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ART REVIEW: "Cut-Ups" by Jack Youngerman Shine at Washburn Gallery
May 9, 2019 by Franklin Hill Perrell

When I heard about "Cut-Ups" at Washburn Gallery in New York City, I was intrigued by the idea of an exhibition of new work by Jack Youngerman (b. 1926), an artist I have long admired. I've always taken great pleasure in his vivid color sense and formal inventiveness, and indeed his work is not seen often enough.

Youngerman (who has lived and worked in Bridgehampton, NY since 1995) is a major figure in American post-war abstract art. Following his first one person exhibition in 1958 with Betty Parsons, he figured in the epochal exhibition "Sixteen Americans" at MOMA in 1959-60, along with Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. He is represented in every major American museum collection and textbook on twentieth century American art yet he has not had a New York retrospective since the Guggenheim in 1986. Youngerman has been exhibiting with the Washburn Gallery since 1981.



"Into Green" by Jack Youngerman, 2008-2018. Gouache/cut paper, 12 x 13 7/8 inches. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.

Youngerman's new exhibition at Washburn Gallery is timely in respect to the attention focused recently on the artist he is most often compared to: Ellsworth Kelly, who had a solo show at Guild Hall in East Hampton last year focusing on his time spent in The Hamptons. The two were lifelong friends, which arose from their experience together as American artists studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, 1948, on the G.I Bill. Both were strongly influenced by the late career collages of Matisse, then creating a sensation in France.

The two were attracted to crisp form and strong color, elements which would ultimately characterize their respective styles. Forming their attitude in Paris, where influences also included Arp and Brancusi, enabled the two Americans to diverge from their contemporaries in New York who were so much in the shadow of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

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*"Ray Yellow" by Jack Youngerman, 2018. Gouache/cut paper, 10 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches.
Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.*

There is a particular refinement about Youngerman's viewpoint that arises from this French context, heightened further by his deep ongoing exposure to European culture. His first exhibition was in a group show at Galerie Maeght, in Paris, 1950, and then with Galerie Denise Rene in 1952. He lived and painted in France until 1956, during which time he married famed French film actress Delphine Seyrig (1932-1990; her credits include "Last Year at Marienbad"), and consequently was the son-in law of Henri Seyrig, head of the French Archaeological Institute in Beirut, cultural attaché to the U.S. from Free France, and director of the Musees de France. Youngerman traveled throughout Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, and became thoroughly steeped in the decorative arts of that region.

Jack Youngerman first gained prominence as a pioneering hard-edged abstractionist, producing both painting and sculpture that refused to choose favorites between the geometric and organic (evidencing an affinity with both Mondrian and Calder). In the exhibition introduction, the artist is quoted as observing, "Geometry is at the heart of natural form," and "both bi-lateral and radial symmetry pervade nature." The current body of work, ten years in the making, is no exception to this premise. Incidentally, the works are each dated 2008-2018 as there was no attempt to differentiate the chronology within what became an ongoing project.



"Foil Blue" by Jack Youngerman, 2008-2018. Gouache/cut paper, 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.

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In the 1970s and 80s, Youngerman exhibited brightly colored sculptures and paintings of swirling abstract shapes and patterned geometrics. In his new Cut-Ups, Youngerman has embraced, and in fact, literally re-used, characteristic elements from earlier works.

For each of the Cut-Ups, he has cut out areas from earlier completed gouaches that he had set aside. These prior works, which already featured complex abstract arrangements, became the chief resource for the new pieces. The pre-existing design gives the results a sense of historic authority. A certain virtuosity and intuition has guided these re-combinations, the outgrowth of a lifetime of studio practice, taste, and judgment.



"Blade Blue" by Jack Youngerman, 2008-2018. Gouache/cut paper, 12 x 12 inches. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.

The colors are prismatic, often primaries and their derivatives, and each component shape is singularly pigmented. Where the paper is sufficiently thick, the artist has painted the edges. Subtle brush-work, and pencil outlines from the original compositions are still visible. The matte surface of hand painted gouache, and occasionally nuanced blends of color, gives the works a vibrant warmth.

Youngerman groups the derived elements, or pieces of them, into new shapes, and shapes within shapes, almost always irregular in contour. Families of form include stars, lozenges, chevrons, medallions, inverted equilateral triangles, squares with geometric bursts, and diamond shapes. The artist alters these well-known shapes by varying their horizontal, diagonal, or vertical emphasis, overlaying additional forms, axial rotations, and incorporating unexpectedly protruding or inset abstract elements. The colorful silhouettes are further superimposed or overlapped to create patterns of considerable intricacy. The use of brilliant hues and sharply contrasting tones (with black active as a color), produces a lively spatial pop. Some of the compositions radiate, as if unfolding, from a center. Symmetry is a pre-occupation. All the compositions are dynamic as imagery appears to explode dimensionally off the surface.

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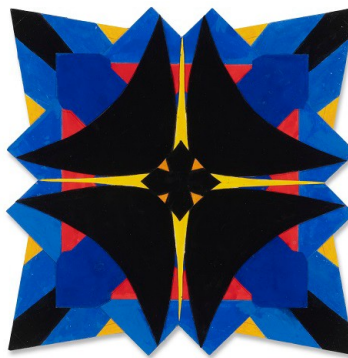
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"Point Blue" by Jack Youngerman, 2008-2018. Gouache/cut paper, 14 3/8 x 14 3/8 inches. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.

Every completed piece is comprised of several discrete compositional arrangements layered upon, or sandwiched between, each other. The finished work is up to five layers thick. Since the paper used was already thicker than average, the ultimate composition comprises a relief that can extend off the background surface by as much as an inch.

The colorful composite casts a slight shadow, as it is floated on a square white background. These are recessed from the front surface of the vitrine-style plexi-glass frames which were especially designed to accommodate them. These features accentuate the exhibition's unity and an inherent quality of pace and rhythm which marks the gallery's elegant installation of the over 40 works. Each piece, of similar scale and intensity, is 13 to 16 inches square and their boldly distinct patterns all differ from one another.



"Foil Black" by Jack Youngerman, 2008-2018. Gouache/cut paper, 11 x 11 inches. Courtesy of Washburn Gallery.

At once painting, sculpture, and collage, the artist calls these works "Cut-Ups." The most obvious comparison is to the late work of Matisse where the elderly French master, then bed-ridden, worked on gouache painted paper, creating semi-abstract shapes cut with scissors (rather than drawn) and re-assembled into compositions that suggested flowers and leaves.

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The impact of the “Cut-Ups” in the exhibition at Washburn, however, is kaleidoscopic, almost hypnotic in its fascinating effect. They demonstrate an energy and vitality that belies the customary image of an artist’s late work as a distillation or simplification.

Very jaunty as compositions, they have been compared to Islamic tile, mosaics, patterned butterflies, stained glass church windows, and Pennsylvania Dutch hex symbols. Neither minimal, austere, or reductive, the Cut-Ups luxuriate in a sense of vitality and animation that has nothing to do with societal assumptions about being ninety-three years old. I look forward to what comes next!

BASIC FACTS: “Cut-Ups” by Jack Youngerman are exhibited from April 25 to May 31, 2019 at Washburn Gallery, 177 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. www.washburngallery.com.

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