



AN AMERICAN PAINTER IN PARIS

SHIRLEY GOLDFARB

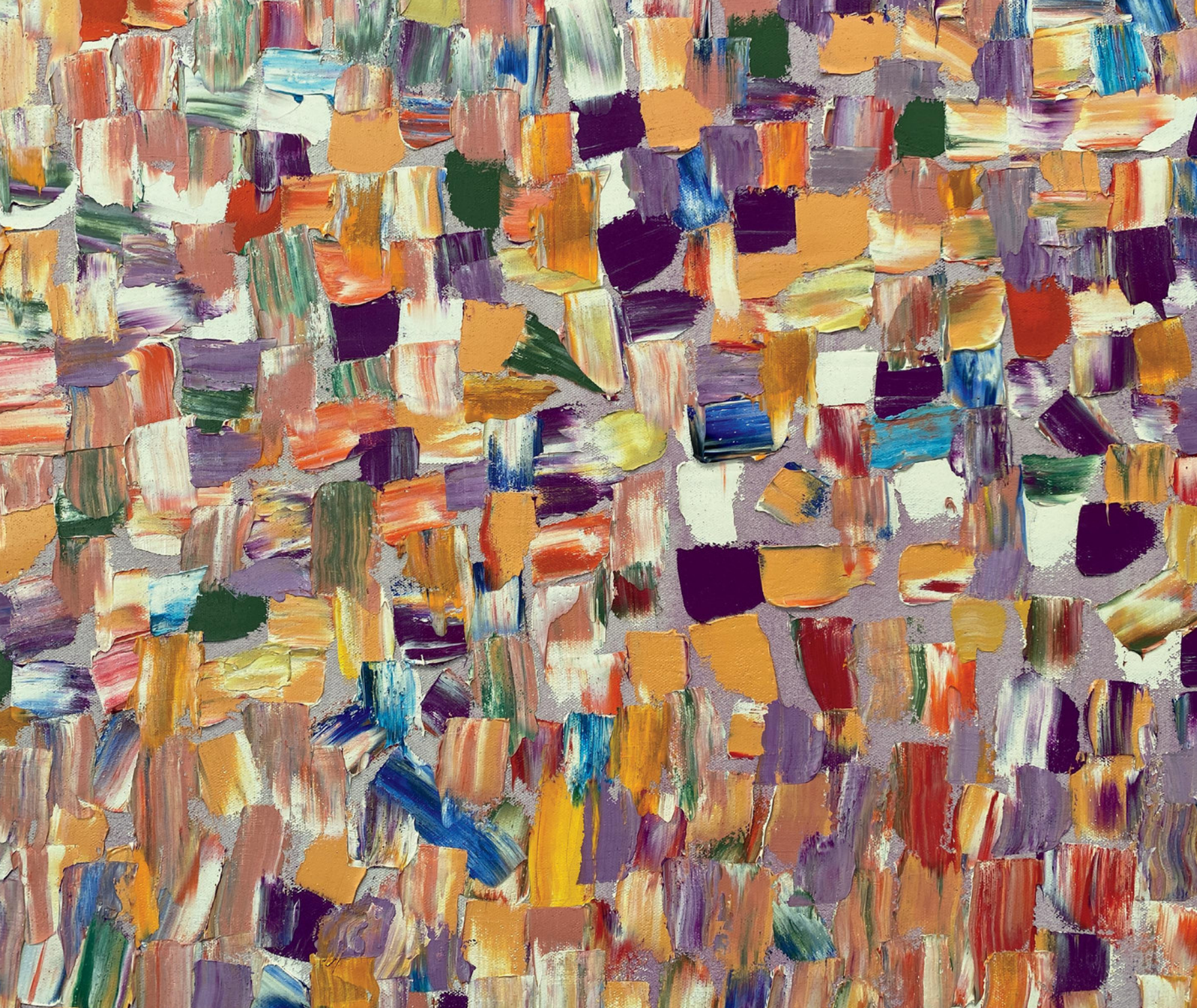
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SHIRLEY GOLDFARB

