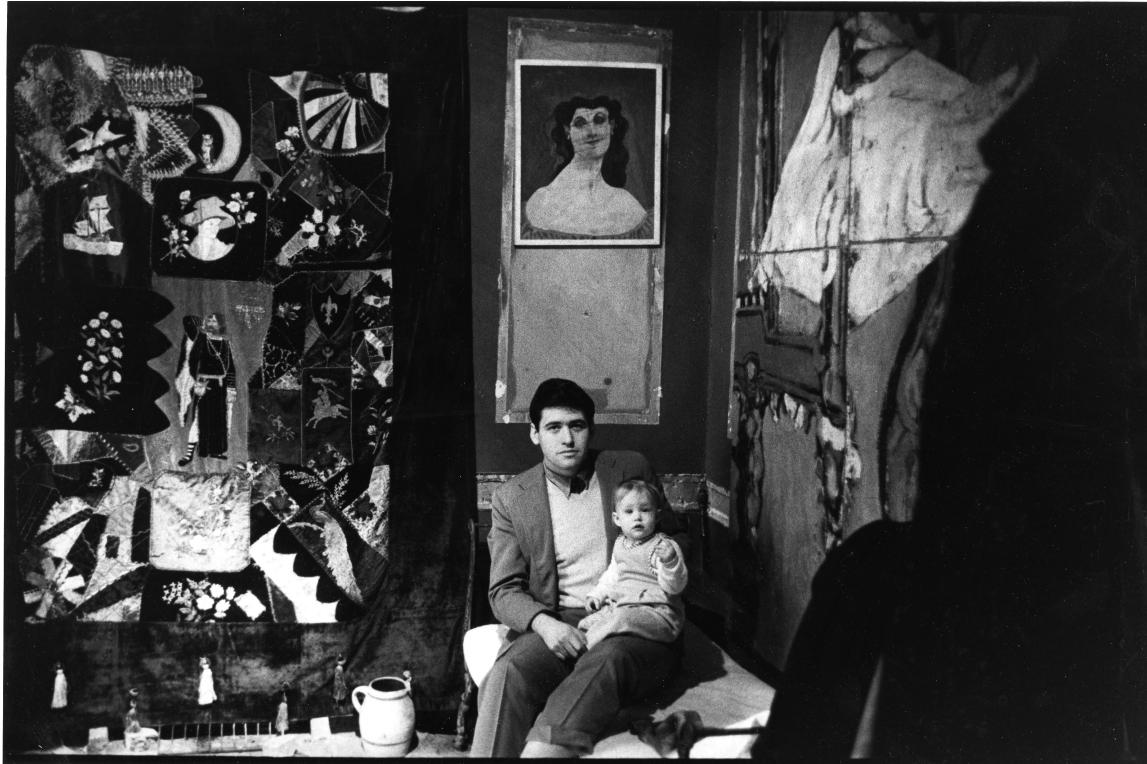


Ron Gorchov: *Painting - In - Between*

In a memorable introduction of Ethel K. Schwabacher's book, *Arshile Gorky*, published in 1951, Meyer Schapiro wrote, "Among the painters in New York, Gorky stood out for years as a development from what seemed a servile imitation of other painters to a high originality."¹ Schapiro furthered observed that the co-existence of Gorky's great pride and humility prompted him to create a unique model of self-apprenticeship — one that demanded the equivalent of the old master's atelier training of young apprentices, which is no longer available in modern art. When Gorky, having made paintings in the manner of Cézanne, Picasso, Miro, Kandinsky, and finally after his exposure to Surrealism, particularly with Matta, his paintings, which had previously been precise in construction, became atmospheric and poetic. One can recognize the transformation from the robust, masculine forms constructed with air-tight space into, as Schapiro put it, "the objects of modern fantasy, primitive, visceral and grotesque, as Corot had created an atmosphere for nostalgic reverie, a sweet mythical world that might have been seen directly."²



Dan Budnik, *Ron Gorchov and his daughter, Jolie*, 1959. Courtesy of Dan Budnik

In a revealing portrait of Ron Gorchov as a young painter by the famed photographer Dan Budnik (taken in 1959), he sits in the corner of his Upper East Side studio and apartment with his eight-month-old daughter, Jolie, on his lap, while above him hangs a classic John Graham painting of a woman's head from the early 1950s. The photograph portrays a sensitive yet receptive 29 year old—he had moved to New York City with his wife, Joy, and their three-month-old son, Michael, in 1953 from Chicago—who looks as if he is destined to be an artist of a certain distinction.

