HARRIETTE JOFFE

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DAVENPORT AND SHAPIRO FINE ART

Ocean, 1974.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.

Foreword

Harriette Joffe: An American Painter

By Michael McDonough

Harriette Joffe is a bit of an enigma.

Her body of work is simultaneously elusive and coherent, formed initially during the 1960s and still evolving today. She has conquered a wide range of techniques—from color field to encaustic wax— employing them to relentlessly explore the fissures between abstraction and figuration, figuration and landscape: a figurative painter with Abstract Expressionist roots, perhaps.

But also: a feminist who had no truck with conventional feminism—a post-feminist, perhaps, 50 years before the word was coined;

A painter of horses and sensual women rendered on complex fields of Hebraic text and Spanish Catholic icons intertwined;

A watercolorist reworking dried surfaces with emery cloth and sandpaper (she works from a small phalanx of paint bowls—the way Bill de Kooning showed her).

Prescient with respect to content, Joffe anticipated our current intellectual exploration of the Spanish Inquisition as a lens onto the Holocaust and modernity in general by twenty years, at least.

Art is ahistorical, Theodor Adorno reminds us.

Like any figure who rejects a conventional pathway, Joffe and her work are deeply engrained in history and yet somehow outside of it. History is more or less bunk, says Henry Ford. The only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history that we make today.

Harriette Joffe is, in the end, an American artist of this new century and the last. Her touchstone was the East End of Long Island during the formative years of 20th-century American Art. Less introspective than the European-born First Generation Abstract Expressionists who she knew and worked with, her coming of age after World War II allowed her work an exuberance that betrays her New World roots. Beyond that fact, no one owns her.

After New York, she traveled extensively in the restless way of those born in the American Century: adventure under a beneficent *Pax Americana*. In New York she had rooted in and discovered iconoclasm and experimentation, performance and landscape. In Italy, France, and on the Iberian Peninsula she found the stubborn relevance of work done centuries ago. In New Mexico and other cultural colonies of Mexico's *El Norte* she found landscape again; and, oddly, the still warm trail of Crypto-Judaism's 15th-century European Diaspora: Magen David and Cross among the succulents. (It followed her back from Spain in her knapsack, that history, sticking in her paint brushes.)

More recently, she has discovered inspiration and renewal in the Massachusetts Berkshires, now following their downward flowing waters to the sea, back across the Sound to her Long Island upstart start. After 50 years of work, now in the second decade of the 21st century and the seventh decade of her life, she is still searching every day, making art with tools as old as Lascaux and ideas as fresh as her laptop.

Have a look....

Matanza, 1993. Oil with mixed media on canvas, 72 x 58 in.

Harriette Joffe: Artistic Investigations

By Robert Linsley

All the important questions in abstract painting are ones of definition, in particular the question of what an abstraction actually is. The canonical definition is a picture that draws its own meaning out of itself, without having to depend on anything in the world outside. A more popular or reduced version of this idea is that an abstract painting should not depict anything we can recognize—but that is really a mistake. It is quite possible that a representational work, a landscape for example, may be more autonomous, and in that sense more "abstract," than an arrangement of lines and colors. Cézanne's works conform more to the definition than those of Mondrian, which are all too laden with meanings added by the artist. More recently the 2011-2012 retrospective of Willem de Kooning at the Museum of Modern Art in New York has brought about new interest in the work of someone who categorically repudiated the distinction between figuration and abstraction. Actually, the period of de Kooning's career, from the late 1940s through the 1980s, might be described as the period in which the definition of abstraction was not theorized but tested out in practice by a variety of artists, many of whom saw no necessity to abandon figuration completely. The list could include, beside Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Balcomb Greene, and Larry Rivers (all of whom Joffe knew), Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, David Smith, Jean Fautrier, Antoni Tapies, and many others. Harriette Joffe belongs to this period as an artist engaged with the major questions of her time, attuned to the development of her chosen métier, its intrinsic problems and possibilities.