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An Affair to Remember

It seems, in retrospect, that artist Shirley Goldfarb was aptly, presciently named. Goldfarb translates into English as gold or golden color, a hue she gravitated toward almost heliotropically, and the color of some of her most ravishing paintings. It is a name that tagged her as a potential painter and chromophile, which she proved to be, becoming an inspired and fearless colorist. It foretold, perhaps, that she would be attracted to light, both natural and artificial: the light created in a painting; the light of the spotlight illuminating the performer; the clarifying, incomparable light of Parisian skies. That she was smitten by *la ville lumière* also might have been predicted. Be that as it may, Goldfarb, with her husband Gregory Masurovsky, who was also an artist, arrived in Paris in 1954. And, in 1956, their son Marc Jean was born. For American women who wanted to be considered serious artists at the time (Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler come to mind), children were often considered one more impediment in addition to so many others and renounced. Goldfarb, however, always audacious, undaunted, pursued her own path, driven by a fierce need to assert her independence. Paris suited her. It allowed her to flourish, to become whom she imagined she was. As with any *coup de coeur*, there were ups and downs, periods of enchantment and disillusionment. But she was in it for the long run, sadly cut short by her death at 55 of ovarian cancer. She painted nearly to the end, dying at home in her Montparnasse studio in the autumn of 1980. That, too, was apt.

Goldfarb was born in Altoona, Pennsylvania on August 4, 1925. In 1949, like many aspiring artists with big dreams, she left her hometown for New York City. She attended the Art Students League, then went to Woodstock to study with Nahum Tschachbasov, a Russian-born Cubo-Surrealist much esteemed at the time. She also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine before Europe and Paris beckoned. While American artists might be fleeing their hometowns for larger metropolises, in particular New York, fewer were going to Paris by 1954, and fewer yet remained for the rest of their lives. Paris retained its allure but had lost

Snowflake (detail), 1967
Oil on canvas

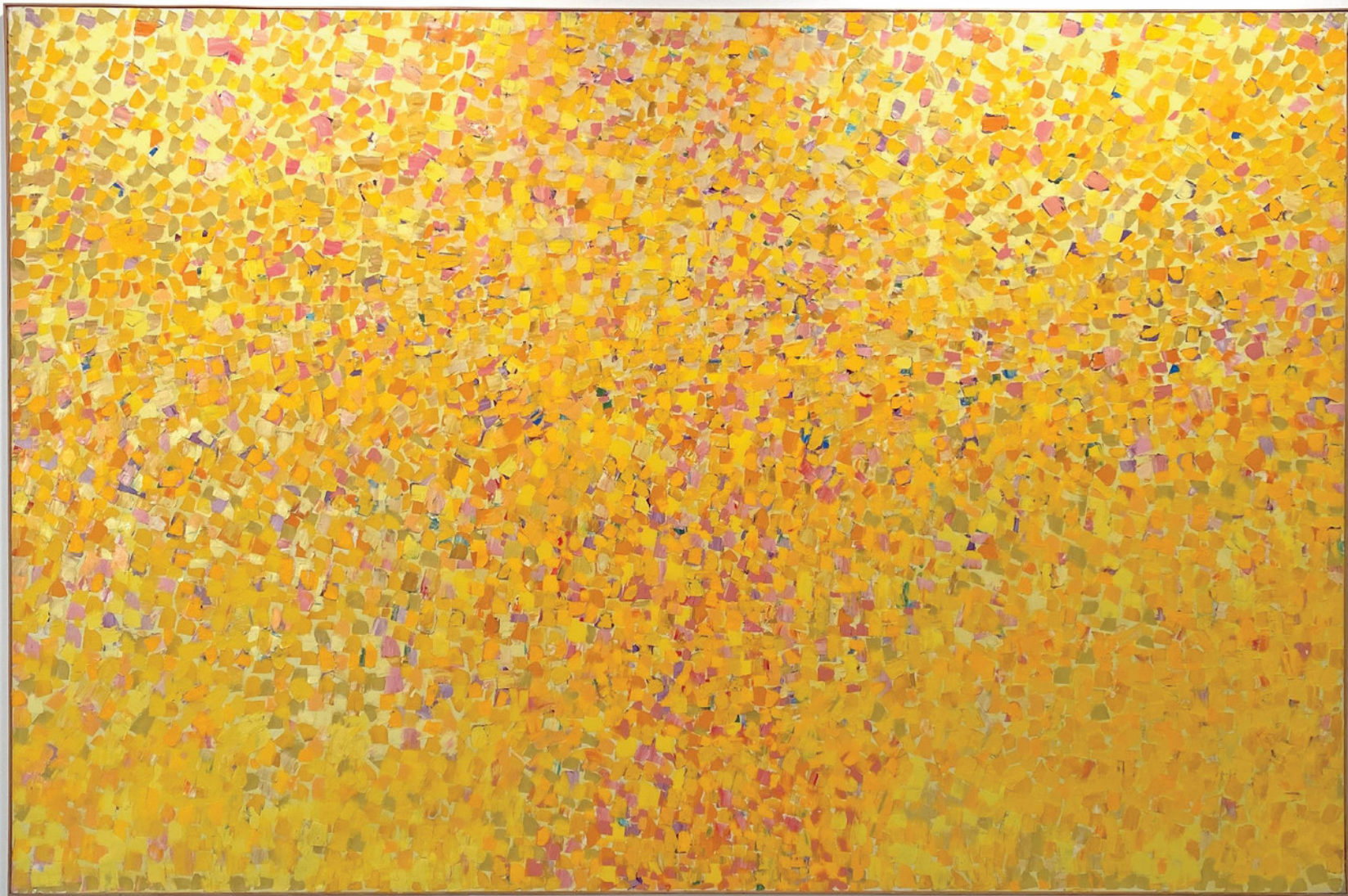
its inevitability. As America ascended politically and economically throughout the postwar years, artists of all disciplines and in unprecedented numbers hurried across the Atlantic in a reverse direction, drawn by the excitement of the new. But for Goldfarb, Paris proved irresistible.

