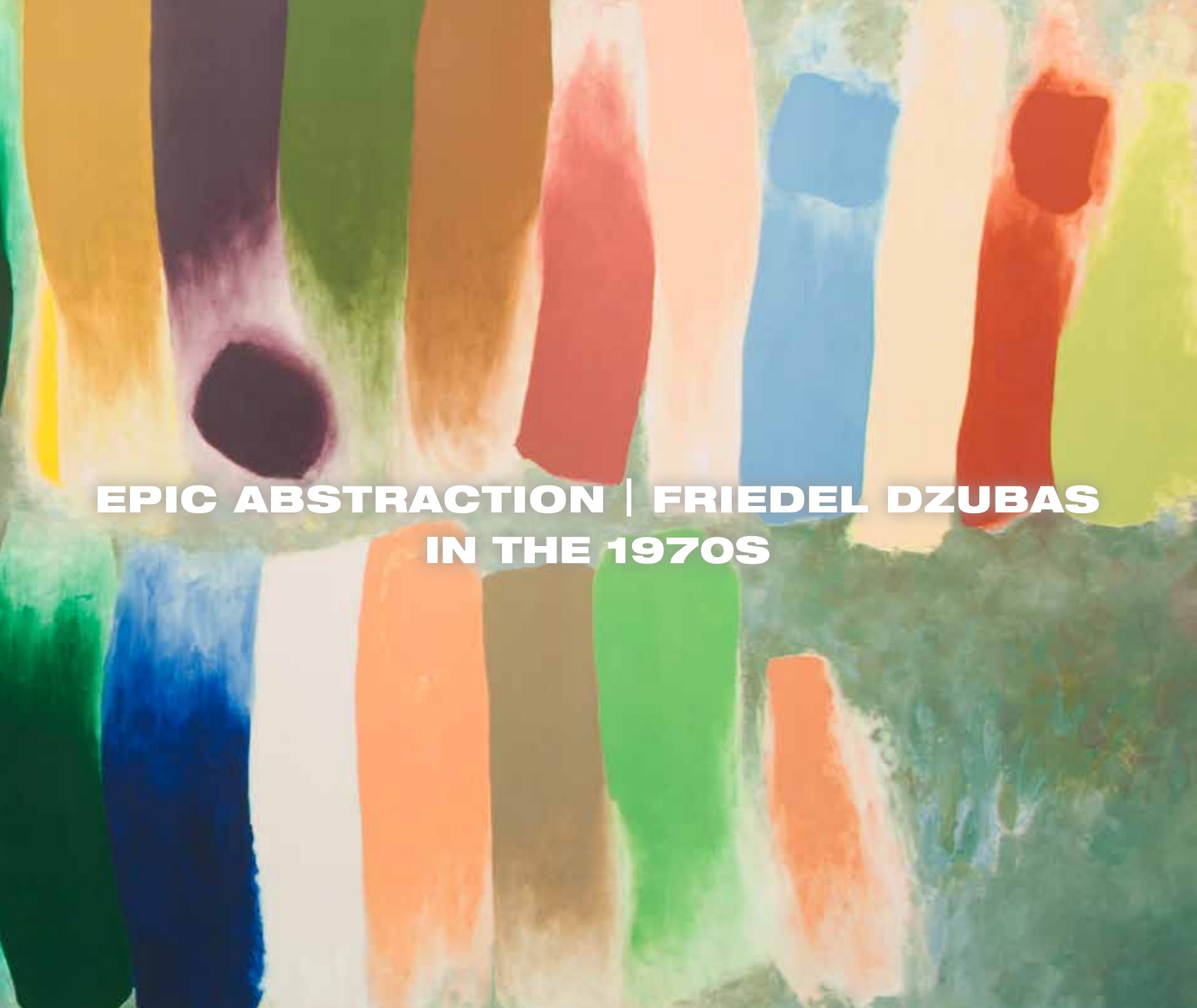

EPIC ABSTRACTION | FRIEDEL DZUBAS IN THE 1970S

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AN EXHIBITION IN HONOR OF HIS CENTENNIAL 1915-2015

April 9 – May 9, 2015

LORETTA HOWARD GALLERY

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To experience high art all you need is a hunger for better things, for great things, a hunger for being touched, for being moved. Perfectly unexpected, great. A hunger for larger experiences that we in our lonely souls...feel; a larger thing touching us, and at that moment we become the larger thing, that instant; that's the way it is. We are touched by something outside of ourselves that is larger; and we are equally as large. It's a great feeling; it's a little ecstasy.

