

Brach. *Ghost Mesa No. 11*, 1980. Oil and gold leaf, 46½" x 58½". Illustrations by courtesy of the artist and the Yares Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona.

CAROL DONNELL-KOTROZO

PAUL BRACH: RECENT WORK

What is a sophisticated New Yorker like Paul Brach doing painting those "dreamscapes" of Arizona — those panoramic scenes of wandering herds of wild horses, grazing or galloping by in the shadow of distant mesas looming up behind? Brach's paintings have a subtle grandeur, and are as still and timeless as his boyhood memory of summers spent, when he was sixteen or seventeen, working as a ranch-hand in the endless spaces of the western desert. The clear light, the glow of color at dawn or dusk, the open land, and the drifting troupes of horses were to have for him a life-long allure. But we had to wait forty years for the full impact of those early experiences to yield the classic simplicity of his recent paintings, transformed by the serenity and assured touch of the mature artist who has found an idiom exactly suited to his psychological-emotional and sensorial-pictorial needs.

It might seem like a rather long route that led him to the present but it was not a circuitous one. There is an orderly progression to his paintings over the years. It is an order ~~received~~ ~~best~~ ~~in~~ ~~retrospect~~, but an inevitable one it

seems, or so we would like to believe, for the development of his art appears so logical and so perfectly designed (whether by instinct, will, or desire), even when it progressed at a slow and hesitant pace.

Brought up in New York in the prosperity of an upper bourgeois Jewish family, Brach eventually found himself in Iowa City after a stint in the service during World War II. There he met and married Miriam Schapiro, a fellow classmate in printmaking. He acquired a Master of Fine Arts degree and was quickly off on the academic track which ultimately led, many jobs later, to a dean's post at the innovative California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles. Promoting and administering the progressive art programs was an all-consuming enterprise in the late sixties and early seventies until Brach returned to New York to live and work as a fulltime painter.

He had been painting and drawing all along, particularly in the late forties and early fifties, also executing a series of mythology-laden prints. Along with fellow artists including Larry Rivers, Al Leslie, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler, he became immersed in abstract expressionism in an atmosphere then heavy with the rhetoric of Harold Rosenberg. Brach was a paradigm second generation abstract expressionist who translated the energy and mus-