The gaze of his eyes assertively projects a firm willingness to go far in the process of self-discovery more than his impoverished genteel appearance would suggest.

One would suspect that Gorchov had admired and knew Gorky's work well enough to pursue Graham—knowing that Graham and Gorky had been close friends (both were refugees from Eastern Europe and had personally experienced some of the most cataclysmic events of modern history. Gorky, at the age of fifteen, saw his mother die of starvation in his own arms while the family was trying to escape from the 1919 genocide; Graham was a Czarist cavalry officer during World War I, imprisoned by the communist party as a counterrevolutionary)³, and shared the belief that in modern art is a synthesis of all past and present art, and a self invention of identities. (Gorky had changed his name from Vosdanig Manoog Adoian; Graham's surname was Ivan Dabrowsky.)

According to one interview,⁴ Gorchov, in a letter he wrote to Graham in the summer of 1954, explained what he was trying to accomplish in his paintings at the time. Among other things, he confessed that after having seen Graham's paintings at the world-renowned concert pianist Anton and his wife Hannah Rovinsky's East Village home, two months after his arrival to the city, he gave up painting the figure for good.⁵ The rare paintings he produced during this period are, which were closely identified with Gorky's unique position that linked Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, were referred as Abstract Surrealist paintings by critics at the time.



Arshile Gorky, *Golden Brown Painting*, 1943 – 44, oil on canvas, 43 1/2" x 56"

Collection, Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis

Moreover, there must be other good reasons that compelled Gorlov to not only give up painting the figure in favor of abstraction, but, also, after his three successive and critically successful exhibits at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (1960, 1963, 1966), to withdraw from the art world. (He did not show his work again in New York until 1975, a good nine years later). When asked in the same interview as to how he managed to stay close to his vision in the midst of the simultaneous emergences of Pop Art, NeoDada, Environments, Happenings—all of which were reactions against the validity of the second and third generation of Abstract Expressionist art—he responded, “I never wanted to be a second or third generation artist of any kind.” He

continued, “Painting … is an ideal way to criticize the work you already admire because that way you can take the best things in it and try to make your work be the next consequential step.”⁶

This so-called “consequential step” requires us to revisit the mid 1940s when the friendship between Gorky and Graham began to dissolve. While the former met Andre Breton and soon moved away from the noisy and compressed urban life of New York City to his wife’s family farmhouse in the rolling hills of Sherman, Connecticut (whose landscapes he drew and painted from direct observation), the latter turned inward to his own obsessional hermeticism. In the early 1940s Graham started to reject his former companions and protégés as well as the figures of his immediate past, once honored and revered, for example, Picasso, who he and Gorky proclaimed as the “greatest painter ever lived” now replaced by Raphael as the fountainhead of art. While turning against Cubism and abstract art, Graham became increasingly obsessed with Uccello and Quattrocento portraits. During this critical phase Graham produced the most enigmatic paintings of his life: portraits of women with crossed-eyes and labial wounds in their necks; self-portraits with all sorts of private symbols and cryptograms referring to hermetic legends in Latin and Greek. Graham’s “Self- Portrait as Harlequin” (1944), for example, shows nothing less than Graham paying homage to Picasso in his own eccentric manner. However, it could not be more different than the large drawing of his late self- portrait, “Apothesis” (1955-57), a large drawing in which he depicted himself as a combined persona of both chivalric Saint George and the martyred Saint Sebastian. One would imagine

that the young Gorchov, one of very few artists, if not the only one of his generation who was close to Graham until his death in 1962, must have been aware that while Graham was deep in his own invented world of alchemical signs and symbols, Gorky, de Kooning and Pollock had all found ways to synthesize the differences of cubist and surrealist elements into their own art.