Friedel Dzubas, Lecture, Emma Lake Workshop, 1979

by Patricia Lewy Gidwitz

The optical power and emotional charge of Friedel Dzubas's paintings from the 1970s hold the eye and quicken the senses. The sheer boldness of Dzubas's vision—a contestation between color and image—proceeds from the deftness with which he shapes and deploys tesserae of saturated color across vast expanses. Luminescence and hue, image and surround, catalyze an allover visual expressiveness of immense vitality.

Even as Dzubas is associated most often with the group of artists known collectively as "color field" painters, among them Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland, he forged a distinctive style for reasons both of age and background. Born in Berlin one hundred years ago (20 April 1915), Dzubas emigrated from Germany to America in 1939 amid escalating racial tensions in Nazi Germany. After a peripatetic half decade working in a variety of menial jobs and also as a graphic designer at the magazine publisher ZiffDavis in Chicago, Dzubas finally settled in Manhattan on

Friedel Dzubas in his studio, 1975
photograph by Phyllis Boudreaux

10th Street in 1945, supporting himself as a commercial illustrator for various book publishers. Although younger by more than a decade, he befriended Clement Greenberg in 1948 and mixed with Willem de Kooning, Adolf Gottlieb, Robert Goodnough, and Jackson Pollock, who inspired Dzubas with a freeing yet isolating sense of American individualism. "In America you rise and fall with what you have built yourself—[with] your very own and solitary tradition and presence, with your own subjective system of values. And you are alone."

This sense of isolation extended Dzubas's aesthetic distance from so-called "color field" painters. For even as Dzubas shared a studio with Frankenthaler in 1952, the year of her break through to soak-stained painting, each had been working independently across a curtained "divide," first on gestural, calligraphic canvases and then on to open fields of color that would characterize the new trend in painting. Frankenthaler, a fiercely independent artist, recognized their parallel struggle in their work "to sustain conviction…. No one enjoys being alone." Yet the personal generosity between them was expressed the moment she created *Mountains and Sea.* "I got up on a ladder after I made the picture, and looked down at it, and called Friedel who was in his 'half'—we had a divider—to take a look. We were both sort of amazed and surprised and interested…. Friedel got on [the phone]

Helen Frankenthaler and Friedel Dzubas
photographer unknown

Helen Frankenthaler
Mountains and Sea, 1952
Oil and charcoal on canvas
86⅝ x 117¼ inches
collection: Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York,
(on extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

Untitled, 1953
Oil on canvas
79 x 52 inches

and ebulliently told [Clem] to come over and look at the picture I'd just made…. Friedel helped me to staple it to the wall, and Clem encouraged me to go ahead and make more. I did."

Dzubas had been stunned by the daring sense of freedom with which Frankenthaler and others forged their mature artistic statements. In contrast, Dzubas abandoned himself to the slow process of working through various styles. During the 1940s, Dzubas had mastered gouache-like watercolors that featured wet into wet frankly figurative or allusive images in diffuse expressionistic markings.

Oil paintings from the 1950s show him adept at loose linearity and painterly gesture. By the 1960s, Dzubas had in his own words "cleaned out his vocabulary" by creating exquisitely rendered clean-edged pools of discrete chroma that responsively abut or overlap within the surrounding white force field.

By the 1970s, Dzubas's canvases have exploded into processions of color shapes—great phalanxes of contrasting hues that travel across the surface with unparalleled directional force. What catalyzed this salvo were repeated sojourns to Europe undertaken in the late 1960s and that continued to his death in 1994. There, Dzubas re-established family ties in Berlin as well as forged artistic ones in various cities, among them Würzburg and Padua. Apprenticed at the age of

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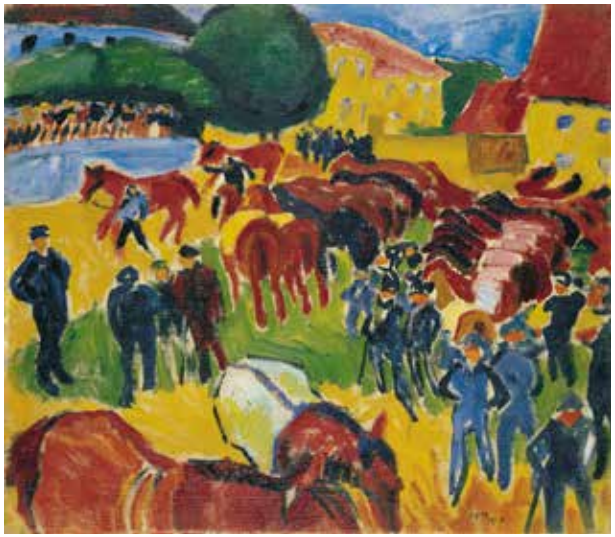
Procession, 1975
Magna acrylic on canvas
116 x 294 inches

