

JOHN GRILLO



INTRODUCTION

The sun comes out in many minds' eyes at the mere mention of John Grillo's name. His first show at Howard Wise on a stormy miserable day in 1961 had such a great impact — "It was like walking into a room full of sunshine." "It seemed 10 degrees warmer in there." "Everyone was so depressed by the bad weather and their spirits lifted as soon as they entered the room," etc. — that no one forgets the experience. One artist called Grillo the Renoir of Abstract Expressionism, another compared him to Rubens for his sensuality. One critic brought up Turner while another waxed eloquently about Venetian luminosity in his regard. All these references still seem apt when you see these gorgeous, light-filled canvases.

One reference which was not made at the time might be made now, and that is to Futurism, especially to Boccioni's *Dynamic States of Mind* series. The Futurists said it for Grillo when they declared their intention to "render dynamic sensation," to "enclose the universe in the work of art," and to "forget the exterior reality and the knowledge we have of it in order to create new dimensions." They "would express plastic emotions which are not only relative to an emotional environment but which are linked to the universe." (All quotations are from statements in Max Kozloff's *Cubism/Futurism*.) Spiraling forms, dazzling color chords, dynamic diagonals and jump-cut spatial locations, fast rhythms, fleeting, fragmentary shapes, a sound that bordered on cacaphony — these are some of the attributes Grillo shared with the Futurists. The density and intensity of modern life experience is revealed in both situations.

Like the Futurists, Grillo painted pure energy. Unlike them (primarily because of his Abstract-Expressionist training with Hans Hofmann), he wasn't tied to the world of objects or specific, mechanized forms of action. Thus the noisy, heated, super-charged world they depicted seems controlled in comparison with the explosive painterly manifestations of Grillo. He often responded to the four corners of his canvas much as they did, with diagonals rushing in form or out to them, as in *Apocalypse*, creating vortices that spun out laterally from the center or epicenters. A stabilizing horizontal might be present as it is in *Chloé*, or there might be some circular forms to focus on, but there could just as easily be no such compositional niceties. Upon occasion, he successfully resisted the temptation to impose order on the maelstrom of flying forms which the Futurists were never able to do, and at those times he indulged his love of pigment for its own sake to the fullest. These canvases, and the huge collages in which he mashes paper into a paintlike pulp, seem as hedonistic and full of joy as the best Hofmanns of the '60s and are even more sensuous.

Grillo had rebelled as a Hofmann student, moving out of his late '40s mythologizing biomorphism into impastoed squares of brilliant color in huge grid formats. He comes close to Hofmann in these painterly canvases of the early '60s and then returns to sterner control in the hardedge abstractions of the late '60s. Of course Hofmann had his Constructivist side as well, but it was never as rigorously employed as Grillo's, just as at the other extreme Hofmann never explored the heights of sheer sensibility that Grillo reached in these painterly 1960-61 canvases such as *Cyclops* and *Yellow Burst*.

Grillo's most recent paintings — the vibrant, yellow-dominant landscapes containing abstracted or geometrically clarified units — have their coloristic precedent in paintings like *Chloé*, *Zeus*, and *Kukulcan* of the early '60s. Yellow was the color of the spirit according to Van Gogh, and Grillo redefines it as high-spirited. His paintings exude happiness. Rhetorical Abstract Expressionism, which was the crucible in which he was formed, was much more somber and 'down' in mood. Rothko, for example, felt that tears were the truest response one might have to his paintings, even the yellow and blue ones. De Kooning used yellow a great deal too, but it is fleshier, more physical and palpable.

The verbal rhetoric — as opposed to the painted kind — of these years focused on light; this is the main reason these paintings by Grillo were so exciting to the audience that greeted them. As one reviewer, Dario Suro, said: "He produces the light that acts as its own statement." Grillo actually painted quite thickly, with all manner of palette-knife flash and dash and semi-automatic techniques; however, the substance of the pigment seems to evanesce before your eyes, it is so 'light'. Years of rhetoric about structure, systems, reductivism, gestalts, and concepts have intervened to deflect us from seeing painting's primary concern with light, but younger artists are rediscovering it for themselves. Grillo's new show of old work may be an important catalyst in this process. Like the restless seas on which young Grillo sailed during the war, light never falls the same way twice. It takes an open, ever-changing, responsive sensibility such as Grillo's to capture its palpitating essence in such recalcitrant materials as pigment on wood-stretched canvas.

April Kingsley