One suspects that Gorchov's decision not to show his work for nine years came from a need for personal contemplation that would resolve conflicts and turn them into synthesis of his art. This synthesis likely involves resolving his own relationship to Graham's enigmatic persona, as well as to his own generation's burgeoning art scene. In my reading, the subject of form and content was central to Gorchov's achievement of full maturity. First of all, Graham's formal insistence on the role of edge as the boundary of shape—or how edge is generated from the tension built up between the negative and positive space pushing against each other—must have had a profound impact on Gorky's early paintings, in which forms were thickly painted with the same tension within the space of his assimilation of synthetic cubist idioms. But, in spite of how thorough and beautiful those paintings were painted they soon became his means of repudiation against the calculated rectilinear in favor for more sensuous, biomorphic forms, achieved by spontaneous applications of layers of thinner paint. Similarly, Gorchov's images have always been painted from both the inside and outside of their forms, therefore creating such diverse and subtle edges, from which the tension of the issues of weight and balance between positive and negative space is built up. And although the painting may appear to have been

painted fairly quickly it is actually a result of a long meditation, without allowing the paint to get too thickly built up on the surface. If the result were not satisfactory, after letting it briefly soak in paint remover, he would scrape off the whole painting with a palette knife, then start it all over again. (Since all the paintings were never painted right to the edges of the canvas—he prefers to leave a sliver of raw linen exposed near the edges—the layers are detectable, despite how thin each layer is applied to the linen.)

Secondly, in the context of how particular groups of artists dealt with endless declarations of the death of painting, especially in reference to the reductive, formalist enterprise advocated by Clement Greenberg in the 1950s, then Michael Fried in the 1960s, and by the 1970s with the new application of Post-Structuralism led by Rosalind Krauss and Robert Morris, all of whom buttressed the reductivist language of minimalism that enhanced aspects of monumentality and legible geometric forms in sculpture, painting, as a result, was forced to its momentary retreat. As Lynda Benglis said, “I wasn’t breaking away from painting but trying to redefine what it was.”⁷ Similarly, some of Gorchov’s contemporaries, including Alan Shields, Richard Tuttle, Cesar Paternosto, Ralph Humphrey, Mary Heilmann, and Lee Lozano, all began to question the viability of painting as a progressive medium. They took canvas off the stretcher, draped it around the room, resembled it on the floor, painted only the sides of the canvas, cut holes on the surface of the painting, and tacked it directly on the wall. Gorchov was part of this aspiring consensus of collective thinking. They knew that their individual tasks were to revive the

relevancy of painting, without taking a defensive stand. In fact, to his peers, the need to be assertive was essential to their ambition as artists. But, in Gorchov's case, what drove him to deal first and foremost with formal problems, I think, was more than just creating his first negative curve structure in 1966, which he made using wire dipped in plastic liquid to form a saddle shape that eliminated shape corners—an issue which the cubists and their successors never resolved. In Gorchov's desire to create his legitimate and formidable structures that are comparable to sculptural objects, which was never intended to violate the integrity of the painting surface as a two-dimensional domain, he was able to reach a unique equilibrium between form and content as one. Both thrive on their subtle co-existence, as minute as a human hair.

