

Montauk Highway II: Postwar Abstraction in the Hamptons

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July 26, 2018

August 4 – September 23, 2018

Eric Firestone Gallery: 4 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937

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EVENTS

Panel Discussion

Saturday, August 11th, 4 PM

with Barbara Rose, Lana Jokel, and Gail Levin; moderated by Jennifer Samet

PRESS RELEASE

EAST HAMPTON, NY: Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce the exhibition *Montauk Highway II: Postwar Abstraction in the Hamptons*, opening August 4th, and on view through September 23, 2018.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Hamptons became one of the most significant meeting grounds of like-minded artists, who gathered on the beach, in local bars, and at the artist-run Signa Gallery in East Hampton (active from 1957-60). It was an extension of the vanguard artistic activity happening in New York City around abstraction, which constituted a radical re-definition of art. But the East End was also a place where artists were freer to experiment. For the second time, Eric Firestone Gallery pays homage to this rich and layered history in *Montauk Highway II*. The show includes work from the period by more than thirty artists who played an important role in the Hamptons scene, and had studios in the area.

Uncluttered sight lines and expansive fields by the sea define the landscape of the East End. In the 1950s and 60s, when the artists lived mostly amidst farmers and fishermen, it was particularly so. The influence of this landscape and its light permeates the painting and sculpture on view.

Works in the show are linked by the aesthetic of biomorphic and lyrical forms. Much of the painting and sculpture presented here has a sense of hope and expansiveness, but is also fractured and elegiac. This aesthetic also becomes a visual metaphor for what the East End represented to these artists. In the 1950s and 60s, when the artists lived mostly amidst farmers and fishermen, it was particularly so. was a refuge from the pressures of the city. It was bucolic but punctuated by tragedy: Jackson Pollock died in a car crash in Springs during the summer of 1956. Pollock, and his wife, the painter **Lee Krasner**, were among the earliest artists of the scene to decamp to the Hamptons; they moved to the Springs in 1945.

Al Held and his wife, sculptor Sylvia Stone spent two summers living near Sag Harbor in shacks that had been found by **Howard Kanovitz** and Mary Rattray. Held was painting outside and would nail his paintings to the trees. This abstract, but nevertheless palpable, connection to the landscape and body plays out in many of the paintings in the exhibition. As **Milton Resnick** said, "Painting is a correspondence between what you are and what you see. It's a moment when something is holding together in such a way that it is a universe in itself."

Alfonso Ossorio, a painter born into a wealthy Filipino family, first encountered and purchased Pollock's work in the late 1940s. The two artists became friends, and Ossorio and his partner Ted Dragon spent the summer of 1949 with Pollock and Krasner. In 1951, Pollock encouraged Ossorio to buy the East Hampton estate, "The Creeks," which Ossorio would make his full-time home until his death in 1990.

Guild Hall, East Hampton's center for visual and performing arts, was presenting exhibitions year-round by 1957, although there was a mixed response to the arrival of the new abstract avant-garde. Roseanne Larkin, then chairman of Guild Hall's art committee, included Pollock, Krasner, and Balcomb Greene in a 1949 exhibition of regional art. Other museum supporters responded to the new artists with more reserve. Gradually, the museum began to include more work by the abstractionists in group shows. But by 1960, members of local community were protesting the "bohemian" activity and "undesirable" people who, they claimed, were attracted by, and gathered at the John Drew theater at Guild Hall.

In 1957, Ossorio, along with John Little and Elizabeth Parker, decided to bring a major art gallery to the area. The Signa Gallery in East Hampton was far from provincial: its opening attracted about 500 guests, among them Marcel Duchamp. It had a distinctly international character; for a group exhibition in 1958, curator Michel Tapié chose artists from Europe and Japan, while Little and Parker chose American artists. Artists exhibited during Signa's four seasons included **Mary Abbott, Lee Bontecou, James Brooks,**

Paul Jenkins, Robert Motherwell, and Ibram Lassaw, among many others. **Lassaw** – whose contribution is still under-recognized – is the sculptor whose work most embodies the linear marks and forms found in drip painting like that of Ossorio and Pollock.

Another early gathering place was the home of Leo Castelli and his wife Ileana Sonnabend, on Jericho Lane in East Hampton. **Willem and Elaine de Kooning** spent two summers in the early 1950s living there. It was during this time that de Kooning was struggling with his “Woman” series, and he was able to carve out his own studio on the porch of the rambling house. His palette lightened during this period of artistic transition; the sea and water seemed to infiltrate the paintings. Soon after, he established his own home in the Springs, where he was known for riding around the area on his bicycle. Numerous paintings were named after and inspired by the landscape: “Montauk Highway” (1958), “Clam Diggers,” and “Rosy Fingered Dawn at Louse Point,” (both 1963).

Charlotte Park and **James Brooks** first came to the East End after visiting Pollock and Krasner in 1948. They originally lived in Montauk, but after the studio was badly damaged by Hurricane Carol in 1954, they moved to Springs in 1957. **Miriam Schapiro** and her husband Paul Brach bought a house in 1953 in Wainscott, where they would summer and eventually live full time. It was there that Schapiro began to develop an abstract language of form that reflected her experience as a woman and a mother. Working outside of the “center” of the art world may have freed her to find the independent voice that established her as a pioneer feminist artist.

Also part of the first wave of artist migration was the sculptor **Costantino Nivola**, who was born in Italy, and had a background in architectural decoration and graphic design. He moved to the East End with his wife Ruth, and their 35-acre property and home in the Springs became another gathering place. One visitor was Le Corbusier, who painted a mural in their living room. Nivola, who made plaster and concrete sculptures, revived the technique of sand casting after observing his children at the beach.

The landscape also deeply impacted the sculptor **Philip Pavia**, a founder of the Club, the legendary association of artists and writers who met on 8th Street in the late 1940s and 50s. Pavia lived on the North Fork from 1965-69, and in East Hampton from 1979 until his death in 2005. His sculptures of the 1960s utilize and reflect the natural landscape. Grouped pieces of rough-hewn marble look like stones encountered, rather than perfectly arranged.

This aesthetic, of individuated, curving segments organized across a field, is recurrent in the abstract painting and sculpture on view. It is especially present in paintings by **Nicolas Carone, Ray Parker, and Giorgio Cavallon**. It is a lyrical reflection on the body moving through space, and a response to the landscape – where scattered elements

punctuate flat expanses. This environment became the backdrop for a lively exchange among artists. The exhibition shows that this community was bigger and more varied than a few well-known names; there were many voices at the party.