The narrative of abstract painting in America, in particular abstract expressionist painting—once a gated, (white) male preserve—has undergone radical revisions in the past few years. The previously overlooked contributions by women artists—Native American, white, Black, Hispanic, Asian—are at last being acknowledged, necessitating a long overdue re-evaluation of the movement. Although each story was individual, there were common societal forces that impinged upon these women's lives and careers in ways that did not hamper male artists—in America, France and elsewhere. Paris was in some ways seemingly more openminded, particularly in the milieu Goldfarb habituated. Simone de Beauvoir had published her groundbreaking, foundational study of women, "The Second Sex," in 1949 to acclaim, while Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique," another feminist classic, didn't come out in the United States until 1963. But changes were in the air, gaining momentum and support and although circumstances and opportunities have significantly improved for women, parity on multiple fronts remains elusive, even decades later.

Despite the fact that Goldfarb did not have gallery representation throughout most of her life, her work is in the collections of several prominent museums on both sides of the Atlantic. To get a sense of her voice, you might read entries from the diaries she kept in the last decade of her life in which her doubts and frustrations, joys and triumphs, and her candid, very personal thoughts about herself and those around her, often writing while sitting in a café. Edited by her husband, a selection was first published in 1994 under the title "Carnets: Montparnasse, 1971-1980." The diaries were also adapted into a one-woman play and Goldfarb was the subject of a documentary film, "An American in Paris." But she is still underknown, something that during this moment of serious reconsideration of women abstractionists, might finally be remedied.

There is a short film featuring Goldfarb interviewed by critic Michel Sicard in her Montparnasse studio in the summer of 1971 that gives another look at who she was as a person and an artist. It begins with some photos of her from her childhood in Altoona, as a young woman in New York and in Paris, then discusses her paintings. While fluent in French—it was, after all, more than 15 years later—her

Yellow Painting, 1966
Oil on canvas
76⁴/₅ x 118¹/₁₀ inches



left:
Yellow Painting no.7, 1968
Oil on canvas
77 x 77 inches

right:
Snowflake, 1967
Oil on canvas
78 x 120 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches





accent was jarringly American, the kind that certain Parisians think is enough justification to refuse any further conversational exchange with you, at least in French. But it could also be seen as a willful—or perhaps simply instinctive—act of resistance rather than linguistic infelicity; she certainly didn't let it hold her back. She was who she eccentrically, indisputably was, an American in Paris, her expat status permitting a certain latitude and affection. There was freedom in being an outsider, even one who became an insider. Yet, in the end, however truly *bohémienne* she was, she was still *une Américaine*.