How was Gorchov able to find a solution that did not compromise his ambition as an artist who produces work that has both inherent value to its immediate present and its eternal value? This condition must have been the central aim of Gorchov's "consequential step." Once, he was asked about his relationship to both Graham and Julian Schnabel—the former being 44 years older, and the latter 21 years younger. In reference to Graham's crossed-eyes and puncture wounds and Schnabel's occasional deployment of similar pictorial effects, Gorchov said, "Graham claimed he was using wounds formally as punctuation, and that the crossed-eyes were a way of trapping space. As for Julian, he and I share a love for extreme forms, not necessarily tormented forms, but forms that imply expansiveness."⁸ It is helpful to revisit Graham's disdain for the Surrealist's influence in New York, especially when his old

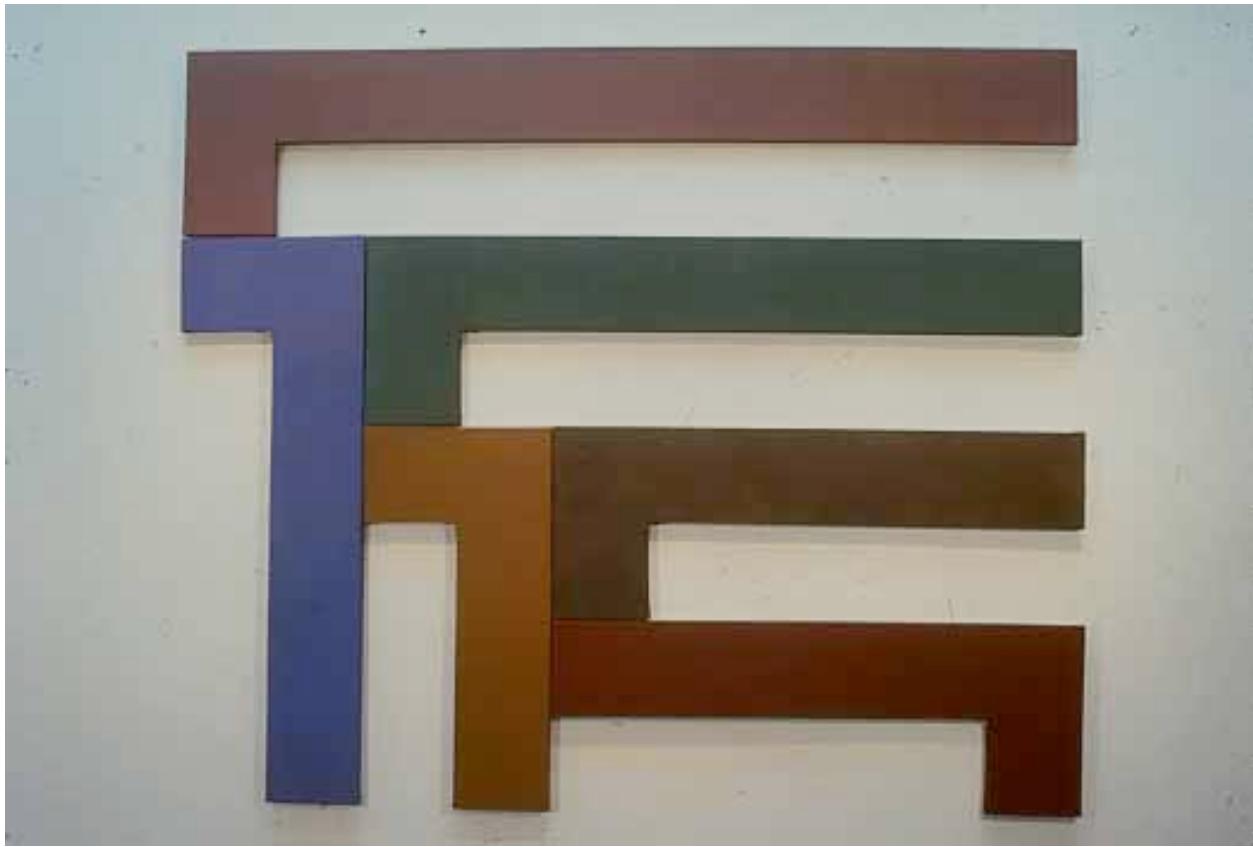
friend, Gorky, became an ally with Breton and Matta-Gorky began to adopt the Surrealist's use of automatism in his paintings. One would think that Graham, who grew up in Russia in the heydays of Madame Blavatsky and knew of the roots of theosophy, would reject the Surrealism. Yet it has never been clear since he, too, projected his own flight of fantasy in perpetually recreating his own myth. Despite the complex struggle for clarity he composed in the volume *System & Dialectic of Art*,⁹ one can argue that the book does not offer a coherent system. However, in his own attempt to create himself as the cognoscenti of modern art, one would agree that it was certainly the first time that the application of the dialectical method, employed by the ancient philosopher from Heraclitus to Plato and later revised to create methodology of historical analysis by Hegel and Marx, was being utilized in the context of modern art. Not to mention that it contains endless stimulating ideas, which can be made into a handbook for young artists. In essence, Graham's insistence on both elements of thesis and negating antithesis must co-exist to generate new evolution, which implies the notion that modern art is a synthesis of all past art, regardless of however consistent or polemical one may think of his worldview in art.

