

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

GREGORY AMENOFF: Inside and Out

By Stephen Westfall

American abstraction was born in the landscape. Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe seem to have got there before anyone else, trailing plowed fields, banks of clouds, and zigzag lightning bolts into visual rhythms that verge onto geometric patterning without losing touch with a dream-like memory of forest, field and weather. This is a region of painterly Symbolism where earth, air, fire and water, along with the energies and textures of creaturely and botanical existence are bearers of psychological states and metaphysical premonitions. Gregory Amenoff has been one of the principal carriers of Symbolist abstraction into our current century and his current work is rich with his own allusions to heightened states of feeling, transcendence, and mortality.

For nearly four decades Amenoff's paintings have resurrected the organically abstract forms of Dove, O'Keeffe, Hartley among other iconic American painters and recast them in terms of a post war monumental scale that had passed from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism and Pop. Amenoff isn't simply looking back to a rustic American abstraction, however. His image references extend back through German Expressionism and Kandinsky's Expressionist, landscape-based abstraction; the Symbolist landscapes of Charles Burchfield, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Courbet's gnarly grottos; and even to the frozen bursts of divinity in Sieneese painting. And yet, he remains an emphatically contemporary painter, in visual conversation with the likes of Bill Jensen, Margaret Lewzcuk, Per Kirkeby, and such visionary artists who invoke landscape as Joseph Yoakum.

Amenoff's paintings shiver and swim with light and illumination rippling across and through impasto surfaces that can seem both massively thick and elastically supple. There is an animist streak in both the shapes of his forms and the viscosity of his paint, his forms can seem to surge and swell with intentionality. There are openings to other spaces, bathed in light or cloaked in darkness, but the spatial illusion in his paintings is fused to a sense that the entire picture surface is leaning *up against* the picture plane, pushing into our world rather than receding away from it. Thus, the spatial apertures in his recent paintings, such as the ovular portals clinging together like frog eggs, seem to brim over with materiality even as they beckon to a shimmer that also spatially reads as beyond their banded borders, as they do in *Clearing (for J. B.)* (2016) or the darker blue ripples in *Flood* (2015).

One of the most compelling charms of painting for painters is this duality of spatial illusion and gross materiality. "Illusion" might even be too strong of a word, I'm more comfortable with *suggestion*, perhaps because I'm also a painter and am always thinking about painting in material terms. But the toggling back and forth between the optical and concrete is always there, although it can sometimes strike a painter like a thunderbolt. Hence those bursts of divine space into at least a schematically human space in Sieneese painting, such as the circular bands of flat color surrounding an Edenic disk in Giovanni de Paolo's *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* (1445). Divine space can no longer be inhabited and must be instead presented as a kind of sign. The almond or vulva shaped *mandorla* enclosing divine figures such as Christ in Byzantine and Russian icons, or the radiating light around the Virgin of Guadalupe is another example. These "portals" are solid, unenterable, pushing into our space as arrivals rather than beckoning us to leave as departures.

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Such a thunderbolt struck Barnett Newman when he left the tape on his first *Onement* painting. Amenoff had a similar epiphany when he was living in New Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He had been visiting local *sanctuarios* and had been impressed with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. He had also been working with the image of the Crown of Thorns as an opening to another space set in the larger pictorial field of his paintings, which was to become the dominate image in a large triptych he was making as a temporary altarpiece for a cathedral in Cologne. The Virgin's *mandorla* and the oval of the Crown of Thorns in perspective merged for Amenoff. The thorns of the Crown were diagrammatic cousins of the light rays emanating from the Virgin. Another illuminated world invites us inside these portals, one that is also embedded in Amenoff's expressionist materiality, and that tension between inside and outside has proved out as one of the recurring image structures in his work.

In this current exhibition Amenoff offers glimpses of two other pictorial themes, concurrent with his canvases with the embedded ovular openings. Most recently he has been making paintings inspired by Courbet's "grotto" landscapes. The radiant darkness of the cave shape in *Grotte* (2016) hums underneath a horizontal band of irregular pink and whitish shapes that could be sunset clouds. Amenoff's cave shapes are the *yin* to the *yang* of *Clearing (for J. B.)*'s: light against dark. Both convert an indwelling "space" to concrete materiality that wants to be as much a part of the painting surface as anything outside their borders. Charles Burchfield's watercolors of entrances to abandoned coal mines also come to mind. The cave is both Christ's tomb and a coalmine; in material terms a lump, a returned repressed, but also a womb, a place of birth and initiation. A marvelous exhibition could be curated of caves in both old master and contemporary painting, including Amenoff's.

Another series of paintings begun before the grotto paintings, but overlapping them, depicts a platform on a barren rocky clearing. The platform can resemble a dolmen bathed in golden sunrise, as in *Early Bright* (2016), or in a wintry nocturnal nimbus, as in *Tower (Catcher)* (2016). This is a totally new "figure" for Amenoff's lexicon, again carrying multiple metaphoric meanings. Partly inspired by the spindly execution towers that one sees in such Flemish paintings as Breughel's *The Road to Calvary* (1554), it is clearly a site of reckoning, both an altar and place of trial. It is also one of the few manmade objects or structures in his entire body of work. Amenoff is clearly thinking about mortality and accountability, and he is well aware that a painting's surface is also a platform of reckoning, as well as play, that follows every ambitious painter's life.