Another photograph of her by Alex Chatelain from 1974 shows her ensconced in a bistro; the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse (Café de Flore, le Dôme, les Deux Magots) were her favorite haunts. The point of view is frontal, and she faces the viewer alertly, challengingly. Her hair is deep auburn, long, her eyes hidden behind huge black sunglasses. If her eyes weren't concealed, you would see that they are theatrically lined in bold black eyeliner, her lipstick so dark red it is almost black and she is dressed in black. Sardi, her Yorkshire terrier, is tucked against her side, held fast by one hand. It was her uniform, representing a way of life that was in its waning days.

Both Goldfarb and her husband became regulars in the American expat art community and the Parisian art scene over the years, their friends and acquaintances artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, designers, theorists, a who's who of culture at the time, among them Sam Francis, Man Ray, Andy Warhol, Michel Butor, Yves Saint Laurent and David Hockney. Hockney painted a beguiling double portrait of Goldfarb and Masurovsky in their lilliputian live/work studio in 1974, now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He removed the fourth wall in order to see inside it in its entirety, recalling the frequently used blown-roof convention (*fukinuki yatai*) of traditional Japanese paintings in which the roof was removed for the same reason.

The six remarkable abstractions in this exhibition were made between 1957-1970, offering a sharply focused overview of the formative years of Goldfarb's art as she gradually moved toward monochrome paintings. (Yves Klein, it is worth noting, was the first artist who invited her to visit his studio). Goldfarb, influenced by Jackson Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists while in New York, changed course after arriving in Paris as she searched for her own visual language, one that would include the many new influences and insights that she was absorbing. Guided by her

Snowflake, 1967
Oil on canvas
78 x 120½ inches



keen response to color, light and to paint's earthy materiality, her practice became increasingly tactile, voluptuous, a synthesis of the School of Paris, the impressionistic, and the pointillistic. As the color and her marks became more and more palpable, they became richer, as did the light that they reflected and refracted. She said that she was very aggressive when she confronted her canvas. It was a struggle, a fight and monstrous. But she also said that the longer she lived in Paris, the gentler she became. The city, it seemed, both excited and soothed her, smoothed away her edges, her combativeness and her defensiveness. She was searching for something more harmonious and wanted to construct a pictorial space that could contain silence and the spiritual.

The earliest work presented are two small but robust paintings, their impact much greater than their measurements might lead us to expect. Both are oils. One, *Untitled (64)* from 1957, is on canvas and luminous. The layered greens, yellows and blues are interlaced by rose, pink, peach: landscape alchemized into an exquisite correlative of vernal bliss. The color scheme is that of the Impressionists, in homage to Monet, whom she saw for the first time in Paris. For her, his depiction of the world was miraculous, in particular the light that emanated from his paintings. The light of Paris and that of a Monet painting "were one and the same thing," she said. The other postcard-sized work is from 1960, on paper over panel, and horizontally oriented. It is more agitated, the marks brusque, slashed, the colors less ingratiating, a jumble of muted reds, blues and whites, merging into purple. And again, it packs a disproportionate punch.

Yellow Painting (1966) is of another order. An opulent yellow gold, flickered with reds, greens, violets, more colors, it is nearly ten feet across, an especially impressive feat considering the diminutive size of her studio. Each mark is distinct, sparkles blinking on and off, depending on the source of external light and how it plays across the surface, activating it, the tessera-like dabs akin to those found in Seurat and Monet. Its luxuriance, however, has a dash of Klimt, as if a detail had been enlarged many times over. By now, the paint was often applied with a palette knife, the surface gridded, laboriously built up but without predetermination. She likened it to writing a long letter, word by word, or taking a walk, step by step. What happens next depended on what happened before.

