

TWO COATS OF PAINT

The real deal: James Brooks reconsidered

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James Brooks, *Diston*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of the James and Charlotte Brooks Foundation

Contributed by Laurie Fendrich / “A Painting is a Real Thing,” the Parrish Museum’s current exhibition of the work of the Abstract Expressionist painter James Brooks (1906–1992), is his first comprehensive retrospective in 35 years. On the rare occasions I’ve encountered Brooks’s paintings, I’ve paid them scant attention. Like many, I have walked on by, presumptively ranking him well below the likes of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. With this survey of more than 100 paintings, drawings, and prints, I find myself reconsidering Brooks’s status. With the 176-page catalog containing essays by adjunct curator Klaus Ottmann and artist-writer Michael Solomon, the show makes a case that Brooks’s art is more original and important – both within and beyond the context of the AbEx movement – than most of us thought.



James Brooks: *A Painting Is a Real Thing* at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Aug 6–Oct 15, 2023. Photo: © Gary Mamay

The best Brooks paintings in this exhibition are his later ones, from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which hang in a large, light-filled gallery. They're dynamic and arresting, with carefully controlled hues, odd, raw shapes, and occasional wandering lines reminiscent of Miró. They are gutsily beautiful in their unorthodox composition. Unlike most AbEx paintings, a contemporary artist conceivably could have painted them.

Brooks was born in St. Louis to a family that moved around the region before settling in Dallas when he was ten. He briefly studied at Southern Methodist University and the newly opened Dallas Art Institute, then moved to New York in 1926. There he worked in commercial pen-lettering (now a lost art), earning a reasonably good living during the Great Depression and taking night classes at the Art Students League. He made enough money to take time off from his job and travel around the country, making sketches and paintings in the Social Realist mode and exhibiting them in New York galleries. His lithographic prints were shown in such venues as the Dallas Museum of Art and the Whitney. Most importantly, he met, mingled with, and befriended artists who later became known as Abstract Expressionists.

When the Federal Art Project began awarding mural commissions in 1935, Brooks began applying for them. At the Art Students League, he'd come to appreciate the pure, flat clarity of Giotto and Piero della Francesca, and he also became acquainted with the work of the Mexican muralists. In 1939, after completing commissions for a couple of smallish murals, he received his most important fresco commission, for *Flight* – a 236-foot circular mural, done in WPA style, celebrating the history of aviation. It took three years to complete and was installed in the rotunda of the Seaplane Terminal (now the Marine Air Terminal) at LaGuardia Airport. (Covered over during the McCarthy era on account of a supposed communist tilt, the piece was restored to public view in the late 1970s.) The exhibition includes a full-scale reproduction of one of its sections and an exquisite small gouache study of all its sections.



James Brooks, *Woodstock*, 1931, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY



James Brooks, *Untitled (Study for downed plane)*, ca. 1944
watercolor on paper, 9 7/8 x 14 in. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY
Gift of the James and Charlotte Brooks Foundation

Brooks enlisted in the Army in 1942 and was designated a combat artist. He spent a couple of years in Egypt, Libya, and Palestine, where he made sketches and watercolors of what he observed. Several, some depicting downed planes, are in the exhibition. When he returned to civilian life in 1945, the New York art scene had radically changed, with abstraction at the forefront. Brooks said later that the war had cost him in terms of his artistic development; de Kooning, Guston, and Pollock had never served.

In 1947, Brooks had a eureka moment. From Pollock, he'd learned to embrace the unconscious and the accidental, and to pour paint onto unstretched, unsized canvases on the floor and use squeegees. Brooks was looking, he said, for "newness and strangeness," and "accidents on the surface that didn't seem mine." He discovered that "spilling" the paint onto a coarse cotton fabric known as Bemis cloth (or Osnaburg cloth) produced stains with unusual shapes, which were often more interesting if seen from the back of the cloth.

This led him to render many paintings by working from the back. The accidental stains eventually evolved into starting points for the paintings with bold shapes and meandering lines for which he is now best known. Ottmann notes that Brooks's earliest stained paintings – such as *#13* (1949) and *Untitled* (1952) – predated Helen Frankenthaler's "soak-stain" paintings from the 1950s. Who was first, of course, was an obsession among Abstract Expressionists in their grand endeavor to find the limits of painting. Ottmann also observes that after his 1947 breakthrough, Brooks had "few radical changes in style." He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1985 and died seven years later.

There's only so much to be gained from the parlor game of ranking artists. Still, I wonder why Brooks's reputation isn't greater than it is. He participated in the 1951 Ninth Street Exhibition, had many exhibitions in major New York and European galleries, was included in multiple museum shows, and, from the 1950s on, was financially successful. He was even one of the 18 artists in the 1954 *Irascibles* photograph, signifying that he was considered a real player. But Brooks didn't share the swaggering machismo and bravado associated with the Abstract Expressionists, and that may help explain how art history is treating him. By all accounts, he was soft-spoken, his thoughts about painting more subtle and philosophical than blustery, which makes his friendship with Pollock something of a puzzle. He also seemed to be (gasp) happily married – to Charlotte Park, a painter herself – for over 40 years.



James Brooks, *Untitled*, ca. 1950, ink and crayon on paper, 22 x 25 inches. Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, Gift of Charlotte Park Brooks

In a 1965 interview, Brooks provocatively remarked that an artist's work changes "because the artist is trying to keep from being bored. And so I think painting is just an extension of life and just a flight from boredom." On his own terms, he succeeded. Brooks's paintings are original and beautiful, and not boring in the least. They're the real thing.

"James Brooks: A Painting is a Real Thing," curated by Klaus Ottmann, with support from Assistant Curator and Publications Coordinator Kaitlin Halloran. The Parrish Museum, Water Mill, NY. Through October 15, 2023.

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