

*New Demarcations for Old:
Refining and Redefining Abstract Expressionism Vis-à-vis
A Consideration of the Willard Gallery Artists*

In this panel, I will discuss the Willard Gallery artists who were concurrent with and related in complex ways to the canonical Abstract Expressionists. By identifying and delineating other strands of mid-twentieth-century American abstraction such as that produced by the Willard Gallery artists, we will deepen our conception of what Abstract Expressionism was and, importantly, what it was not.

Like the Abstract Expressionists, Willard Gallery artists (especially focusing on the work of Charles Seliger, Mark Tobey, Norman Lewis, Lee Mullican, and others) delved into issues of subjectivity and the divided self, the battle between consciousness and unconsciousness, order and disorder. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, their work ultimately conveyed a sense of control, through the use of meticulous, dense, precise and at times even patterned calligraphic lines, or the use of light lines and floating, glowing orbs shrouded in mist. As critics at the time noted, Willard Gallery artists came from many ethnic groups, religions and even parts of the world. Willard was a Jungian and believed in a universal collective unconscious. In their statements about their work, the artists often articulated a desire to express a sense of holism and universality bound by rules and a sense of order. Though preoccupied with many of the same themes as the Abstract Expressionists, their paintings ultimately look more orderly, refined and even ethereal. The Willard Gallery artists never thought of themselves as Abstract Expressionists; their artistic peers and critics likewise perceived them as representing something unique and cohesive. Today, however, scholars usually treat Willard Gallery artists as overlooked Abstract Expressionists (Charles Seliger, Norman Lewis) or as *sui generis* (Mark Tobey, Lee Mullican). Both of these characterizations are too simplistic. There are many more categorical distinctions that can and should be made for American abstract painting of this era.

For a number of decades, critics, scholars and dealers mainly ignored a great deal of abstract painting of the era if it was not generally considered to be Abstract Expressionist. However, in the past two or so decades, there has been a propensity towards pushing for the incorporation of numerous artists into the canon, no matter how vexed the relationship. While we should not revert to the previous monocular vision and overly exclusive approach to artists of this period, it is also not beneficial or accurate to have the overly inclusive tendency we have today. We need to break out of these binary modalities and expand our interpretation of art of the period by articulating more precise categorical designations for other groups of painting from this era, of which the Willard Gallery group is but one example. The process of differentiating and labeling other groups of abstract artists would precipitate a new analysis of painting from this period more broadly and in the process would help demarcate characteristics that were unique to Abstract Expressionism itself.