

HERMAN CHERRY

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Paintings on Paper

Martha's Vineyard ∞ 1956

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Photographs of the works by Regina Cherry

Cover: *Seascape #33*,
Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 16 1/8 x 20 1/4 inches

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s, when I first saw Herman Cherry's recent abstract canvases, I was amazed and delighted by their freshness and vigor. It seemed to me that he had made a breakthrough, achieving a synthesis of color and form unprecedented in his work. It was not until recently, when Regina Cherry showed me the series of paintings on paper that her late husband had made in the summer of 1956, that I realized where the seeds of those beautiful late canvases had been sown.

Cherry spent that fateful summer on the island of Martha's Vineyard, off the coast of Massachusetts, where his one-time teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, had a summer home. Cherry had studied with Benton at the Art Students League in New York City in 1930, when Jackson Pollock was one of his classmates. Cherry and Pollock were among those who rejected Benton's American Scene subject matter, but they remained beholden to him for the conviction that direct experience was a cornerstone of authentic creative expression.

More than 25 years after leaving Benton's class, Cherry chose to summer near his former teacher's retreat. There, immersed in the humid coastal atmosphere, with its shimmering light, and attuned to the constant interaction of land, sea and sky, he created scores of paintings on paper that crystallized a harmonious vision of chromatic abstraction. Perhaps a synthesis of Benton's lessons about the importance of observation, as well as a desire—fostered by the prevailing New York School aesthetics—to transcend anecdotal

narrative and description, led Cherry to pursue color and gesture as the essential elements on which to focus.

It should also be mentioned that one of Cherry's other teachers was Stanton MacDonald-Wright, whose pioneering color experiments in Paris before World War I led to a short-lived movement known as Synchronism. Thus the influences combined to produce a deep-seated respect for color's supremacy, an attitude that found a receptive audience among Cherry's Abstract Expressionist colleagues. One of them, the sculptor David Smith, recognized Cherry's achievement and wrote to his friend in 1957:

“...you have something wonderful going on in color—
all I can say is push it, push it like hell and let nothing divert you.
Throw caution, take unknown liberties, dive in where nobody has been....
I don't see why you can't fly high—it seems so close to you—
and who else has color?”

In this selection from the Martha's Vineyard series; we see Cherry's chromatic gift at its purest. Inspired by landscape, but without reference to local topography, they express a deep understanding of the natural environment—of the fundamentals of nature rather than its specifics. And thirty years later, those elements would re-assert themselves in the sensuous canvases that crowned his long and distinguished career.

Few of the series have ever been shown, although three were included in a 1990 show of Cherry's works on paper at the Luise Ross Gallery in Manhattan, and a few years later one was in a group show at the Arlene Bujese Gallery in East

Hampton. Gerson and Judith Lieber purchased that piece, and I thank them for lending it to the current show. It includes collage as well as paint, and was not completed until 1958. Its fragmented imagery and enigmatic title, *Aftermath*, may refer to the emotional turmoil following Pollock's fatal car crash in August 1956.

Cherry learned of his friend's death from Willem de Kooning, who was also summering on Martha's Vineyard. According to Regina Cherry, someone had telephoned de Kooning with the news, and he and Cherry went to Benton's house to tell him. Benton had already learned of the tragedy, and he and his wife, Rita, were deeply distressed. De Kooning and Cherry had decided to fly back to East Hampton to attend the funeral and they asked Benton if he would join them, but he declined.

I am deeply grateful to Regina Cherry for bringing the Martha's Vineyard series to my attention, and for her wholehearted cooperation in preparing this exhibition. Her hard work and generosity are sincerely appreciated. Thanks are also owed to Gary Snyder of Gary Snyder Fine Art for participating in the project, to Edmund Leites for his amusing and insightful essay, and to the Judith Rothschild Foundation and Bobbi and Barry Collier, through the Research Foundation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, for financial support of the exhibition and catalogue.

Helen A. Harrison, Director
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center



Aftermath, 1956/58
Oil and collage on rag paper, 18 1/2 x 22 3/4 inches
Lent by Judith and Gerson Lieber

HERMAN CHERRY: AN APPRECIATION

EDMUND LEITES

The Pasteur Pharmacy, on 62nd Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, used to be owned and run by an extraordinarily irritating man. The store was noted for its large selection of brushes, unparalleled in the city. There were brushes for every purpose: brushes for every kind of hair, for the brows, for the lashes; toothbrushes, ordinary and of the strangest shapes, imported and domestic; brushes for the skin, for this or that part of the body, for the scalp, for the hands, for the nails; brushes for shaving, for the application of powder and for the application of ointments. Brushes to invigorate, perhaps brushes to relax. And there were clothes brushes, shoe brushes, brushes for purposes I had never dreamed of. It was wonderful.