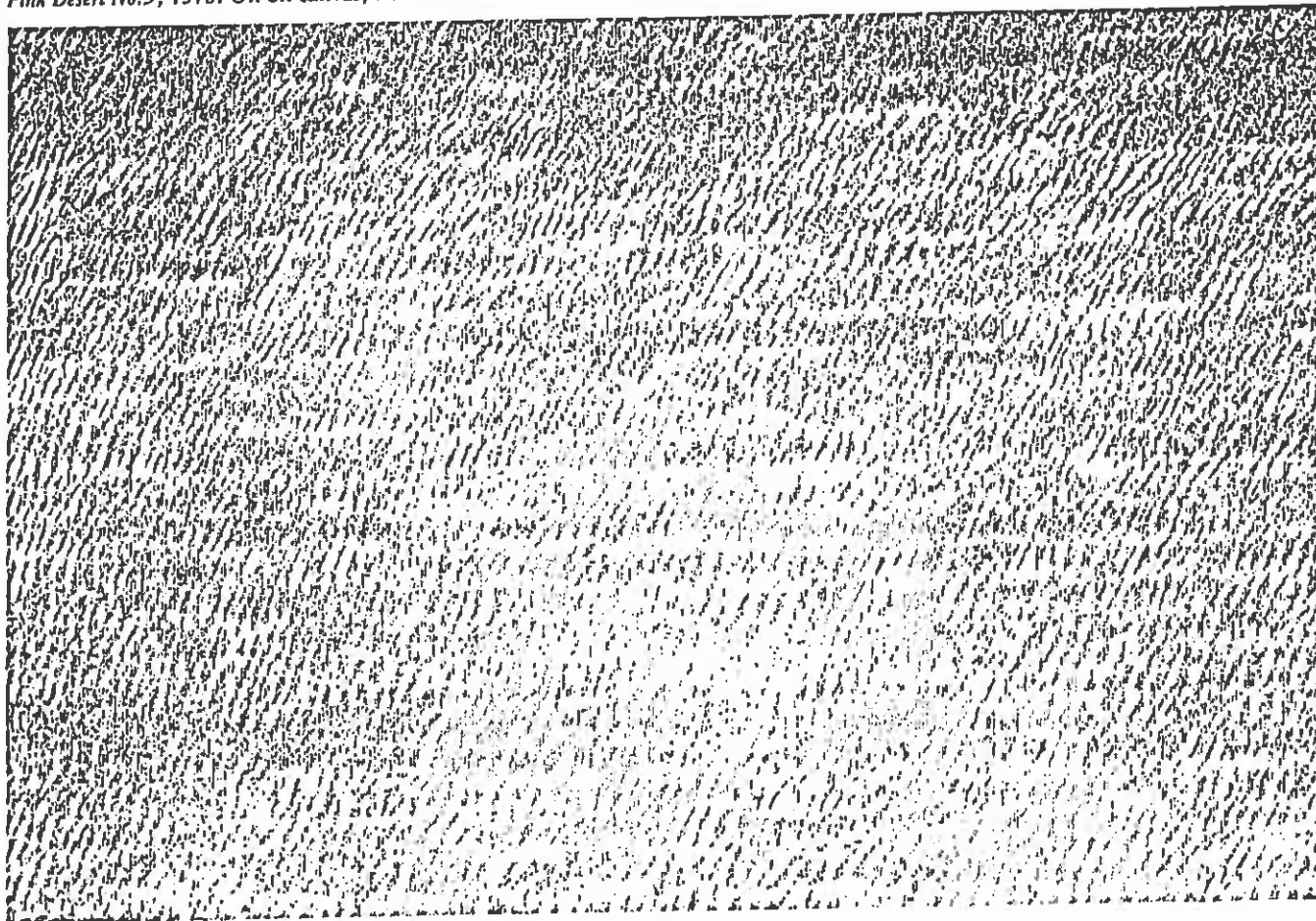
ic of the heroic Hellenic figures of his early prints into a new painterly body language. He sought passion, drama, elemental expression, infusing his multi-colored abstractions with the ambiguity of cubist space in which fragments of pictorial matter collide with one another in the central arena of action – the canvas. He may not have been one of the lead actors, but he was a learned devotee producing paintings which today look like beautifully classic derivations rather than gut-stained maps of existential psychic space. "But what do you expect", says Brach, "I inherited a successful revolution."

