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THE ARCHIVES

OPINIONS

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Bernard Childs at Jason McCoy Gallery

Enigma stands out as perhaps the most unequivocally captivating feature of certain paintings—drawing in viewers before they know what they're staring at, or why. Bernard Childs, an American oil painter who lived from 1910 to 1985 and produced many of his most interesting works during a period when he lived between Paris and New York from 1966 to 1977, painted in a way that resists interpretation and understanding more insidiously than many of the great masters of non-representational painting.

More traditional abstraction relies on an undermining of the representative figure, turning the canvas instead into a pure interrogation of color, shape, and form, as in Mark Rothko's haunting veils of floating tone, Ellsworth Kelly's patterned swatches of screaming primary color, or Morris Louis' surface-defining striped rivulets of poured paint. By contrast, Childs playfully toed out images that have an inescapable figurative gestalt, but one that eludes identification of an underlying referent. You know he's painting something, yet you've been given one- or two-too-few clues to solve the mystery, deliberately.

Such a conflict of meaning lies at the center of almost all of Childs' great works from the '60s and '70s, including *The Visitor*—a standout piece from a current exhibition of his art at Jason McCoy Gallery in Midtown Manhattan, on view through June 29th. Pausing before it, you at first appreciate little more than soft-edged geometric forms circumscribing regions of warm, present tonality. As the lines settle into place, one's imagination invokes a small story—is this the scene of a street-corner meet-up? A door held ajar, cracked open long after midnight? Two small swatches of brighter color set against the larger figures almost insist on self-identifying with a sort of painterly personhood, but even in granting that interpretive possibility, far more questions have been asked than answered.

Color and hue present another important expressive outlet in Childs' paintings, with the strong contrast and primary-color-oriented palette of works like *Summer Solstice* competing with the soft, amorphous blends of *He Who Loves the Earth Must Love the Worm* and *Matrix of the Butterfly* to define the boundaries of the artist's broad emotional landscape. In each, color acts as a final figurative element, almost shoving the viewer into a range of feelings through which the work is meant to be interpreted, be it the melancholy meditations of *Matrix* or the joyful, transcendent effervescence of *He Who Loves*.

He Who Loves the Earth Must Love the Worm also makes an important gesture towards the larger theme of environmentalism that quietly permeates the artist's 1970s works. Several titles make direct reference to natural spirits or creatures, but more importantly the larger mood of the works locates symbols of nature not only as central, identifiable figures in an otherwise-abstract sphere, but surrounds them with motifs in color and light that convey an intrinsic sense of longing, and the urge to thrive—a powerful message of hope and forward-thinking that captures the essential spirit of all of Bernard Childs' artwork.

— Christopher Graffeo