Gorchov, unlike many of his contemporaries from the outset wanted to create work that yielded no easy access to category or identification with any time period. Like Gorky, whose work is neither surrealist nor abstract expressionist, Gorchov, who had adopted Gorky's biomorphism and sensuality and turned them into his own undeniable presence of expressionist and painterly touch, had no alliance to either

Field painting or Minimalism. In fact, right after having seen Richard Smith's hyperbolic canvas in extreme three-dimension at the Jewish Museum in 1968,¹⁰ Gorchov created his own modification of three-dimensional rectangular or square structures, which allowed the two-dimensional surface stretched over above. This



(Proper title, date, dimension to be provided later from Joan Washburn gallery)



(Proper title, date, dimension to be provided later from Paula Copper gallery)

“invention,” not only provided Gorchov with, as he said, “an argument to the rectangle,” it actually separated his work from many painters of his generation. Ray Parker and David Novros seemed to come closest to Gorchov’s pictorial ambition. Parker’s early paintings evoke de Kooning’s all-over and compressed space as well as painterly gestures, though they were painted with dense and angular patches. Not

until 1958 did Parker began to paint chromatically with two, three or more semi-oval or oblong shapes while allowing each shape to find its edges and relating to each other frontally to the picture plane. As a result, the old problem of composition is entirely eliminated, as Irving Sandler wrote of Parker's painting, "(his) shapes seem to hover between "form" and "field," too irregular to be hard-edge and too discrete to be color-field."¹¹ Similarly, Novros' concept of "painting-in-place," which materialized in his first shaped canvases that were composed of large angular modules—however different from Gorchov's structure—his seems to share with Gorchov's a mutually visceral understanding of scale that is far more complex than so-called "shaped canvas" that merely corresponds to its own shape, size, and objecthood.