In the history of modern art it is often assumed that a development from figures to abstraction is necessary or inevitable, and that such a change represents progress. Mondrian is the classic example, an artist who moved logically from the depiction of trees to a formal organization of the picture. However, most of the artists on the above list show no such development—rather, they move back and forth between the two modes, as if they are trying to establish exactly what the difference is. Joffe fits this description, and her work is based in a creative nexus from which abstract forms and living figures may both emerge, separately or together. The earliest works in the current show reveal her responding to the landscape of Long Island,

Blue Green Ocean, 1975.
Oil on canvas, 41 x 41 in.

home to many of her artist colleagues, the so-called East End community of which she was an important member. But what it means to "respond" to a landscape is not so easily understood, or at least it appears so today.

It might be generally assumed that the artist looks at nature, has a feeling and then notes that emotion on canvas in terms of line and color, and probably most artists of the recent past described their activity in those terms. Yet now, looking at the geometrical arrangements of colored slabs of Joffe's *Montauk* pictures, and the more gestural, freer abstractions of the *Pond* series and *Ocean* series, what is most interesting is the gap between nature and art. The world is there, the picture is there, and the two are very different, yet they are in a relationship, one in which neither term lords it over the other. The interest of a representation lies in its departure from its model, and the experiments of modernism have finally established this as a new way of looking at both the world and at art. Abstraction here entails respect for nature by letting it be, while appearing itself as another, parallel nature.

During the 1980s Joffe's trajectory took her into a symbolic figuration based on the nude, and this raised the stakes of her art. Still later, in the nineties, her figure paintings became quite illustrative, often derived from Jewish history or mythology. These have a color and tonality characteristic of the Southwest, where most of them were painted. Though they seem like a departure from her earlier abstractions, these works are not incompatible with the trajectory of American modernism.

There is a richly contradictory Jewish tradition in post-war abstraction—secular, esoteric and materialist. A classic example is Barnett Newman's abstractions with their references to Kabbalah. No adherence to ritual is implied, yet works like these acknowledge that in an important sense in our culture art has taken the place of religion as a source of spiritual values. The legacy of Jewish spirituality, which has played a crucial role in the formation of our culture, is secularized and grounded in the material of painting. In this kind of work nothing is hidden, yet the meaning is communicated through abstract form, not through transparent language, so it remains esoteric. It is a kind of open mystery, accessible to anyone who wants to find it.

The Jewish imagery of Joffe's work of the 1990s would later be sublimated into her *Riversong* series, appearing as a broken calligraphy, an abstraction of the central vehicle of Jewish spiritual wisdom, the written word. Like the *Montauk* pictures and the other landscape based works painted on Long Island, these paintings from the Southwest were a response to Joffe's experiences and her environment at the time. Again, it is important to stress that there is no hierarchy of value between abstract and figurative work, and that Joffe's career, no more than those of her colleagues already mentioned, does not follow a straight upward path from one to the other. I am talking here about an exploratory, open ended kind of practice, one that circles around the definition of abstraction, drawing energy with each orbit. This approach actually repudiates any notion of "progress" in art, instead it broadens and deepens the space between abstraction and figuration, and the tool with which it does this is naturally the artist's own personality and sensibility.

The human figure has been a source of value in Western art for a very long time, perhaps the main source of value. The drive for autonomy in abstraction, the need to let colors and gestures speak for themselves, has produced work that to the general public often seems to wreak destruction on the human form. Artists such as Picasso and de Kooning have been criticized for the violence presumed to be present in their treatment of the figure. Actually, this is a misunderstanding but it is true that painters engage in both a break up and rebuilding of the figure. The forms of the body inspire shapes and gestures, which want to settle themselves in their own

Horse at Deep Hollow. 1990.
Monoprint. 26 x 19 in.

Blue Pond, circa 1990. Acrylic and mixed media on rag, 30 x 22 in.

