

# HYPERALLERGIC

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ART

## The Remarkable Early and Late Work of a Lifelong Abstract Expressionist

By staying the Abstract Expressionist course, Michael Goldberg produced a body of work imbued with remarkable aesthetic and emotional power.

Richard Kalina    February 14, 2018



Michael Goldberg, *Untitled* (c. 1957,  
courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery)

*Michael Goldberg: End to End, The 1950s & 2000s*, at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, highlights a large group of paintings and drawings by one of the best second-generation gestural Abstract Expressionists. Michael Goldberg was perhaps less well-known than [Helen Frankenthaler](#) (who, like many of that generation, moved on to other things) or [Joan Mitchell](#), but he stayed the Abstract Expressionist course, and in doing so,

produced a body of work imbued with remarkable aesthetic and emotional power. I knew Goldberg well, as did many other younger artists, and he made quite an impression. Mike was funny, warm, optimistic, and opinionated — a man with an immense appetite for art, music, books, fine food, wine, travel, friendship, and tall tales. He embodied the existentialist romance of the [New York School](#). You didn't really want to *be* him — he was far too taxing and larger-than-life — but you certainly wanted to be around him.

What especially inspired me was his commitment to making and living art *now*: not resting on his laurels or reminiscing about the good old days, not being negative about the art that was happening around him, and not taking anything for granted. I got to know him in the early 90s, and saw his art develop from then until his death in late 2007. Laboring away in Mark Rothko's dark and cavernous old studio on the Bowery, a former YMCA gym, Goldberg would staple big canvases to the wall and use paint, brushes, scrapers, and juicily fat oil sticks to push and pull the paintings into being. Some were open, airy, colorful, and calligraphic, like *Grotto in the Kingdom of Naples* (2001). Some were clotted and tangled, black and brooding, like *Glass House* or *Horns of Hymettos* (both 2001). Often a rudimentary grid subtly showed itself, as in *Untitled* (2003), a looming vertical painting roughly 9.5 feet high and 6 feet wide, filled with teetering boxes of gritty scribbled color. Sometimes he deployed overtly cubist geometric scaffolding and spatial division, as in *Knossos* (2007) and *Lindos* (2006), two lively and colorful works painted in the last two years of his life.



"Lindos" (2006)

Goldberg's late work bears certain similarities to his earlier paintings. Both have the same highly-worked look, a palette that alternates between the brightly-colored and the monochromatically somber, and a palpable sense of physical pressure — both in terms of paint application and their jostling, muscular composition. Goldberg's 21st-century work is more overtly calligraphic, and perhaps in tune with the abstraction of the 90s and later: it is more layered, historically conscious, process-oriented, and indexical. Although both bodies of work clearly come from the same hand, his

work from the 1950s is firmly ensconced in the straight-ahead New York gestural abstraction of that period. The pioneering artists of the previous decade seemed to have sweated out and solved the big problems. For the hard-core younger group, there was, at least at first, no looking back. Which meant no Mondrian-like geometric tinkering, no nods to surrealism, and no compulsion to reinvestigate the human figure.

*Park Avenue Façade* (1956-57) may be the most engaging of the early work in the show. A nearly square vertical, it measures in at approximately 9 feet by nine feet. The painting, echoing its title, is architectonic: dynamic but stable, anchored by a

balanced set of strong verticals and horizontals. Its lively surface is vigorously brushed; a fat rectangle of sullied yellows, on the left, abuts a streaky slab of white in the center, which in turn is held in place by a pillar of cerulean blue on the right. The bottom of the painting is grounded by deep greens and browns, while flashes of hot lipstick pinks and reds illuminate its upper half. This was the kind of painting that artists of the day wanted to paint — big, full-throated, spatially and chromatically complex, resolutely reflecting the noisy, gritty urban life that gave birth to it. It feels edgy and improvisational, yet assured — just like the bebop jazz that Goldberg and other artists loved. (Did Mike actually sit in with Charlie Parker at the legendary Five Spot Café on Cooper Square, as he claimed? Probably not, but it was a good story — and he did, along with his Abstract Expressionist friends, frequent the jazz club and pay for his drinks with art.)



"Park Avenue Facade" (1956-1957)

Goldberg's drawings, most of which are really paintings on paper, are key to understanding his work. It is constantly impressed upon art students that drawing is thinking, and in Goldberg's case, this is absolutely true. Like de Kooning, he drew all the time, and it came perfectly naturally to him. The path from drawing to painting, and back again, was unobstructed for Goldberg, and at the heart of the process was scale. No matter how small the work on paper, he built it like a full-sized painting. Looking at reproductions of drawings and paintings, it is very hard to tell which is

which. This is more complex than it seems, since it points to a fluid and natural interplay between marks generated by the finger, the hand, and the arm. How do you draw, say, a line with the small muscles of your fingers that looks as if you made it with your arm, and vice-versa? This practice suggests a deep immersion of body and mind into the work of art — one part of the desired unity that still lies at the aspirational core of much of the art of our time. Seeing a large and representative selection of Michael Goldberg's work is a rare pleasure. It should be savored.

Michael Goldberg: End to End, The 1950s & 2000s continues at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (100 Eleventh Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) until March 24.

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