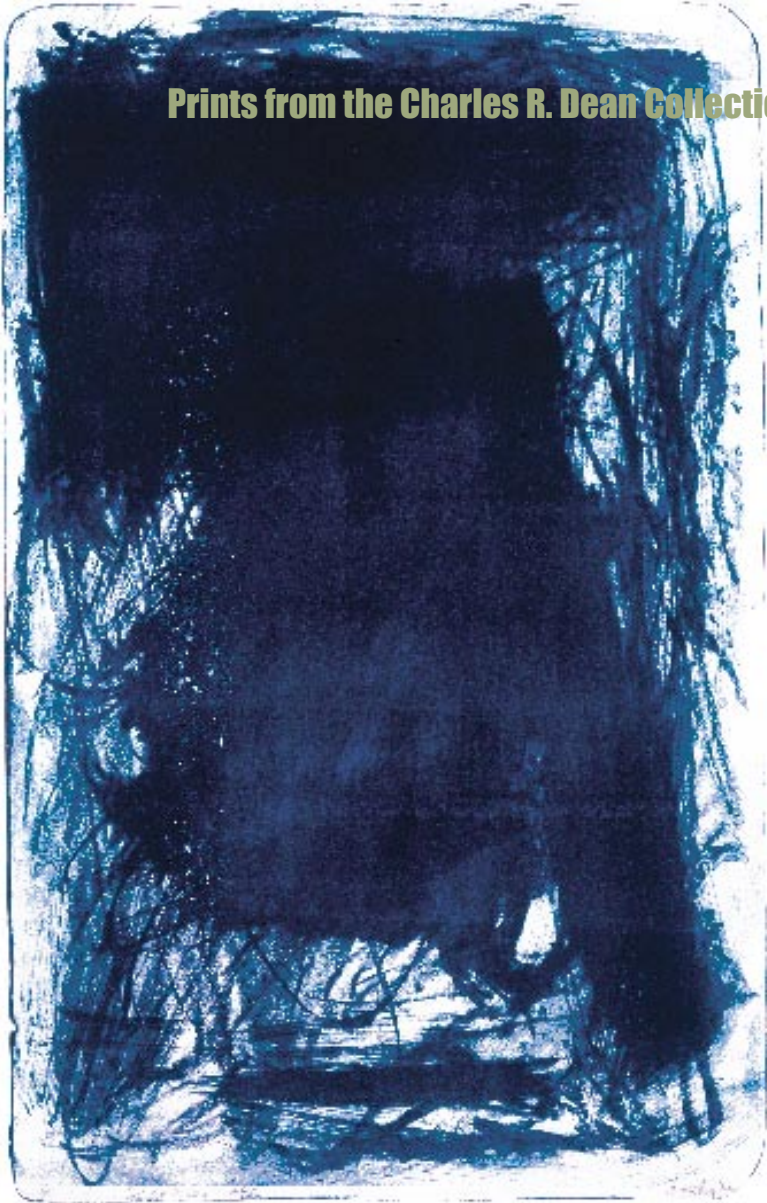


California Abstract Expressionists

Prints from the Charles R. Dean Collection



September 10th through October 25th, 2003

International Print Center New York, 526 West 26 Street, # 824, New York, NY 10001



Charles Randall Dean began collecting Abstract Expressionist prints in 1987 and has since amassed one of the most impressive caches of this material in private hands. At first, he had little competition, for very few people knew of the existence of these works. Dean soon discovered that, because there was no market at the time the prints were made, artists had produced them in tiny editions or as unique works. Through persistence, enthusiasm, and his growing erudition, Dean found himself making friends with the artists, a number of whom were still living. Memories were awakened, boxes opened, and prints rediscovered by

their makers. Dean's is surely one of the more fascinating adventures to be recounted in the annals of print collecting.

Revisionist accounts of postwar abstraction in the United States have, in the past decade or so, remedied some misconceptions. First-generation Abstract Expressionism was long seen as the domain of a small coterie of male artists living and working—pretty much on canvas—in New York. Now we have a more considered idea of its demographics, geography, and range of material experimentation. Susan Landauer, for example, has exposed the vital postwar San Francisco arts community that was partly fueled by the California School of Fine Arts and the North Beach jazz and poetry scene. The notion that postwar abstractionists rejected printmaking has been buried at last by *The Stamp of Impulse: Abstract Expressionist Prints*, a 2001–02 traveling exhibition and catalogue. Its curator, David Acton, began collecting Abstract Expressionist prints for the Worcester Art Museum at around the same time that Dean undertook his own efforts.

Like Landauer, Dean has been particularly drawn to the California scene. A third of his collection is from California, with important early examples by artists working not only at CSFA but also at the California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco State College, Berkeley, and, in Los Angeles, at the University of Southern California.

The California artists had a uniquely early interest in lithography. Dean's collection includes a number of lithographs produced at CSFA despite deplorable facilities that were, nonetheless, made available to artists 24 hours a day. By the early 1950s the artist Byron McClintock, who understood the chemistry of lithography, assisted others in the shop (Sonia Gechtoff printed with him). James Kelly worked at nights there, by himself, in 1952 and 1953. He showed a dozen lithos in 1954 at The Place, a local hangout

where he was bartender (there were only a few galleries in San Francisco). The earliest of these were extremely rough, the ink unevenly printed; yet even as he became more adroit Kelly continued to incorporate a sense of immediacy, printing the edges of the stone and leaving fingerprints and other random marks in the margins. Clearly this was a desired effect in his remarkable prints.