Electronic Goddess, circa 1990.
Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 58 in.

arrangements, and then in the act of composing the picture new figures are built out of those parts. The whole process is a back and forth from nature to painting in which the body actually inhabits the canvas—moving around, breaking boundaries, entering into relation with others.

It is probably the case that the figure has been more productive for abstraction than landscape because three millennia of art have placed it inside art in a way that a landscape can never be. The beauty of landscape depends on it being out there, around us and apart from us; the beauty of the figure derives from the fact that all figures are us. In art there is an understood equivalence between the movement of the artist's body (their hand of course, but also their entire body) and the body they represent. This is where the appreciation of abstract pictures such as those of the New York and East End work of Willem and Elaine de Kooning, through Balcomb Greene and Larry Rivers, and onto to Joffe, begins. For this show the works chosen are those on the edge between the recognizable figure and pure abstraction, and works that hover around that boundary in an interesting way. Pieces such as the *Electronic Goddess* series—my personal favorites—are on a high level, and demonstrate most clearly the seriousness of Joffe's involvement with the defining problems of her practice. Abstraction is born out of the human struggles of the figure, and figures are born out of the movements of form and color—this is the generative moment of abstraction, its origin for the classic artists of the American tradition. In Joffe's case many years of work, both with the elements of her medium and with the figure, contribute to these works, which are truly the workshop and forge of creativity.

If *Electronic Goddess* is one high point of Joffe's career, it would be wrong to suggest that it was the highest. Her most recent work carries on the development of an artist who keeps getting stronger. The *Riversong* series have been produced at her current residence in Great Barrington, on the banks of the Housatonic River. They keep contact with nature—namely the river that flows by her house—but touch it lightly. The autonomy of her abstractions is fully achieved; they participate in nature as a new nature, mimicking the rhythms and flows of the river but not depicting them in any literal way. The larger forms in the pictures are broken, with short, relatively heavy lines reaching to each other across the surface to suggest connections and evoke figures not fully represented. These marks also suggest fragments of calligraphy, perhaps even Hebrew writing, and so keep contact with the symbolic figure paintings of her American Southwest and Northern Mexico period. These more prominent gestures are in dialog with a multitude of smaller and more diffuse marks, which both sustain and separate them. The support is a coated paper, smooth and semitransparent, and it has the effect of making the water based paint puddle and spread in sensuous ways. Importantly, Joffe's style in these recent works is fully consonant with the current development of abstraction. Her works have as many, if not more, gestures of erasure as of marking, and this is very contemporary, as is the attention to small arbitrary effects born of the incompatibility of water and oil based litho crayons.

Finally, the works are framed by an intriguing method in which the paper is stitched to the backing. In each case the stitches are individually placed to work with the picture's design and color. Though all the pieces use the same methods, each one represents a new, unique and complete conception, and this is how the series format has developed in recent years, especially in the late, culminating works of de Kooning, with whom Joffe shares many affinities. I have to stress that I don't see anything derivative of de Kooning's work here, but rather an equal address to the same problems poised by the history of abstraction

In Joffe's recent works I detect continuity with her earlier, nature-based abstractions of her *Montauk* and *Pond* series, but in their broken forms I also see the integration of everything that she learned during her figurative period. The dance of integration and disintegration, the break-up and rebuilding of the figure as the source of painting's organic unity, even more than of its meaning, is here fully realized. The "yes" and "no" of abstract figuration, the ongoing dialectic of modernism's destruction and affirmation of the human form, is transcended, and put into perspective. These pictures have large scale ambition in a small format, and they reach their goal precisely through variation, through diversity within the overall series.

Harriette Joffe is an exemplary figure in the seriousness, consistency and forward looking nature of her artistic investigations. She continues to create in her late seventies, and although her work has a place in the history of American abstraction, it is still moving on, much like the river of her newest works.

Like all the best abstract art, hers has the integrity of the searcher, and like all such open-ended careers, it is always fully grounded in its own moment.

