



STEPHEN GREENE
1960S ABSTRACTIONS

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Green Night, 1963

STEPHEN GREENE: 1960s Abstractions in Context

By Alison de Lima Greene

*I'd say the most marvelous painting is a painting that offers
nothing to anybody other than itself.*

—Stephen Greene, 1968¹

The 1960s were a pivotal decade in the career of Stephen Greene (1917–1999). Already acclaimed for his figurative works of the late 1940s and early 1950s, he achieved a new authority with such breakthrough compositions as *Le Ciel Amoureux*, 1960 (Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena); *Night Watch*, 1960 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art); and *White Light*, 1961 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York). Recognizing this fundamental change in his work, Greene acknowledged: “I now want the painting itself to be the passion rather than to illustrate it. . . . I do not want to consider myself as an ‘ex-figure painter’ for the same reasons that I would not want to think of myself as another ‘abstract painter.’ I am making something else, something more involved than these classifications imply. I desire my own place, my own name.”²

Greene’s desire to create his own place, his own name, coincided with a critical juncture in the history of American painting. By 1960 the revolutions first ignited by the Abstract Expressionist vanguard had evolved into the more complex history of the New York School. At the same time, a new generation of painters was coming forward—Jasper Johns and Frank Stella among others—for whom the concerns of expression and representation had undergone a radical reassessment, while the emerging Pop, Minimalist, and Conceptual art movements issued new challenges to the very act of painting itself.

It was in this era of seismic shifts that Greene defined his distinctive and autographic method of abstract composition. In part inspired by the canvases of Barnett Newman, he sought to purge his paintings of narrative elements without sacrificing the qualities of myth and timelessness that had been his early inspirations. Or, as Barbara Rose observed, “Greene gave up the easily named for what Meyer Shapiro has called ‘the liberating quality’ of abstract



LEFT: *Grey Light*, 1965

RIGHT: *Vigil*, 1962

art.”³ As gesture and hue gained in importance, he brought a new quality of light to his paintings, working through subtle layers of oil washes, and bringing a quiet drama to his nuanced orchestrations of primary and secondary colors. At the same time, he allowed certain shapes to resonate, and fragments of ladders, props, and the human anatomy persist like latent memories.

Greene’s choice of titles eloquently captures the larger dimensions of allegory he brought to his work: *Vigil*, *The Ladder*, and *Descent* resonate in the history of art, and can also be considered metaphors for studio practice, the daily effort to conquer the canvas. *Grey Light* and *Green Night* further map the liminal territories Greene sought to chart and fix in place. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1964, Brian O’Doherty proclaimed: “Stephen Greene . . . makes the word ‘artist’ take on its fullest meaning. His style is one of the most perfect in American art, utilizing all the skills of a consummate picture maker.”⁴

The nine paintings in the present exhibition encompass the major developments of the first half of this decade, from the sensuous palette of *Vigil*, 1962, to the taut linearity of *Extension*, 1965. Commenting on his evolution, Karen Wilkin has written: “Greene’s paintings of the early sixties are loose and painterly, roughly brushed patches of color massing into configurations which are the actors in ambiguous dramas. Gradually, these become more clearly defined, biomorphic shapes interacting with bands and arcs of color. In the mid-sixties, Greene began to explore a more geometrical vocabulary. . . Linear elements become increasingly important in the paintings immediately following, spiky scaffoldings, constructions held in tenuous balance.”⁵

The 1960s saw some of Greene’s most critically acclaimed exhibitions. In 1963 he was the focus of a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which coincided with a survey dedicated to Arshile Gorky at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. In reviewing these exhibitions, Leslie Judd Ahlander placed the two artists in context: “Stephen Greene did not start where Gorky left off . . . still it would be hard to conceive of his present work had Gorky



LEFT: *The Demise of _____*, 1964

RIGHT: *Descent*, 1963

not lived and painted when he did. Greene's large-scale retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery is typical of many American artists who started from traditional sources only to end embracing the new freedom of vision which Gorky helped make possible."⁶

In addition to the Corcoran retrospective, Greene was featured in several notable exhibitions during these years, including *Abstract Expressionists and Imagists* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1961) and *Seven Decades of American Painting* (1969) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as such exhibitions as the São Paulo Bienal (1961), the Art Institute of Chicago's American Exhibition series (1962), and the Whitney Annuals (1961, 1963, and 1967). His work was also seen in solo presentations at George Staempfli Gallery, New York, in 1961, 1964, 1966, and 1969.

In recent years Greene's contribution to painting in this era was highlighted by the exhibition *Surface Truths: Abstract Painting in the Sixties*, organized by Gloria Williams in 2011 for the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena, where Greene was exhibited in conjunction with the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, and Jack Youngerman among others.

- 1 Dorothy Seckler, "Oral History Interview with Stephen Greene, June 8, 1968," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 2 Stephen Greene, "A Case in Point: The Artist in America," *Art in America* 49, no. 1 (Januray 1961).
- 3 Barbara Rose, "Stephen Greene: A Retrospective Exhibition," *Art International* 7, no. 4 (April 1963).
- 4 Brian O'Doherty, "Stephen Greene, Perfectionist: His Paintings, Charged With Anxiety, On View," *The New York Times*, May 16, 1964.
- 5 Karen Wilkin, "Stephen Greene," *Art International* 17, no. 2 (February 1973): 16.
- 6 Leslie Judd Ahlander, "Gorky, Greene Are on Exhibit," *The Washington Post*, Sunday, March 17, 1963.



The Ladder, 1963



Chasm, 1962



Vigil, 1962



Descent, 1963

STEPHEN GREENE: 1960s ABSTRACTIONS

March 3 – April 30, 2016

The Sphinx, 1959

Oil on canvas, 43½ x 37 inches (110.5 x 94 cm)

Chasm, 1962

Oil on canvas, 80 x 68 inches (203.2 x 172.7 cm)

Vigil, 1962

Oil on canvas, 68 x 80 inches (172.7 x 203.2 cm)

Green Night, 1963

Oil on canvas, 80 x 68 inches (203.2 x 172.7 cm)

Descent, 1963

Oil on canvas, 80 x 68 inches (203.2 x 172.7 cm)

The Ladder, 1963

Oil on canvas, 58 x 58 inches (147.3 x 147.3 cm)

The Demise of _____, 1964

Oil on canvas, 64 x 50 inches (162.6 x 127 cm)

Extension, 1965

Oil on canvas, 50 x 82 inches (127 x 208.3 cm)

Grey Light, 1965

Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 inches (127 x 127 cm)

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