategies and even, in her last years, at the service of explicit figuration: a reliance on the relentless repetitive movements of her brush rather than on the smearability of oil paint. Where de Kooning and many of his acolytes privileged the viscous properties of oil paint, Passlof preferred a drier materiality, one that left each gesture, each brushstroke, visibly distinct. In a 1961 review of her show at Green Gallery, Judd called this "scribbly brushwork"; Wilkin, writing in the catalogue of the current survey, observes how "every painting is conjured up out of Passlof's eloquent, wristy brush marks." Another early example of Passlof's brushwork is *Mark's House* (1960), a large canvas in which a half dozen clunky geometric shapes are unified by a film of yellow and white brushstrokes that continually switch between respecting the contours of the shapes and ignoring them.

One of the pleasures of this exhibition and quite possibly one of the things that impeded the artist's career, was Passlof's willingness to change her work. Even paintings done in the same year can employ dramatically different manners, as is the case with two 1959 canvases on view, *AS-Brown*, a 50-by-58 inch composition of roughly indicated shapes under attack from furious drab-colored gestures, and *Stove*, slightly larger at 77 by 69 inches, which swells with a cloudlike mass of cerulean, as vibrant orange, yellow, and violet passages peek out from underneath. Daringly "unfinished," *AS-Brown* looks like an enlarged oil sketch and could easily pass muster as an example of contemporary "provisional painting" while *Stove* is a radiant, almost Rococo celebration of luminous color and painterly layering.



Top left, *AS-Brown*, 1959, oil on linen, 50 by 58 inches. Top right, *Domino*, 1961, oil on linen, 28 by 26 inches. Above, view of the exhibition "Pat Passlof: The Brush Is the Finger of the Brain," 2019-20, showing (left to right) *Mark's House*, 1960; *Tan*, 1960; *Stove*, 1959; and *Shef*, 1961.



Left, *Mulberry*, 1967, oil on linen, 70 by 30 inches.

Right, *Untitled*, 1995-96, oil on linen, 78 by 117 inches.

An even more dramatic stylistic split is on view with two paintings from 1961: *Domino* and *Sky Pasture*. Featuring some casually sketched shapes filled with a minimum of desultory marks, *Domino* looks even more *non finito* than *As-Brown*, while *Sky Pasture*, at 68 by 144 inches one of the largest paintings in the show, is a densely packed symphony of delicate, abbreviated marks creating an effect that is, as the title suggests, at once pastoral and celestial. Like Resnick and quite a few other abstract painters at the time, Passlof was deeply influenced by Monet's late work. MoMA owned an eighteen-foot-wide *Water Lilies* canvas, which was destroyed by fire in 1958 and replaced by a similar work in 1959, in time for the 1960 exhibition "Claude Monet: Seasons and Moments."

Having embraced Monet's expanses of shallow continuous space, what Clement Greenberg called the "broad, daubed scribble" of the *Water Lilies*, Passlof seemed to have become more formally focused for the next two decades, at least to judge by the paintings in this show. Reminiscent of Chinese brocade, *Mulberry* (1967) is a tall, narrow painting packed with blossom-like clumps of orange, red, and pink. Darker, and more emphatically landscape-inspired is the all-over painting *Keeping Still Mountain* (1971-72), whose field is subtly interrupted by sequences of short curving lines. Here, as so often, Passlof challenges her viewers to perceive her gestures as individual touches and simultaneously as the constituents of larger shapes and fields.

Into the 1980s Passlof was still making gorgeous abstractions like *Isoceles* (1980) by accumulating thousands of discrete marks, but around 1990 representational forms (human figures, horses, centaurs) suddenly began to emerge from her brushy fields of color. These motifs inevitably, yet startlingly, convert her field of marks into grounds for her figures. This phase is represented in the survey by two paintings: a 1995 landscape, in which three horses (one, perhaps two, with riders) share the space with a street and a large red cloud, and an untitled painting from 1995-96, featuring a dozen or so centaurs distributed across a turbulent field of dirty pink strokes.

Passlof's turn to figuration followed, by several years, a similar shift in Resnick's work. Over the course of their careers, Passlof and Resnick developed their painting in remarkably similar directions. In the late 1940s he was as much under the sway of de Kooning as she was. Circa 1960, the revelation of Monet affected them both. Dense all-over abstractions occupied them for many years. In the latter part of their lives they embraced figuration. As a painter who gained notable success from the late 1950s onward, Resnick worked at a much larger scale than Passlof, and was more prolific. He was also, ultimately, more restricted stylistically, less willing, or simply less compelled, to experiment with new formats.

In the late 1990s, the ever-restless Passlof changed direction again. The small herds of centaurs and groups of figures fled, replaced by a cornucopia of painterly grids and patterns. Even within this new mode there are dramatic differences, from the crowded array of muscular strokes in *Back to Back* (1997) to the more delicate fleet of single white bars moving diagonally across a mottled brown field in *Bear* (1997-98). Over the course of two years, 1999 and 2000, Passlof created a series of large patterned paintings each of which was inspired by an American author or literary work, from Emerson to Allen Ginsberg. In "The Brush Is the Finger of the Brain" just one of these works is on view, *Hawthorne* (1999), an imposing painting of variously configured whitish bands separated by dark lines.



Left, *Back to Back*, 1997, oil on linen, 78 by 132 inches.
Right, *Hawthorne*, 1999, 87 by 75 inches.

For the next decade, Passlof held on to such handmade geometry, apparently fascinated by the seemingly infinite ways available to her of dividing and activating the surface of a painting. (Further examples of this phase could be seen last fall in a show of Passlof's small paintings from 1999-2001 at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in Chelsea; a survey of her works on paper appeared at the New York Studio School in December and January.) In all these paintings, Passlof's eloquent, wristy brushmarks" continue to perform their declarative and unifying work.

Over the last year or two of her life, Passlof seems to have contemplated once again reorienting her work by allowing more organic forms to dominate, as in *Melon 2* (2010). The title suggests a still life. Was she thinking back to the exercises that de Kooning had imposed on her in the 1950s? In one of her very last paintings, not on view, shimmering figures appear to emerge from a dark field, or maybe, are dissolving into it. Did this signal yet another pivot, a second return to figuration? An unanswerable question. Perhaps the real secret to Passlof's variousness—and to her untrammled brushwork—is contained in the Foundation show title, which comes from the artist's contribution to a 1975 *Artforum* symposium called "Painters Reply." At the height of Conceptualism, Passlof wrote: "I tell my students: 'If you can think it, don't bother doing it. Think with a brush – the finger of your brain.'" That still sounds like good advice.

Learning from de Kooning

Pat Passlof studied painting at Queens College, Black Mountain College, and Cranbrook Academy of Art. But her single greatest influence—apart from her husband, Milton Resnick, with whom she maintained a decades-long stylistic dialogue—was Abstract Expressionist virtuoso Willem de Kooning. To her surprise, the Dutch immigrant's pedagogical method was based on traditional European standards and techniques.



Passlof at Queens College, ca. 1947.

Passlof, left, with Willem and Elaine de Kooning, ca. 1955.

Passlof in her studio on Forsyth Street, ca. 1980.