Similarly scaled and executed, *Snowflake* (1967), alternates coolness and warmth, and, while radiating the overall impression of red, there are many colors involved. It is more about producing

top left:
Untitled (60), 1960
 Gouache on paper
 23 x 17 inches

top right:
Abstract Composition, 1980
 Oil on paper laid on panel
 5 1/4 x 8 inches

bottom left:
Untitled (64), 1957
 Oil on canvas
 7 x 5 1/2 inches

bottom right:
Untitled (73), 1961
 Oil on canvas
 23 x 17 1/2 inches



light than color—with color as the vehicle. It is also even more mosaic-like, broken up into smaller daubs, with erratic pulsations that advance and retreat, and seem to tantalizingly conceal a landscape behind its blizzard of dots. It also conjures a semblance of weather, of the ephemerality and temporality of a snowflake, of phenomena poised to disappear. It's an evocation encouraged by the title, which as a writer I find telling, but one reason some abstractionists still refuse to name their works, to permit a greater slipperiness of associations and meanings.

The next painting, *Yellow Painting no. 7* (1968), verges on the monochromatic, its format a six-foot square. In the green-yellow-gold shimmer of its countless marks, behind its haphazard grid, there might be a tree—or there might not be. Goldfarb said that her paintings depict what she saw, like the greens and the yellows outside her door. There is also the intimation of Van Gogh, for whom yellow was almost sacred, whose work she revered. Goldfarb was also a friend of the painter Beauford Delaney (a close friend of James Baldwin, his protégé, later his benefactor) and another underknown painter who is enjoying a reappraisal of late), often holding court at the Flore together.

The latest painting in the show is dated 1970. It is mostly green, its title more than a description. Evocatively called *Fairy*, I think of, for instance, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Oberon and Titania's fairy kingdom. The wonderful, well-known line from Metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Garden" comes to mind, too: "Annihilating all that's made/to a green thought in a green shade." Or there is Klimt again and his painting, *The Park* (1909-1910). The canvas' dimensions are similar to the largest works on view here, and like them, the painting is enveloping, its constellation of pointillist marks teeming with vital energy, as if it were about to burst into bloom. Again, it suggests landscape, underscored by the color, by the myriad scintilla of greens. This work, like all her works, must be seen in actuality in order to appreciate the rhythms and fluidity of its surface, and the constant shifts taking place on it. It is, like the other paintings, in that sense forever unfinished, since the external conditions will always differ, each reading contingent, dependent on a viewer who will never see it the same way, even if that viewer is the same viewer. Like Heraclitus' river, these paintings also can never be stepped into twice.■