fifteen to a decorations firm, Dzubas's formal training had consisted primarily in learning the art of fresco painting. As he wryly put it, "It was the only way to get close to a pot of paint." During the 1960s and 1970s, Dzubas rediscovered heroic and spiritual allegories depicted in dynamically composed fresco and oil paintings from Titian and Paolo Veronese to Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, along with the essential "flatness" he identified in Giotto's groupings—"animated," he averred, "[with] modeled blue background." Such excavations stimulated Dzubas to bring this historic specular tradition forward into contemporary painting: "Thinking also of certain exuberant eighteenth century proclamations of … ideas in ceiling and fresco painting, I believe in the possibility of an equally elevating expression in the language of today and nourished by the spirit of the past."

When in 1973, he was commissioned to design a 13½ by 57½ foot long artwork for the Shawmut Bank of Boston, his first impulse was to produce a fresco, "to outdo Giotto [by] putt[ing] in everything I knew and felt for better or for worse" into that work. "It felt right and good. A gut reaction, not intellectualization." Because there were no fresco artisans available and the weight of such a work as well as the prohibitive expense, Dzubas decided on a painting of vast proportions. The process of creating this monumental composition is documented in



Max Pechstein
Horse fair in Moritzburg, 1910
Oil on canvas
27½ x 39 inches
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

photographs showing Dzubas at work on the floor of his Boston studio. Cleaving to a tradition centuries old, Dzubas worked from small sketches (or *modelli*) that he would scale up to gargantuan size. After tacking a canvas to the floor, applying gesso layers, and measuring and loosely marking his shapes, he would array his cans of paint, prop the *modello* on a low easel or shelf, and with paint brush in hand follow the color scheme he had designed—as can be seen in the photo of the artist transferring the acrylic sketch of this work, *Crossing,* 1975, to a larger-scaled canvas.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
Perseus and Andromeda, 1730
Oil on paper affixed to canvas
20 3/8 x 16 inches
The Frick Collection, NY

Unlike Louis, Frankenthaler, and Noland whose early goal was to achieve a surface at one with its materials—like "dyed cloth," as Greenberg wrote—Dzubas did not stain his canvases. Rather he used the chalky dense white of as many as three layers of gesso to inflect his colors with a *contre jour* effect, embedding a luminescence that would be revealed by "fading out" his edges. To achieve a flat continuous surface, Dzubas painted thin with a mineral-based acrylic called Magna, which was first developed by Sam Golden and Leonard Bocour in the 1940s. What appealed to Dzubas was that Magna provided the fullest saturation available at the time, while holding its color when thinly applied. Nearly as

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Nebel, 1971
Magna acrylic on canvas
78 1/2 x 195 inches

fluid as oil paint, the resin compound added resistance. "It doesn't let itself be pushed around that easily." Magna, then, allowed Dzubas to manipulate his pigments into forms that meld with, even as they resist their material surrounds.

In moving from his hard-edged discrete fields of color to an overall chromatic expanse, the white ground that defined the arena within which Dzubas's forms and hues had operated in the 1960s opens onto fields of color. We see this in *Nebel*, where a shadowy mist-like surface evokes the sense of a "*Nebel*," the German word for fog. As he did with the white fields, Dzubas uses the faintly purple and brown as arenas within which to place indeterminate "imagery," as he would say, having become by the early 1970s more and more "aware of color adjacent to color." Here, color replaces the white as the actor, so to speak, and the contrasts that Dzubas sets up burgeon: a dark, frankly matt grouping of rectangular blocks, where

Morris Louis
Gamma Alpha, 1960
Magna acrylic on canvas
courtesy of Loretta Howard Gallery

inner light is almost suppressed, is embedded in a lightly scumbled purple and off-white area. The sense of an emerging scene peering through the overall mist cannot be denied. In *Nebel*, Dzubas works through a crucial exploratory phase in which elements from his aesthetic past evolve into a new fully achieved style.

Dzubas's titles can be impressionistically suggestive or specifically imagistic: they bring to mind real world encounters—with weather, natural landscapes, personal events, or cul-

Sartoris, 1963
Oil on canvas
90 x 61 inches

tural artifacts. With *Foen*, diagonally tipped horizontal blazes of color surge across a vast expanse of scumbled pigment. Here, Dzubas simulates the environmental force of a vast wind-swept mountainscape, literally the *Foen* (*Föhn*, German)—the warm, yet dry masses of air that sweep through the Alpine regions of Germany, which bring with them sudden precipitation and rising temperatures. Streaks of chromatic bands seem to conjure the rising wind and succeeding precipitation, while the umber surround may imply the residual "rain shadow"—the dry area in the *Föhn*'s aftermath.