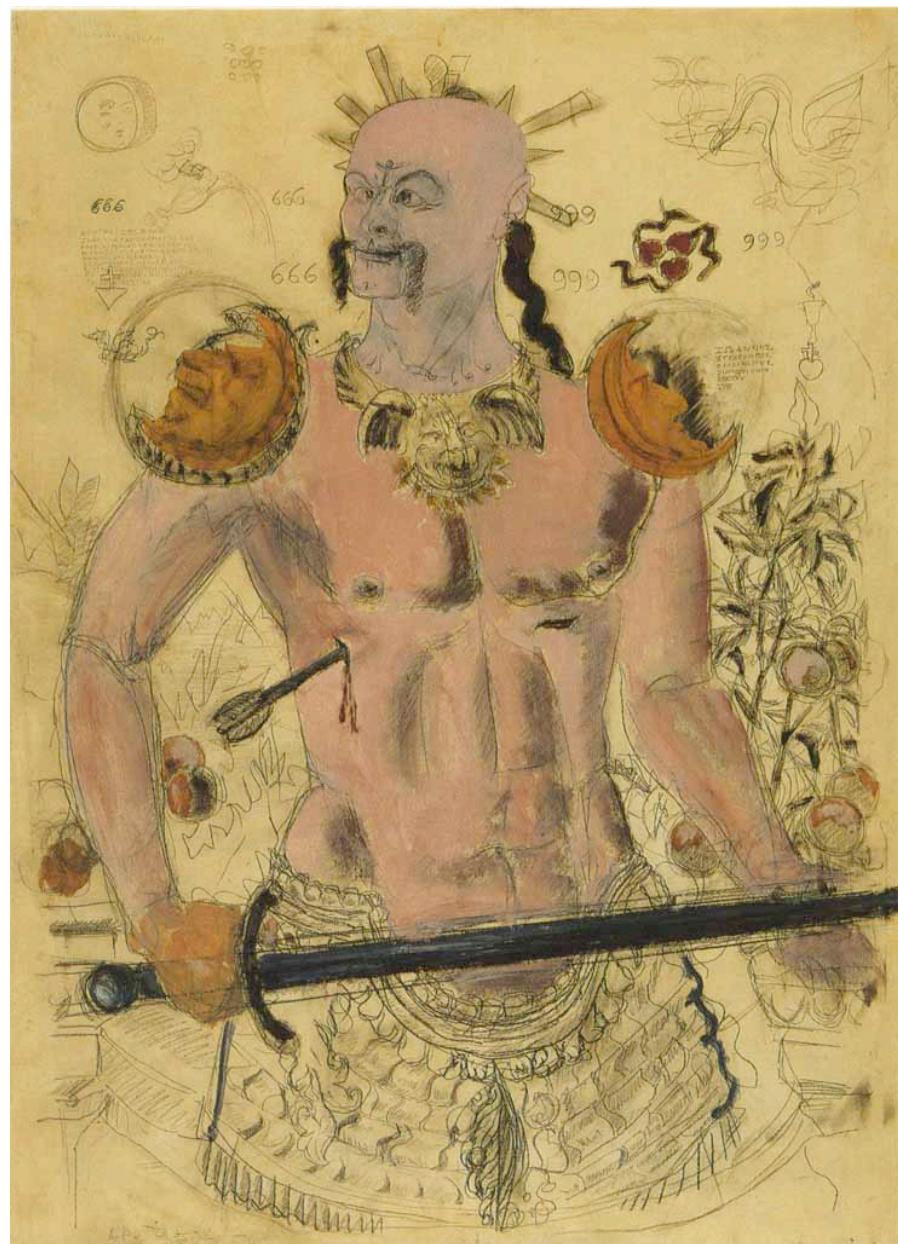
In other words, while Novros employs the multiples of his modules to maximize the physical presence of his paintings, as well as their relationship to the surrounding architectural space, Gorchov's primary interest has always been about how the images, which appear on the painting surface, correspond to the structure, except for a few occasions in which he adopted the minimalist form of modular units built from the floor up with the structure behind exposed. For example, in "Set" (1971), "Serapis" (2008) and "Totem" (2010), the curved edges only appear on the tops while the bottoms are intended as straight lines for practical engineering purposes. Furthermore, for the sake of enhancing a greater sense of individual monumentality in each installation, the image is entirely eliminated.



Ron Gorchov, *Serapis*, 2008, oil on canvas, 13 x 13 feet. Collection of the artist

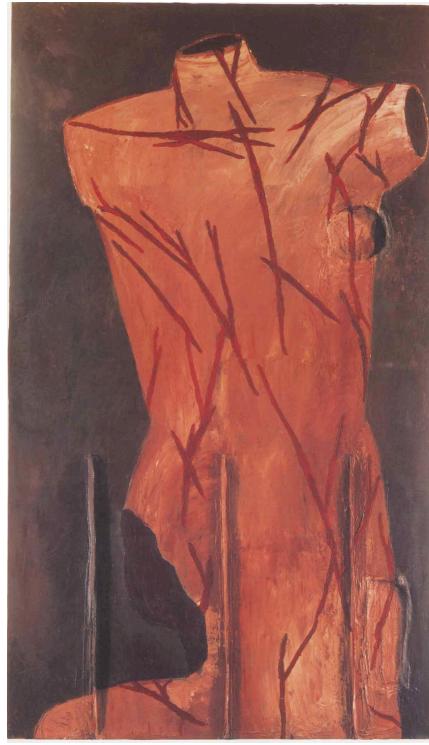
In retrospect, as much as Gorchov relates to both Parker's simple forms flowing in the middle of the field and Novros' concept of "painting-in-place," he is more invested in how to endow the economy of his images with perfect balance on the curved surfaces of the three-dimensional structure. This implies that his images are never perceived as flat, graphic forms, painted with matter-of-fact application. Again, Gorchov's relationship to both Graham and Schnabel seems to reveal subtle yet complex references as to how he embraces opposite attractions for his own