But you could never get out of the store without an argument. If you tried to buy something, the owner would always ask you for what purpose you intended to use it. If you gave him an answer that was not specific enough, or if he suspected you planned, without acknowledgment, to use your purchase—or, more correctly, what you hoped would be your purchase—for more than one purpose, he would begin to attack, suggesting an evasiveness and dishonesty on your part that he was certainly not going to allow on *his* watch. The upshot was that the brush you liked and wanted was never the right choice. Arguments, counterarguments, insinuations and explanations followed, but if you

“He organized the extreme energies of color, volume and gesture that inhabit his painting in such a way that no element ‘violates’ any other. Each area of color, in its movement and shape, allows its mate to live ‘undestroyed’.”

walked out with something (and you usually did: after all, he was rich in brushes and even richer in his knowledge of them), you might have walked out with the right thing, but you always walked out defeated.

I hadn't been to the store for a while, and when I stopped in, some five years ago, expecting and prepared for both argument and defeat, the owner wasn't there. A younger man at the counter, his son, told me that his father had died and the business was about to be sold. We reminisced about the store for a while, about what a difficult man his father had been and how much

character he had given to his small shop. Then he told me this story: A lady had come into the place to buy a hairbrush and, after finding one she liked, went to pay. The usual

ensued, and after much argument back and forth she stormed out of the store without any brush. A few minutes later, she came back and asked to buy *five* of the kind of brush that the owner had so insistently told her was the right one for her purpose. Startled, the man asked her why she was buying five, when just one would serve her well for many years to come. She answered calmly that she wanted to make sure that she never had to come back to the store again.

Herman Cherry, whom I dearly loved and love, whose memory never fails to bring me delight, was just such a man. He was an impossible person to get along with. He gloried in attack.

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Hedda Sterne,
Herman, ca. 1960.
Ink on fabric,
34 x 24 inches.
Collection of
Regina Cherry.

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APPRECIATION

Being so smart, he could often say things, unprovoked, that could really hurt. You could like him, even love him, but you couldn't expect the place in which (to your mind, perhaps secretly) you nurtured your dignity to remain unviolated. He would see to that. Yet his art, to my knowledge at least, shows none of this aggressiveness. He organized the extreme energies of color, volume and gesture that inhabit his painting in such a way that no element "violates" any other. Each area of color, in its movement and shape, allows its mate to live "undestroyed." In Herman's art, energies that would take a destructive turn if they were in the 1950s art of his old friend, Willem de Kooning, add up to something different, more peaceful.

The energies of brushwork, composition and gesture, the swatches of color that penetrate and cut through one another in *Aftermath*, for example, don't take on the macho style of the Artists' Club or the drunks at the Cedar Bar—which is not to say that Herman was a softie and had a gentle soul. No, he was tough. But he did have a longing for the peaceable kingdom, not to be realized on earth (so long as he was around!), but amply realized in his art, as this exhibition's paintings of summer 1956 demonstrate so well.

In 1984, Herman's recent paintings were

shown at Il Punto Blu Gallery in Southampton, and I reviewed the exhibition for *Art in America*. The largest painting in the show was *Imaginary Territory*, a large triptych (6 by 18 feet) that he completed in the late 1970s. As I described it:

"An undulating band of color—green, gray and black—moves across the three connected canvases. It stands against a background of bright reds, blues, purples, yellows and oranges. The band

itself is crossed by verticals of green and gray.

The painting works as a balance of opposing and harmonizing colors. It also can be experienced as moving streams of color, running both vertically

"...which is not to say that Herman was a softie and had a gentle soul. No, he was tough. But he did have a longing for the peaceable kingdom, not to be realized on earth..."

and horizontally. The work carries an extraordinary depth of feeling, giving one a sense of great spaciousness combined with serene movement."

The exhibition also included a group of Herman's monotypes, in which I detected "a pleasant, light and airy feeling," and I pointed out that many of them recall the seashore: "In *Upside Down*, the points of two sail-shapes, one in light orange, the other in blue, happily balance one another. A red line (mast?) separates them. All elements are bathed in what one feels is the bright East Hampton light that Cherry knows so well." I might also have added that the light of Martha's Vineyard was equally strong in his memory, and was shining brightly in his latest work.



Seascape #9, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 16 1/8 x 20 3/8 inches



Seascape #33, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 16 1/8 x 20 1/4 inches



Seascape #35
Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper,
22 3/4 x 18 inches



Seascape #38, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 3/8 x 22 3/4 inches



Seascape #45, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Seascape #50, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Landscape #18, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #1, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 5/8 x 20 1/2 inches



Arrangement #2, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 5/8 x 20 3/8 inches



Arrangement #3, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 1/4 x 20 3/8 inches



Arrangement #4, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #5, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #6, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #6A, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #7, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 18 x 22 7/8 inches



Arrangement #9, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 5/8 x 20 1/4 inches



Arrangement #10, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 5/8 x 20 1/4 inches



Arrangement #11, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 3/4 x 20 1/4 inches



Arrangement #12, Martha's Vineyard, 1956
Oil on rag paper, 15 3/4 x 20 3/8 inches

BACK COVER:
Saul Steinberg, *Herman*, 9/7/67
Pencil and colored crayon on paper,
18 x 12 inches
Collection of Regina Cherry

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