



ROBERT HENRY

L A U R E L T R A C E Y G A L L E R Y

FROM THE BEGINNING

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ARTS TRUST
GALLERY

CATALOGUE DESIGN
Ken Silvia Design
PHOTOGRAPHY
Adam Reich
PRINTER
Reynolds DeWalt, New Bedford, MA

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ROBERT HENRY, ALWAYS SURPRISING

Perhaps it's a function of having two first names, but Bob Henry always seems to be starting over - new formats, new subjects, new paint handling, changed levels of abstraction, new ideas all the time. When you go to his studio, you are always surprised, which is not what normally happens on a studio visit. Some change is inevitable, but the kind of makeovers he achieves are not. With Bob Henry, generalizations are foolhardy: figures, yes, but not all the time. The same holds for the presence of mystery, humor, fear, and focal adjustment. Although he generally moved away from abstraction over the years, he recently began using clumps of other artists' discarded paint as abstract elements in his own paintings. Until his last decade or so, Hans Hofmann, Henry's teacher, handled his paint so differently from canvas to canvas that his solo shows looked like group shows. That doesn't happen with Bob Henry, except in a situation like this one in which many years are covered, and this survey leaves out his kinetic abstractions and kinesthetic self-portraits as well as his most unsettling, psychologically wrought, and mysterious paintings.

The remarkable thing, though, is not the artist's range or multiple identities, but the consistent quality across a chronology of 50 years. The earliest work - *Hofmann's Yard* and *Kitchen in Provincetown*, both 1953, and *Cottage*, 1955 - clearly shows the effect of Hofmann's example and teaching on his color, loose and varied paint handling (brush and palette knife), and push/pull construction of the picture space. The latter is especially noticeable and well done in *Cottage* where the large red plane near the top pulls the distance right up to the foreground reds, yellows and oranges. It looks like an abstraction until you see the buildings, trees and clothesline. The thick and scumbled paint in the other two 1953 canvases feels like he's testing the waters of abstraction despite the depiction, and then in *Kitchen* an arrow mysteriously appears pointing to a small red bottle. It is announcing the saltshaker's unexpectedly small scale. *Kitchen* was painted his first summer in Provincetown studying with Hofmann, and fifty years later he paints his kitchen in Wellfleet, where he summers with his painter wife, Selina Trieff.

A group of semi to very abstract figure paintings dating from the late fifties show the joint influences of his teacher Hans Hofmann and Jan Müller, a young German artist living in Provincetown who had studied with Hofmann in the late 1940s, but rejected abstraction in the 1950s. Müller's early death from heart disease in 1958 turned a role model for younger artists like Henry into a legendary figure. *Henry's Seated Nude*, 1958, is easy to see despite the fuzzy details. It is done in broad strokes from his imagination without preconception. In the others, the figures are almost impossible to make out in the welter of wide strokes of high-key color. Like Müller, Henry paints a kind of rough-hewn version of Fauvism,

most noticeably in *Two Figures*, 1957, where the figures blend into the landscape on small irregular units of color. Light but strong green, pink, red, orange and blue hues predominate in the abstractions, a bluer green characterizes the two landscapes of 1965 and 1976, and it is present in all of the post 2000 paintings in this show. Grisaille, or mostly gray paintings tend to contain his most mysterious, sometimes even eerie imagery. *Idyll*, 1963, with its balking horse and strange figure in a nearby structure is a gentle study in planes of pinker or bluer gray, highlighted in gold.

The two landscapes stand in for the artist's long fascination with how we see and how to represent that in a painting. In 1965 in *The Great Maple* and other paintings he was experimenting with manipulating the focus to create a sense of greater depth in his work using variable focus and the multiplication of edges for an out-of-focus effect. He had discovered that instead of breaking down at the edges like an out of focus camera, in the eye the edges separate into many images. Later with a different view of the same house and a little less intensity he is still trying to render the lack of resolution in the out of focus human eye. In *Alfred's House*, 1967, the railing at the viewer's side seems to pull the eye rapidly to the house. He had also found that the sense of depth increased when the one looked at the work from an angle. He could force this by placing the viewer right at the edge of the canvas, as the railing does, or as the seawall does in *By the Sea Wall*, 1983. His view was from the second floor of painter Pat De Groot's house on the water in Provincetown at high tide. He brings you right up to the window panes in *When it Rains it Pours*, 1987, and your focused view through them to the siding, steps, and Provincetown Harbor beyond throws the box of Morton's salt out of focus. This tiny gem of a painting was painted from the same studio as the sea wall.

In the 1990s he and Selina bought a large multi-story house on Commercial Street, Wellfleet near Provincetown, where Henry subsequently became President of the Art Association and Museum. The house overlooks a tidal inlet from Wellfleet Bay, which seems to be frozen mid-storm in *Winter*, 2000, a painting of Selina sitting at a highly reflective dining room table and gazing out the window with her back to us. Local color, detail, movement - all has been eliminated and silence reigns in the midst of a magically crystalline light-space that whispers of the perfection of the moment as if to protect it. Painted the year after he very nearly lost her to complications from neck surgery, the sense of the miraculous (which her recovery was) and of the quiet joy they both felt comes through quite clearly.

Green predominates in two other paintings of the same year featuring the same room from different angles: *Interior II* and *Wellfleet with Louie*. Actually the dog Louie is in both, in the former curled up on a chair in the center of the picture and as Selina painted him in the latter. Louie was a natural comic - practically every position or action was funny.

In the most recent painting in the show, *The New Vase*, 2002, Bob Henry depicts one of his early paintings, a *Universal Self-portrait*, one in a series of works attempting to "portray a kinesthetic reality by visual means," as he describes it. You see nothing like it in the show. He has done many paintings, and series of paintings, that are not like anything in this show, or like each other. Some of his other favorite subjects are cars and street scenes viewed from above; Chinese influenced landscapes in scroll-like formats; voyeurs, crowds of city dwellers, drowning people, Janus heads, nudes, speed, woods and dunes; looking down into the abyss, looking up into real or imagined spaces, and looking in from outside. His subjects are as varied as the way they are painted. He says: "I want to avoid having a routine method for painting," that "rather than looking for a signature style I have used multiple and varied approaches in the belief that the unity of the work resides in persona, the spirit of the artist, not in the style." Look carefully enough and you can catch him doing a "Degas" or a "Gauguin," maybe a "Corot." He's open stylistically and his paintings' "stories" are left open as well. The viewer wants to know, "What's happening? "What do they see?" "Something's gonna happen. What is it?" He'll tell you nothing, but I can tell you that his favorite song is *Something's Going to Happen*.

April Kingsley, Curator, Kresge Art Museum