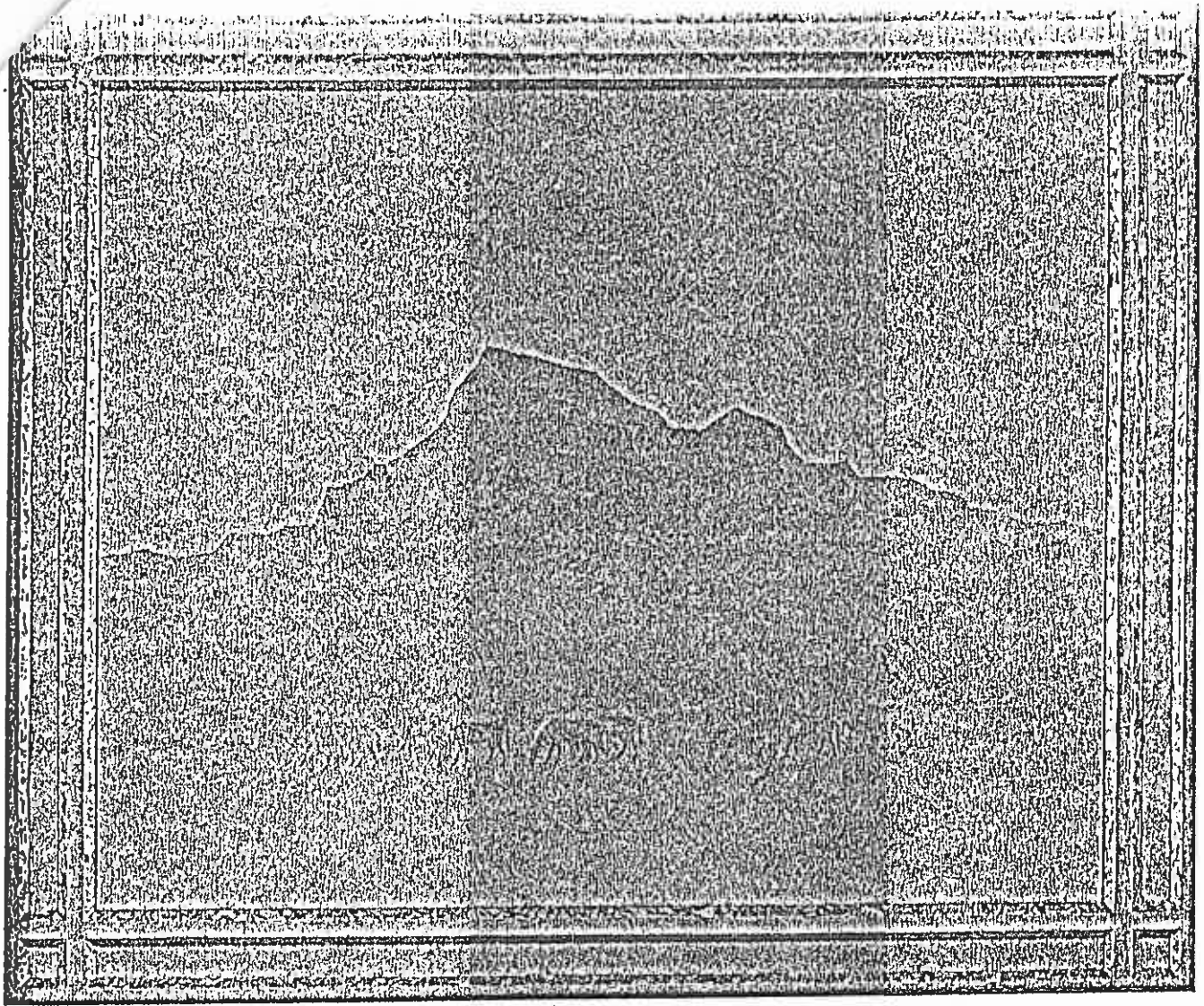
As the fifties waned, so did the legendary movement with its "deadly attraction" for members of the second generation. In the late fifties a series of monochromatic blue abstractions signalled a move toward geometry, but not the idealized models of a perfect world order of de Stijl nor the constructivism of the Bauhaus, nor yet a content-and-ideology-free foreshadowing of the cool minimalism that was to come, blown in on the breeze of Greenbergian formalism. They were metaphors, rather, of indeterminacy, existential "pseudo-certainties" and laden with covert content however personal to the artist. (As Leo Steinberg said, "There at the threshold of invisibility, your eye toils to see.")¹ Some of these "empty icons" as he called them allowed streaks and waves of energy to come tumbling down their vertical surfaces – paint under the spell of gravitational pull – but not always sitting firmly on the stretched taut veneer. There was a residual deep space in the blue paintings, an anomaly in the days of optical color projection that flowed out of, not back into, the picture space – the days when the only "angst" displayed was over

the tense relationship between surface and illusion, or between the physical fact of the paint medium and the content behind it. (Anything but those hated illusionistic hole and surfaces receding into space!) This clash between the "wall and the void" restated the old dilemma of the artwork as flat object and window into nature, and polarized the once loosely defined and dual painting experience. Critics and theorists never tire of debating the roles of illusion and reality in art, and the debate rages on. The perplexing ambiguity of object and image are two long-term tenants of art history with renewable leases, and each new turn of the old dialogue is potentially fresh and enlightening.

Brach went flatter in the early sixties, stripping his art of its overt references, especially of its digressions into mimesis and the distractions of spatial suggestion. Never a good Greenbergian, he created an art that was *both* a wall and a window. He never escaped the role of artist as image-maker whose window into the world beyond offered only a limited glimpse of reality, but a glimpse nonetheless. The image was so abstract that attention was eventually focused more on the window than on the framed "scene". The rectilinear structure of the frame then began to intrude into the picture space, first as simple rectangles of color and then as horizontal bands multiplying endlessly in parallel progression. *Pink Desert*, 1974, inspired by the horizontal tenor of a scene viewed outside his studio window in California, is like the land seen through a refractive prism that splits and divides. Brach had tried to defuse his illusionistic proclivities by going solid white or black, but soon found that such absolute purity was a one-

Pink Desert No. 3, 1975. Oil on canvas, 72" x 100".





Sandia No. 3, 1980. Oil and gold leaf, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 58 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

way street, like Ad Reinhardt rituals in replay. In California, by this time, under the compelling influence of the bright light that "illuminated everything but clarified nothing", Brach noticed the recurrence of the horizon line echoed in the parallel division of his canvases. He was clearly being seduced by the landscape of the west.