Many of the Californians were war veterans, some with harrowing memories. They were older, tougher, and more serious than the run-of-the-mill art student and were using the GI Bill to gain studio time. Weary of military life, they chafed at rules and sought an unfettered personal expression, perhaps the most salient characteristic of Abstract Expressionism as a “movement.” The California artists were radical, sometimes factionalized. They were impressed by Clyfford Still, who taught at CSFA from 1946–50 and had an important show at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1947, but not a few were turned off by the cultishness of his following (Dugmore was a devotee). Like-minded artists gravitated to each other. Six CSFA artists—Richard Diebenkorn, James Budd Dixon, John Hultberg, Walter Kuhlman, Frank Lobdell, and George Stillman—gathered in the late 1940s to draw in Lobdell’s Sausalito studio (the artists later came to be called the “Sausalito Six”). In 1948 Lobdell handed his friends some plates on which to draw, then took the plates to a commercial offset press in Mill Valley run by a friend. *Drawings*, 1948, was the very first Abstract Expressionist print portfolio published anywhere. It consisted of 17 offset lithos and was published in an edition of 200. It sold for one dollar at the CSFA bookstore. Looking at the black-and-white prints today, one gets a sense, in the improvisation and quickness of the drawing, of the feverishness of the artists’ work.

Twice, in 1940 and 1948, the English artist Stanley William Hayter taught at CSFA. Esteemed for his experiments in intaglio, Hayter had founded Atelier 17 in Paris and moved the workshop to New York during the war. Dixon was Hayter’s class monitor at CSFA in 1948, and in an untitled Dixon etching from 1948 one can see Dixon impressing soft-ground with found materials, a technique taught by Hayter. Yet in comparing Hayter and some of the East Coast Atelier 17 artists (Sue Fuller, Louise Nevelson, and Peter Grippe, for example) with the California crew, one is struck by the relative inelegance of the latter. Initially drawn to Hayter’s spirit of innovation, they disliked his Surrealism. Hultberg and Lobdell actually walked out of his class. And by 1950, as demonstrated in an untitled intaglio, even Dixon had rejected Hayter’s mannerisms, bursting the composition asunder. Yet Hayter’s influence was pervasive. He taught Mauricio Lasansky, who founded the graphic arts program at the University of Iowa. Ernest Freed, a Lasansky student, went on to teach Leonard Edmondson and Joseph Zirker at USC. The three are represented by intaglios on view here.

As with Abstract Expressionism in general, the California prints in Dean’s collection are wide-ranging, though a few generalizing remarks may be made. The color palette tends to be muted and somber rather than bright and gay. Yet it can be incredibly striking, as in Dennis Beall’s *In the Asparagus*

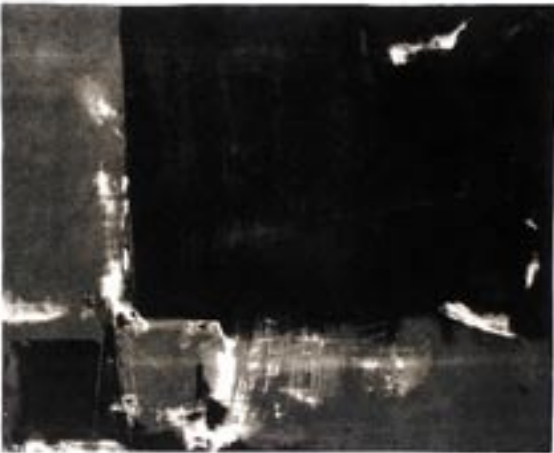


Patch, 1956, with its yellow-halated oranges in a gray-green ground, or in George Miyasaki's adept 1958 lithograph *Landscape No. 16*, in which many layers of blue, gray, and violet hues create an atmosphere as misty as a San Francisco morning. Miyasaki became an influential artist and printer at the University of California at Berkeley, where, for example, he helped print the large 1963 lithograph, *N.Y.K.*, by Sam Tchakalian, the latest work in the show. Intimations of landscape pervade Miyasaki's work, as well as those of Gechtoff and McClintock. A few of the prints contain bits of representation, as in Zirker's two *Dog Dreams* prints, Roy De Forest's *An Afternoon in Port Chicago*, and Leon Goldin's *Brood of Folly*. It may be accurately stated, however, that

most of these artists were after the holy grail of postwar abstraction, the truly "nonobjective" image. Whether attained through aggressive gesture or dispersed atmospheric, abstraction was, for them, the true expression of the individual spirit of the modern artist.

--Faye Hirsch, Curator

IPCNY International Print Center New York is a non-profit institution dedicated to the appreciation and understanding of the fine art print. IPCNY nurtures the growth of new audiences for the visual arts while serving the print community through exhibitions, publications and educational programs. *California Abstract Expressionists* is the fifth in a series of exhibitions in our Chelsea space interspersing juried presentations of contemporary work. For further information visit www.ipcny.org, or call (212) 989-5090. Gallery hours: 12-6 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.



Cover image: James Kelly, *Deep Blue I*, 1952, color lithograph, 24 x 14 3/4 in.

Inside image: George Miyasaki, *Landscape No. 16*, 1958, color lithograph, 25 x 19 in.

This page, top: Sonia Gechtoff, *Untitled*, 1952, color lithograph, 24 x 14 3/4 in.

Bottom: Byron McClintock, *Untitled*, 1951, color lithograph, 16 3/4 x 19 3/4 in.

Photography by John Lei

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