advantage. In reexamining Graham's late portraits, particular the self-portraits referring to himself as Saint George and Saint Sebastian, and Schnabel's



John Graham, *Apothesis*, 1955 – 57, oil, pencil, and stumping on paper, 49 x 35 ½ inches.

Collection of Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago



Julian Schnabel (left) *Accatone*, 1978, oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. (Right) *St. Sebastian*, 1979, oil on canvas, 111 x 66 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

early paintings such as “Accatone” (1978) and “St. Sebastian” (1979), one can identify the similarity in the treatments of the wounds. On the two torsos of Schnabel’s paintings while evoking the Belvedere torso: the first one sits on top of a pedestal, shown in a bigger field of vision; the other is painted up close to the picture plane with the bottom of the image cropped), the wounds are robustly painted with emphatic brush strokes on large canvases (84” x 72” and 111” x 66”), as distinct from Graham’s attentive and hesitant mark making along with his modest scale and use of materials. Furthermore, Graham’s use of “wounds formally as punctuation,” carries directly into Gorlov’s “love for extreme forms, not

necessarily tormented forms but forms that imply expansiveness," and quite likely then into Schnabel's use of emphatic gestures or relief-like elements (for example, the plate paintings from the 1980s) as punctuation and extreme forms. Clearly linking who came before and who came after, Gorchov seems to embrace both Graham and Schnabel, as painters and as personalities. His is the state of a perpetual state of becoming; split in half. Gorchov's first half is turned to the ancient past as an apex of the citation of merit, which is close to Graham's thesis of Platonic dualism; the other is invested in apprehending a contemporary and future culture of art, which yields to Schnabel's excessive ambition, whose notion of freedom requires no self-reflection. One could only imagine the complex measure of Gorchov's desire for greater unity—one that resists either form of extremity, yet at the same time embracing both. In "Mistral" for example, the horizontal and oblong field of light green washed irregularly and gently over the dark green layer from below provides a perfect environment, from which the two forms emerge concretely in the middle of the painting. But they are not simply added on top of the ground. The larger white form on the left, with its four corners, in fact, has four different edges: the top edge is carefully painted over the light green layer; on the right bottom and left edges, one wide, quick, green wide brush stroke laps above the white shape from the outside in, not only changing its speed, but also its as it curves around the bend. Resultant is such as a subtle yet distinct variety in how the form is made. Similar to the subtle and counterforce that characterizes his process throughout the painting, one would think the equilibrium in Gorchov's paintings can only be attained by

knowing how to delicately negotiated the right balance between weight and lightness as well as regularity and irregularity that persist on his forms.



Ron Gorchov, *Mistral*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 inches. Private collection

Another example, "Noli Me Tangere" (2008), shows a dramatic dissimilarity in both the economic deployment of the imagery and how it was painted. Above what appears to be his familiar two commendatory forms that previously had been

painted in larger shapes and darker tones of burnt sienna on top of a lighter ground of the same color is the final coat of thin white wash pushed inward onto those forms from the negative space of the field, creating the imagery. The left and right forms may appear identical, especially from a distance, however, once seen up close, the subtle differences in how their edges were painted from the outside in, including the two drips, are intensely pronounced.

