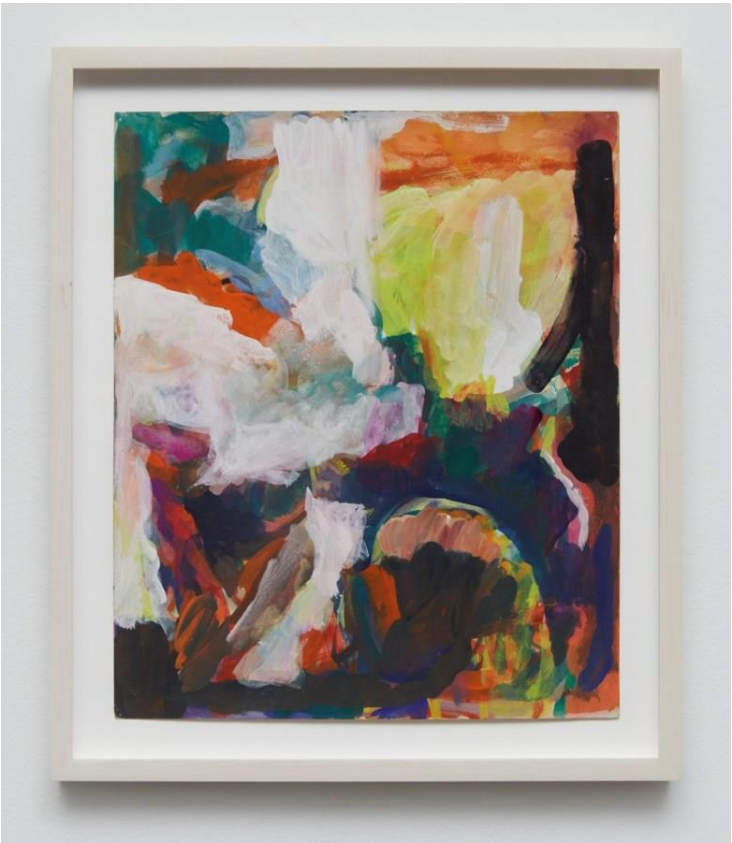
HYPERALLERGIC

Shirley Jaffe's Outlier Beginnings

A show of early works by Shirley Jaffe challenges viewers to think about the road Jaffe pursued in her art, and what it means to go your own way.