Gone were the elemental truths that required no further pictorial demonstration than a radiant corona of white light or the simple perfection of a circle as the perennial archetype of unity and wholeness. Brach at this point re-entered the world of nature and figuration. Even the ultimate abstraction contained natural references: those insistent horizon lines, and the diffuse atmospheric light and color of the desert. The western landscape asserted its grip, perhaps strongest when he returned to New York City. The confinement of walled-in space, the vertical jungle of concrete slab and glass flora and fauna was a far cry from the call of the vast, wild unencumbered land. A romantic longing took hold, first as a stream of stenciled carousel horses with long, elegant necks and supple dancing legs, reined in only by a strongly articulated, illusionistic frame around the canvas that eventually took on actual material proportions becoming a three-dimensional statement. Cleverly, the frame played off the two-dimensional unreality of the flattened images. The tension of ambiguity was

still there in these descendants of his early minimal abstractions. Brach was not balancing the seesaw of art (object) and reality (illusion), of flat design and figurative image. The perennial artist's quest for resolution was becoming something of a search for the Grail in contemporary art, and Brach's own search was coming nearer the mark.

Influenced in part by the stark geometric beauty of Navajo rugs, baskets and pots, Brach's current paintings luxuriate in "equivalences". He creates hieroglyphic surrogates for palpable reality: stylized prancing horses and imposing mountainscapes in silent silhouette. The problematic relation of the reality and the illusion is still the nagging question and residual dilemma. Brach's painted "frames" are dramatic and assertive, finally breaking full-force into the pictorial reality like fanciful gilded windows leading the eye into a created paradise: windows into an idyllic Eden seen through rose-colored glasses perhaps, but a window nonetheless. Is this a parody of Hellenistic or Renaissance illusionism by the veteran teacher and heir to the traditions of art history? Whatever the motivation, Brach still draws the viewer into the old game of fabrication against fact. It is all a created edifice of course, an artifice: the illusion is emphatically dreamlike, and a metaphor for a lived visual experience, an "equivalence" in pared-down pictorial language distilled from the opposition of

passion of abstract expressionism. This is a crux in Brach's art and a double risk for the artist who manages to ease his way along the tightrope, settling on a representational minimalism.

The clarity of the light at noon, the haze of dawn, and the mellow purified colors of dusk exist on one level in these framed images of the land – the motif served up on a bed of sixties art theory struggling to free itself from the last vestiges of dead-end reductionism. On another level, decoration and pattern contradict the conventionality of the image and pull it back into the world of art and artifice – the two-dimensional reality of a canvas as a formal exercise in pictorial mechanics.

The frame is clearly part of the work now and not a mere foil. It shapes the image and exists as rhythmic design, creating an orderly architectonic system of rectangular shapes in gold leaf confronting the viewer with their spectacular presence. Parallel bands move in and out with varying degrees of projection and recession like a constructivist bas-relief at a fancy dress ball. And what of the lofty vision beyond this frame? Is this an Arizona dreamworld conjured up by memory with the added fantasies of the city dweller hungry for primal experience? The horses may be read perhaps as archetypal symbols of freedom and escape into raw nature, Rousseau's nature,

and therefore another example of equanimity. They also join forces with history, consciously or not, as if the Parthenon cavalcade and Attic vase chariot processions, the Assyrian reliefs and Ucello's stereometric horses were leading through the corridors of time into the melting pot present of the Golden West.

The fantasy in Brach's work is not a feigned reality. His images are not purloined from the past, and his art is no mere fiction when seen in this light. It is the idiosyncratic personal expression of one man's dialogue with collective atavistic impulses embodied in a stately, evocative, nondiscursive language of forms and colors. It is one man's vision, but one that is reflective of a larger consciousness, of a deeper kind of instinctual reality whose truth is not measured by literal correspondences or empirical data. Brach evokes the poetic in his viewers, as he did in Leo Steinberg who concluded a review of his abstractions some years ago with a remark that is applicable once again: "They are beautiful pictures, solitary and serious."¹

NOTES

1. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (London: Oxford, 1972), p. 287.
2. *Ibid*, p. 288.

Ghost Mesa No. 4, 1979. Oil and gold leaf on masonite, 24"x30".