Klingsor's Summer, an explosive canvas from 1977, is another prime example of Dzubas's referential titling. With a title based on Hermann Hesse's novel *Klingsor's Last Summer* about an expressionist painter in crisis, Dzubas disposes his color shapes in contrasting groupings of both hue and palette. Warm horizontal rectangles, their edges softened, are pitted against cooler vertical shapes, while a pale yellow central perpendicular form mimes its opposing reversed mirror shape in warmer earth tones. Both warm and cool colors are then lightened with white or shaded into blue-green or umber and painted in as surrounds. Dzubas shaped these color dispersions into fields of extraordinary energy, in what Clement Greenberg described as a "malerisch" manner,

following pages 14-15
Chenango, 1973
Magna acrylic on canvas
46 x 172 inches

which the critic equated with "painterliness," or "loose, rapid [paint] handling." Dzubas's facture transmits evidence of such painterliness throughout as do both the mottled daubing of his surrounds and the "wash[ed]-out" edging of his tessarae. This is a major element that separates Dzubas's art from that of his contemporaries. Recognizing the contrast between his paintings and those of Louis, Frankenthaler, and Noland, with a sly wink Dzubas acknowledged that his "wash-outs" seemed to "violate the 'Holy Grail.' But evidently, I couldn't help myself, and I stuck to these little painterly touches."

The relationship between Dzubas's paintings and their historic models is made evident by Wölfflin's description of Baroque art: "rich groupings" of figures arrayed in "lively variations in axial directions." By alternating hue, value, and image placement, Dzubas creates an underlying intervallic structure and a continuously shifting focal point. This intervallic progression can be seen, for example, in *Chenango*, where musky hues alternate with high-keyed tones and a play between light and dark sets up optical patterns that seem to extend to infinity.

Yet Dzubas folds these Baroque compositional elements into contemporary abstraction by placing them within an unbroken, non-illusionistic shallow space that rarely breaks the two-dimensionality of his surfaces. His images are not volumetric or modeled, nor are they meant to be. With no foreground or background, Dzubas hews close to a key goal in "color field" painting—to preserve the integrity of the two-dimensional picture plane. As the artist emphatically stated, "Everything was kept on the surface, everything was very much forward, very much front."

What clearly distinguishes Dzubas, then, from the emerging stylistic trend of "post-painterly" or "color field" painting is the influence of European technique and compositional struc-

ture. All major critics of Dzubas's work call attention to the artist's European background to account for what they see as a romantic element at work, particularly in canvases from the 1970s. Dzubas himself refers to an "expressionistic, romanticizing" tendency in his early work and points to the "brooding quality" and "idealization of loneliness" in Caspar David Friedrich, along with "the unheard brashness of color" in the paintings of *Die Brücke* artists, which impressed him as an eighteen-year-old Berlin artist. "That [color] was very exciting. Because color is an emotional thing; it's a highly emotional thing, you know, and it seemed to me, these people not only spoke directly, they felt directly. There was passion." But it is the contemporary critical contention that these elements continue to undergird his later, bold colorscapes from the 1970s, with their roiling painterly surfaces, massed dynamic shapes, and expressive coloration.

Dzubas releases the expressive force of color to evoke historical large-scale grandeur, to satisfy "a hunger for larger experiences," and perhaps, to provide "a little ecstasy." The sheer fullness and richness of his large-scale 1970s work reflect the size and scale of the artist's own history. In Frank Stella's wonderfully apt and intelligent formulation, "Friedel was a 'natural,' very comfortable with paint. Early watercolors, decorative house painting, and commercial illustration all came together for him. The 'materiality' of his era was duck soup for him."■

Casper David Friedrich
Drifting Clouds, c.1820
Oil on canvas
7¼ × 9⅝ inches
Kunsthalle, Hamburg

following pages 18-19
Klingsors Summer, 1977
Acrylic on canvas
54 x 154 inches

following pages 20-21
Foen, 1974
Magna acrylic on canvas
84 x 206 inches

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Special thanks to Jim Walsh and Mark and Barbara Golden

Friedel Dzubas in his studio,
photograph by Phyllis Boudreaux

ISBN:0-9842804-9-9

All works by Friedel Dzubas photographed by
John Small and Richard Walker
Design: HHA design

cover: Procession (detail)


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