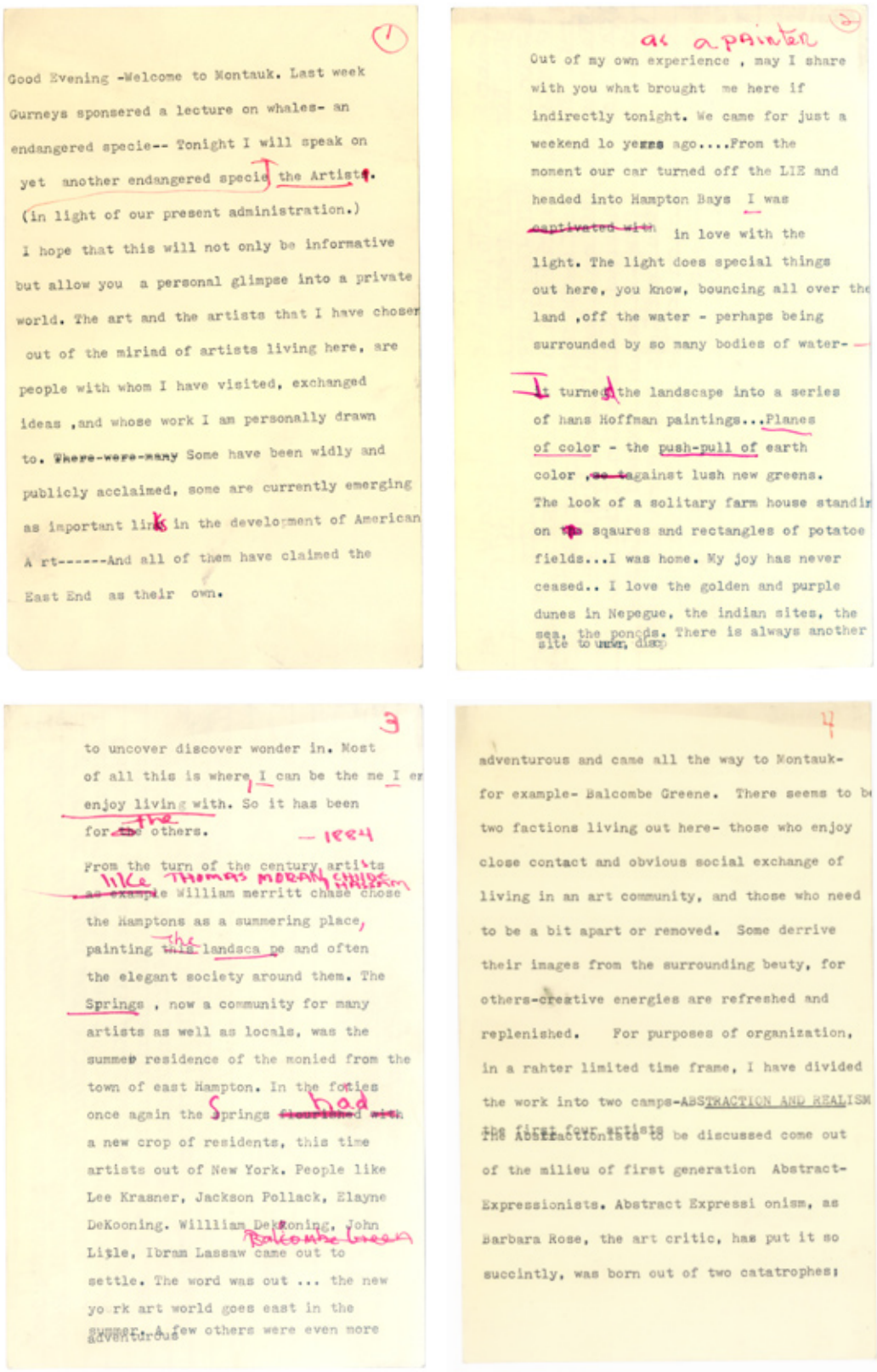
Robert Linsley is an award-winning art critic and artist who has published over 50 critical and scholarly essays and two books, and lectured and exhibited internationally for over 20 years. Currently based in Kitchener, Ontario, he has exhibited in Canada, the US, and Europe. His work is in the collections of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Alberta, and other public and private collections. Linsley holds an MFA Degree from University of British Columbia and a Postgraduate Diploma/Studio from Simon Frasier University. He taught at University of Waterloo from 2001 through 2006.