What distinctly sets Gorchov apart from his peers is ultimately his unorthodox ability to unify, on one hand, elements of extreme opposite: three-dimension versus two-dimension, concave versus convex, monumental versus intimate. On the other hand, his ambidextrous way of painting offers a new invention—one form informs the other while simultaneously allowing the tension between them to coexist. And by feeding off that tension Gorchov is able to free the gesture without eliminating the imagery, as most of artists of his generation would, particularly those of minimalist persuasion.

Gorchov has arrived at a unique position, one that requires his constant negotiation on himself, not with anyone else. This is due in part to his keen observation of Graham's overemphasis on alchemy and magic, which compelled Graham to work, on and off on paintings to their prolonged and perpetual state of incompleteness; his attraction to Schnabel's literal adaptation of alchemy into excessive sensuality on a epic scale, which is the key to Schnabel's prolific output; Parker's elimination of the composition; and Novros' concept of "painting-in-place." Undoubtedly, Gorchov's

independent spirit that lies behind his works inspires not only his peers but also generation of younger artists, from Elizabeth Murray, Chris Martin, Ray Smith, to Josh Smith, Bruce High Quality Foundation, and many others.

Revealingly, Gorchov said of his own structure, "(It) becomes an argument the rectangle, and that interests me," recalling W. B. Yeats' famous aphorism, "Out of the quarrel with others we create rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we create poetry." I also thought of the story of Perseus, in order to convey his sense of lightness: Perseus seeks to kill Medusa, whose gaze turns men into stone. So as to avoid her sights, Perseus sets upon the Gorgon with the aid of a reflective shield, which allows him to see the lightness of her reflection, without succumbing to her petrifying glare. This also enables him to behead her, after, which point he carries, her head with him in his knapsack. Medusa is therefore with him always, and he occasionally uses her head to his own combative benefit: by affixing her gaze to the sights of others, Perseus is thereby able to turn his enemies to stone. As Italo Calvino pointed out, "Perseus' strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden."¹²

In other words, there is a constant struggle between weightiness and lightness. Without one the other cannot exist. In Ron Gorchov's paintings we find the argument that he created for himself is his poetic flight, and within the argument of lightness (his imagery) and weightiness (his structure) there arises his fine balance

that truly obscures the differences between form and content. He is *painting-in-between*.

Phong Bui

¹ Meyer Schapiro's introduction to Ethel K. Schwabacher, *Arshile Gorky* (New York: The Macmillan Company), p. 11, 13. (The book was initially conceived in the spring of 1948, a few months before the painter's death, though it was later published concurrently with Gorky's memorial exhibition in January 1951 at the Whitney museum.)

² Schapiro's Introduction to Schwabacher, p. 11, 13.

³ Barbara Rose, *Arshile Gorky and John Graham: Eastern Exiles in a Western World* (Arts Magazine, March 1976), p. 62 – 69.

⁴ "Ron Gorchov in Conversation with the Robert Storr and Phong Bui" (*The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2006), p. 24 – 26.

⁵ Gorchov recalled from the visit to the Rovinsky's home that Anton was very proud of his Grahams and said that living with them had cured his alcoholism.

⁶ "Gorchov with Storr," *Rail*, p. 24 - 26.

⁷ Lynda Benglis, *High Times/Hard Times: New York Painting 1967 – 1975* (Independent Curators International, New York, D.A.P/Distributed Art Publishers, New York), p. 37.

⁸ "Gorchov with Storr," *Rail*, p. 24 – 26.

⁹ *System and Dialectics of Art* was first printed in Paris in February 1937, by l'Imprimerie Crozatier under the supervision of Jacques Povolsky (the author of two highly important books on Albert Gleizes and one of the seminal interpreters of cubism) in an edition of 1000 copies, and also published that same year in New York City by Delphic Studios. The second edition was published in 1971 by John Hopkins Press, with annotated unpublished writings and a critical introduction by Marcia Epstein Allentuck.

¹⁰ "Gene Davis, Robert Irwin, Richard Smith," The Jewish Museum, March 20 – May 12, 1968.

¹¹ Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (Icon Editions, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: 1979) p. 239.

¹² Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., New York: 1993), p. 9 – 19.