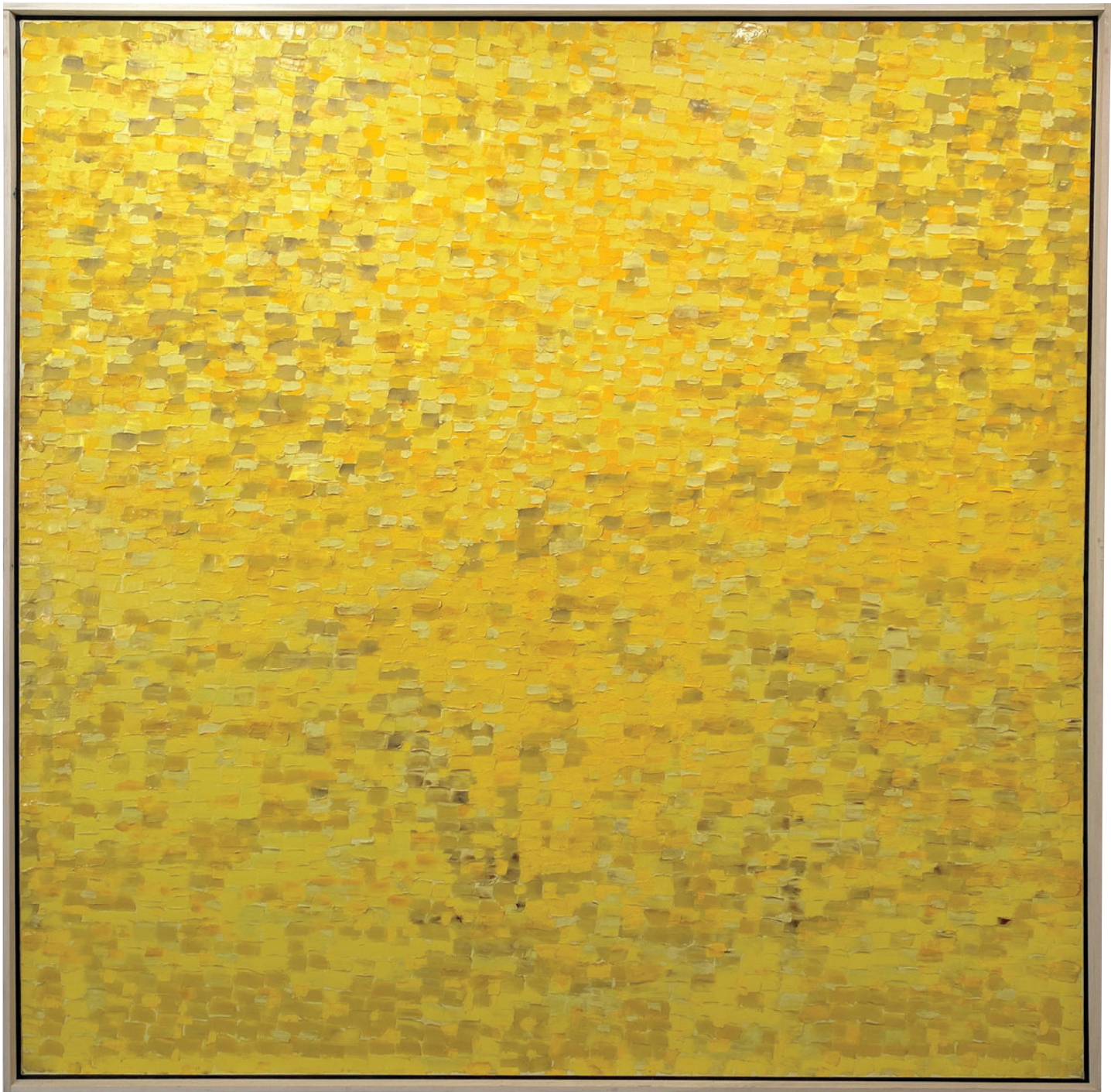
Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic, curator and journalist.