By John Yau

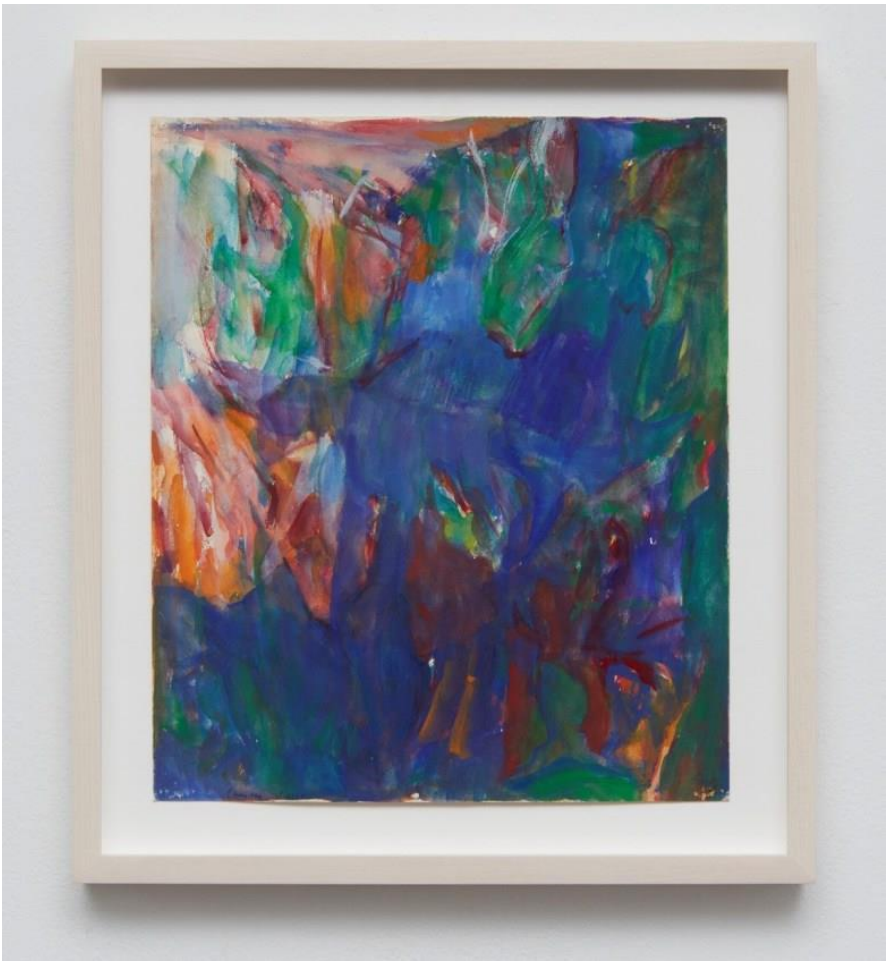


Shirley Jaffe, "Untitled" (c. 1960), watercolor and gouache on paper, 13.98 x 11.61 inches

Shirley Jaffe is an outlier in the history of Abstract Expressionism. A member of the so-called "second generation," she was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1923, and grew up in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. She studied at the Cooper Union School of Art. In 1948, she saw the Pierre Bonnard retrospective at MoMA, which influenced a number of artists of her generation, and in 1949 she moved to Paris with her then-husband, Irving Jaffe. In Paris, she became part of a scene of expatriate artists that included Jean-Paul Riopelle, Sam Francis, Norman Bluhm, Jack Youngerman, Ed Clark, and, later, Janice Biala, Kimber Smith, and Al Held. Unlike the other Americans in this group, Jaffe, who passed away in 2016, never returned to the United States.

Jaffe began exhibiting her work in Paris in 1956, but she did not have her first solo show in New York until 1989. For those who have followed her art, the work in *Shirley Jaffe: The 1950s and 1960s, Works on Paper and a Painting* at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (December 10, 2022–January 21, 2023) is largely unknown in New York. The show includes 15 undated pieces on paper, likely from 1958–60, and a vertical oil painting, "Dominos 2" (1962).

Shortly after making these works, she received a Ford Foundation grant and lived in Berlin from 1963 to 1964, while the Berlin Wall was being constructed. There, she met the composers Elliott Carter, Iannis Xenakis, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. It was at this time — while she was away from Paris and a familiar and supportive life — that she began making the work for which she became known in the US: irregular geometric shapes on a white ground, pure abstractions unlike anyone else's. If, as critic Walter Pater said, "all art aspires to the condition of music," then Jaffe is one of the few artists of her generation to attain that state in her work. She did so by eschewing image and eliminating any allusion to nature and landscape.



Shirley Jaffe, “Untitled” (c. 1958), watercolor and gouache on paper, 12.13 x 10.31 inches

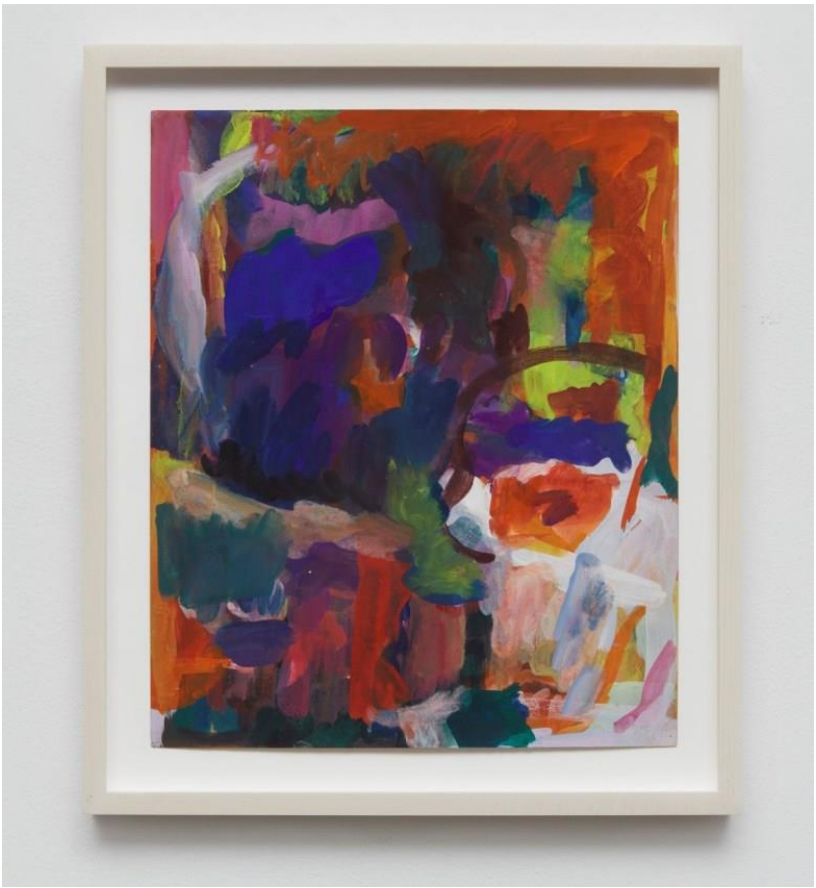
I was curious about these earlier works. What would this exhibition reveal about Jaffe’s development as an artist? What was she doing in the late 1950s, when many artists of her generation (Bluhm, Held, Jules Olitski, Grace Hartigan, and others) had not yet fully distinguished themselves. In contrast to these artists, who were experiencing firsthand the rise of Color Field painting, Pop Art, Minimalism, the “death of painting,” and a widespread dismissal as “second generation Abstract Expressionists” and followers of Willem de Kooning, Jaffe took what Robert Frost called “the road less traveled.” I do not think one path is preferable to the other, but Jaffe decided it was better to stay in Paris, and history proves her right.

None of the works on paper — all in watercolor and gouache — are larger than 15 by 13 inches. Though modest in size, I think of them not as studies, but as investigations into composition, color relationships and gradations, transparency and light. It is also clear that by 1958, Jaffe was

not a vigorous gestural painter. Despite the intimate scale of these works, not a single mark spans the surface. They are not in dialogue with the expansive gestures of de Kooning and the reductive geometries of Barnett Newman, but with the work of two Russian-born abstract artists living and working in Paris, Serge Charchoune (1888–1975) and Serge Poliakoff (1900–1969), both of whom pursued the possibilities of color, as well as Vasily Kandinsky and the artists associated with *Der Blaue Reiter*.

In an interview with Shirley Kaneda (*BOMB Magazine*, April 2004), Jaffe makes this telling observation about her early work:

I've always been interested in breaking up space as a kind of compositional device, but I wasn't really thinking about making a satisfying image. I looked recently at some of my very early works; I was so concerned with how I could break up that space that I didn't think about the fact that I was also making a picture. It's curious, a big blind spot.



Shirley Jaffe, "Untitled" (c. 1960), watercolor and gouache on paper, 13.98 x 11.61 inches

What is striking about this show, particularly in light of where she went in her work, is that Jaffe followed the internal logic of her concerns even without a clear path to take. This cannot be said of Held or Olitski, who acquiesced to the pressure to remove the hand from painting, and to separate themselves from Abstract Expressionism in a prescribed manner. Jaffe is one of the few abstract artists from her generation who followed her own impulses and was not swayed by external pressure (Kimber Smith and Norman Bluhm were the others). Her independence is remarkable for many reasons, not least because it led her further and further away from whatever roots she had in Abstract Expressionism and what Clement Greenberg called, "American-type" painting.

Hindsight is 20-20. What seems evident in these works is Jaffe's interest in the structuring of color. Always analytically astute, she is accurate when she says she wasn't "thinking about making a satisfying image" in these works. This takes time to get used to, since the qualities that distinguish them could be perceived as weaknesses. After all, everyone around her — from Francis to Youngerman to Joan Mitchell — was making images in their work, even if they were using gesture to do so.