Yellow Painting no.7, 1968

Oil on canvas

77 x 77 inches



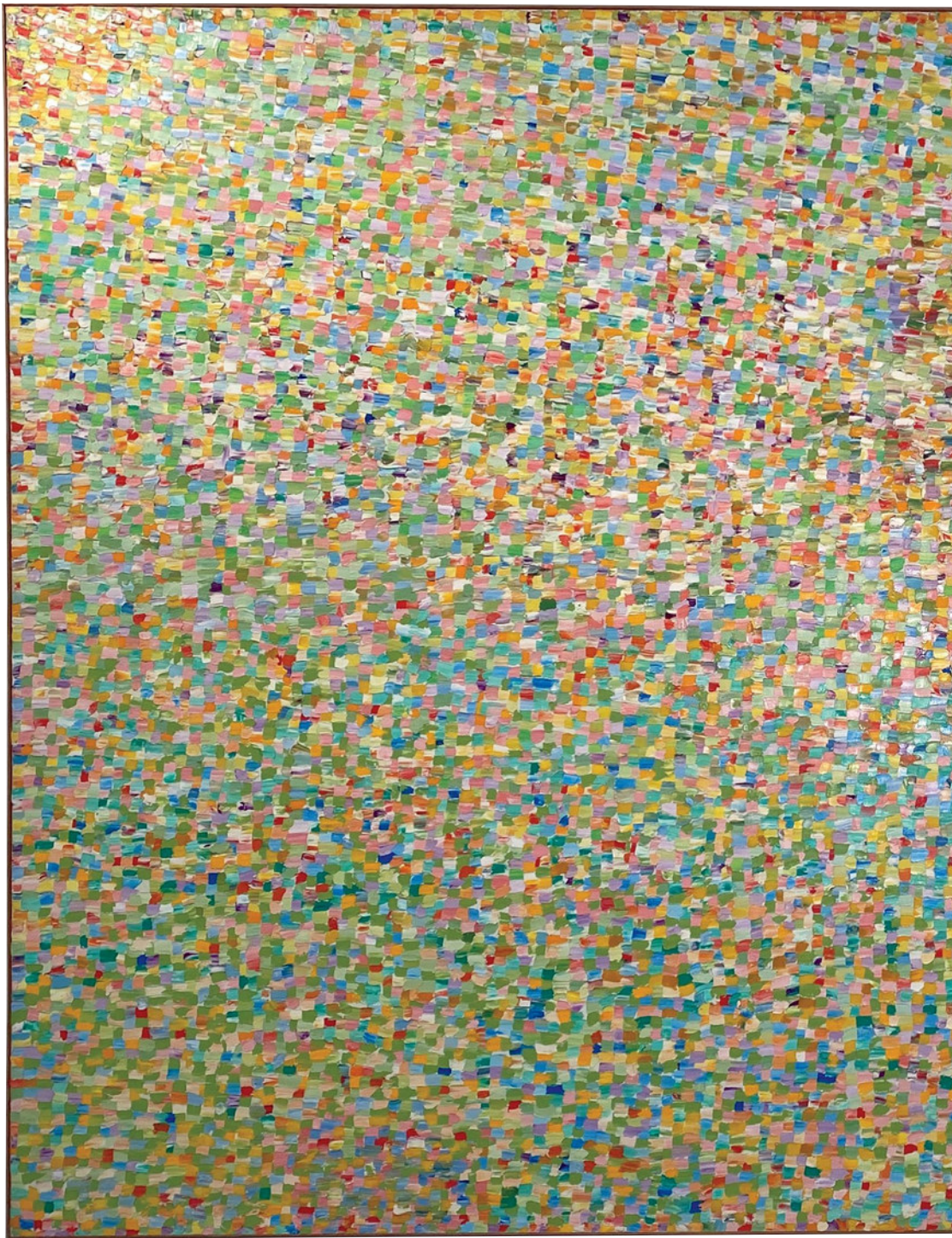




left:
Fairy, 1970
Oil on canvas
77 x 118½ inches

right:
Yellow Painting no.7, 1968
Oil on canvas
77 x 77 inches

Fairy, 1970
Oil on canvas
77 x 118½ inches





SHIRLEY GOLDFARB (1925 – 1980) was an American painter best known for her monumental Abstract Expressionist paintings of the 1950s and 1960s and her gridded pallet knife paintings of the 1970s and 1980s. She first studied art at the Art Students League in New York in 1949 where she frequented the storied cedar bar and had befriended Jackson Pollock. In 1954 she moved to Paris with her husband Gregory Masurovsky on the GI Bill. It was here that she came into her own as an artist. She diffused the painterly action of Abstract Expressionism with a sense of light and color owed to her adoptive city.

Thriving in a social milieu that encouraged eccentricity and flair, she created a new artistic persona and became a fixture of Paris' community of artists, writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals. She formed friendships with Americans Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis and the surrealist artists Alberto Giacometti, Man Ray, and Max Ernst. While many of her contemporaries returned to New York, Goldfarb and her husband remained in Paris becoming long term fixtures in the community. She was represented in both Paris and New York throughout her life by friend and renowned gallerist Virginia Zabriskie. In the 1970s she became close with Andy Warhol and with David Hockney who painted her portrait, now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

In 2000 her personal journals were adapted into the one-woman play Shirley which won a Moliere award for best actress. She was also the subject of a documentary *An American in Paris* by Kaye Morley on RTI Radio. Her work is in a number of important public collections including the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, Kunsthalle, Bale, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. the Georges Pompidou Center, the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 2017 Shirley Goldfarb: Painting Paris, Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013 Shirley Goldfarb: A Retrospective, Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, NY
- 2008 Shirley Goldfarb: Paintings Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY,
- 2002 Shirley Goldfarb: Pink, Rose, Love, Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY
- 2000 Shirley Goldfarb, Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010 Shirley Goldfarb: The early years, Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
- 1998 Shirley Goldfarb, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.
- 1998 Galerie Mantoux-Gignac, Paris
- 1994 Galerie Zabriskie, Paris, France
- 1991 Galerie Zabriskie, Paris, France
- 1990 Hommage to Shirley Goldfarb, Musee de Pontoise, France
- 1983 Shirley Goldfarb: Retrospective, Galerie Eric Franck, Geneva, Switzerland
- 1983 Galerie Reckermann, Cologne, Germany
- 1983 Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France
- 1981 Art Center OET Foundation for Culture, Paris, France
- 1981 Galerie Eric Franck, FIAC, Paris, France
- 1980 Musee de Pontoise, Pontoise, France
- 1976 Galerie la Derive, Paris, France
- 1967 The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
- 1964 Eric Locke Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1963 Kipstein und Korneld, Bern, Switzerland
- 1962 Centre Culture Americain, Paris, France
- 1956 Studio Paul Facchetti, Paris, France

Literature

Shirley Goldfarb: Painting Paris, 2017, Loretta Howard Gallery, exhibition catalogue, essay by Howard Hurst
 Women of Abstract Expressionism, Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO., Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. Joan M Marter; Gwen Finkel Chanzit
 Shirley Goldfarb, Art Forum, 2013, Robert Pincus-Witten
 The Lure of Paris, 2012, Loretta Howard Gallery, exhibition catalogue, essay by Saul Ostrow
 Art in Review, 2000, The New York Times, Roberta Smith
 American Art from the Collection, Centre Georges Pompidou.
 Trapped: Shirley Goldfarb at the Café Flore, Interview Magazine, Peter Lester
 Monet, Nympheas, 1972, F. Hazan, Paris, D. Rouard
 Adventures in Art, 1966, Harry Abrams
 American Sanctuary in Paris, Artnews Annual, 1966, John Ashbery

Selected Group Exhibitions

2022 Grey Art Gallery, New York University
 2020 Soulages Museum, Rodez, The Musée d'arts de Nantes, the Musée Fabre Montpellier, France
 2012 The Lure of Paris, Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, NY
 1986 A Look at Today's Art, Musee Promenade, Marly le Roi, France
 1985 Black and White, Musee de Pontoise, Pontoise, France
 1981 New Acquisitions, Musee de Pontoise, Pontoise, France
 1981 Americans in Paris, Art Center, Paris, France
 1981 The Best Works from the Collection of Peter Stuyvesant, Provinciaal Museum, Asselt, Belgium

1977 Some Americans in Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
 1969 9th International Salon, Juvisy, France
 1969 Biennale de Menton, Menton, France
 1969 Art USA, Musee de Brest, France
 1968 Salon de Mai, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
 1967 5th Biennial, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
 1966 Art Vivant USA, Kunsthalle, St. Gallen, Switzerland
 1966 Salon de Mai, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
 1961 Salon des Realities Nouvelles, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
 1961 Salon des Comparaisons, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
 1958 Jackson Pollock, New American Painting, Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland
 1958 Salon de Mai, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
 1956 Salon des Realites Nouvelles, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France

Public Collections

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA
 Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris
 Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris
 Kunsthalle, Basel
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 The National Museum of Women in the Arts Washington, D.C.
 Georges Pompidou Center
 Minneapolis Institute of Art
 Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.



top right: Shirley Goldfarb, 1974, Photograph by Alex Chatelain
 top left: Shirley Goldfarb, Photograph by Marc Masurovsky
 above: David Hockney In His Paris Studio painting "Shirley Goldfarb & Gregory Masurovsky"
 © David Hockney, Photograph by André Ostier

This catalogue published on the occasion
 of the exhibition

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