Jaffe's disinterest in making an image turns out to be her strength. It compelled her to go in a direction in which a central image or all-over composition would play no part. In the 15 works on paper, Jaffe discovered what she is up to as she went along. The pieces are, as Harold Rosenberg wrote in "The American Action Painters" (*Art News*, 1952), "an act [that] is inseparable from the biography of the artist," a record of decisions. You can add only so many layers of color before the work gets too muddy or clotted. Jaffe applies semi-transparent veils of color. She covers over areas with milky and grayish whites. Her use of jade and celadon greens, violets, deep blues, chartreuse, and different shades of red is very different from the palette used by her American peers. Her use of midnight blue and related tones brings to mind the work of Franz Marc and Kandinsky, but she will eventually remove any traces of landscape that appeared in her work.

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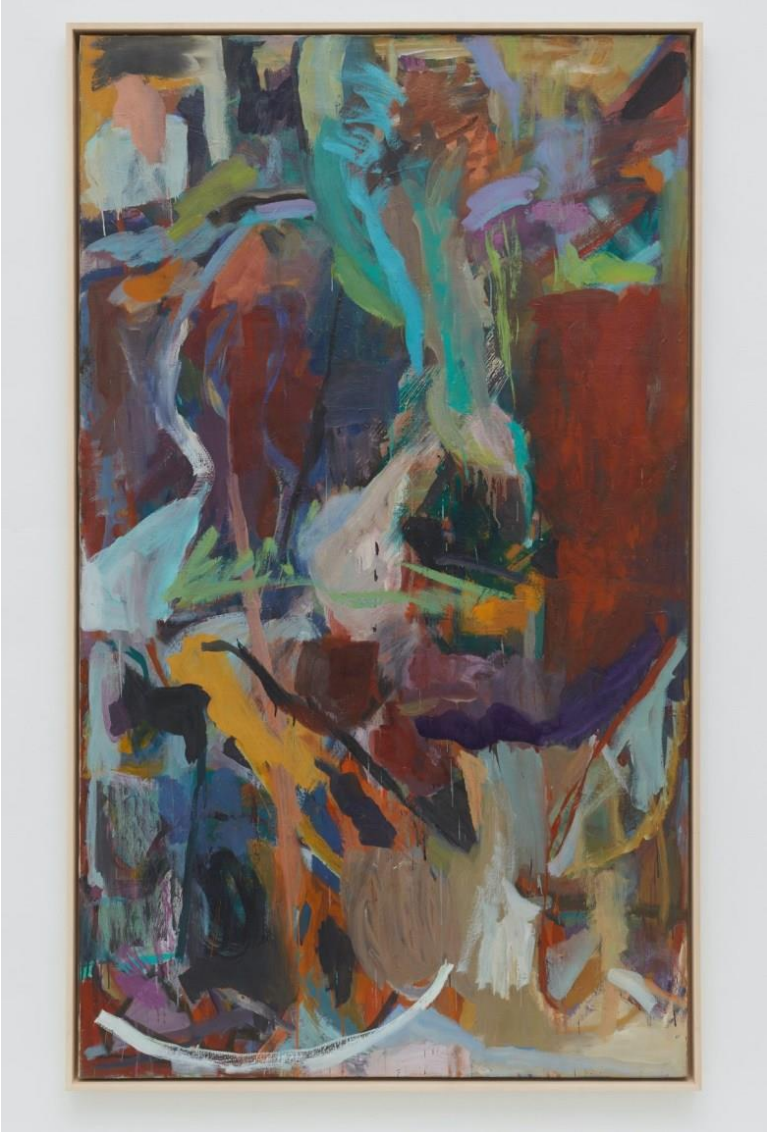
One of the things I love about this show is that it does not seem market driven. By showing these works, the gallery challenges viewers to think about the road Jaffe pursued in her art, and what it means to go your own way. The pursuit of pure abstraction was central to certain mid-century American critics, and yet they failed to appreciate Jaffe's art. Her work demonstrates that pure

abstraction does not have to look a certain way, nor does it have to be fashionable. And if it is, maybe we should look twice and consider the implications of conformity.



Shirley Jaffe, “Dominos 2” (1962), oil on canvas, 76.77 x 44.49 inches

Shirley Jaffe: The 1950s and 1960s, Works on Paper and a Painting *continues at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through January 21. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*