(left) *Counterpoint*, 2012. Watercolor on translucent plastic sheet. (above) *Counterpoint*, detail.

(above) *Long Live The Queen,* 1992. Oil on canvas, 58 x 72 in. (below) *Misguided Angel,* 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 72 in.

The Fifth World, 1987.
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 58 in.

(above)
Pond Series – Napeague, 1985. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.
(below)
Middle Palace, 1985. Acrylic and oil on canvas, *52 x 60* in.



Good Evening -Welcome to Montauk. Last week Gurneys sponsered a lecture on whales- an endangered specie-- Tonight I will speak on yet another endangered specie the Artist. (in light of our present administration.) I hope that this will not only be informative but allow you a personal glimpse into a private world. The art and the artists that I have chosen out of the miriad of artists living here, are people with whom I have visited, exchanged ideas ,and whose work I am personally drawn to. ~~There were many~~ Some have been widly and publicly acclaimed, some are currently emerging as important links in the development of American Art------And all of them have claimed the East End as their own.

as a painter

Out of my own experience , may I share with you what brought me here if indirectly tonight. We came for just a weekend lo years ago....From the moment our car turned off the LIE and headed into Hampton Bays I was ~~captivated with~~ in love with the light. The light does special things out here, you know, bouncing all over the land ,off the water - perhaps being surrounded by so many bodies of water- It turned the landscape into a series of hans Hoffman paintings...Planes of color - the push-pull of earth color , ~~as~~ against lush new greens. The look of a solitary farm house standing on the sqaures and rectangles of potatoe fields...I was home. My joy has never ceased.. I love the golden and purple dunes in Nepegue, the indian sites, the sea, the ponds. There is always another site to uncover, discover

to uncover discover wonder in. Most of all this is where I can be the me I enjoy living with. So it has been for the others. — 1884

From the turn of the century artists like Thomas Moran, Childe Hassam, as example William merritt chase chose the Hamptons as a summering place, painting the landscape and often the elegant society around them. The Springs , now a community for many artists as well as locals, was the summer residence of the monied from the town of east Hampton. In the forties once again the Springs had a new crop of residents, this time artists out of New York. People like Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollack, Elayne DeKooning. Willlium DeKooning, John Little, Ibram Lassaw Balcombe Greene came out to settle. The word was out ... the new yo rk art world goes east in the summer. A few others were even more adventurous

adventurous and came all the way to Montauk- for example- Balcombe Greene. There seems to be two factions living out here- those who enjoy close contact and obvious social exchange of living in an art community, and those who need to be a bit apart or removed. Some derrive their images from the surrounding beuty, for others-creative energies are refreshed and replenished. For purposes of organization, in a rahter limited time frame, I have divided the work into two camps-ABSTRACTION AND REALISM ~~the first four artists~~ The Abstractionists to be discussed come out of the milieu of first generation Abstract-Expressionists. Abstract Expressi onism, as Barbara Rose, the art critic, has put it so succintly, was born out of two catatrophes:

Note cards

In summer of 1974 Joffe, who was then showing at the Tower Gallery in Southampton, organized a public slide lecture at Gurney's Inn in Montauk, New York. The event, with over a hundred persons in attendance, was based-on Joffe's having spent time with many pivotal East End artists, and was intended to explore their zeitgeist through an informed sensibility. John Little and Balcomb Greene both later contacted Joffe to let her know that the lecture directly resulted in sales of their work.

Harriette Joffe's 50-year career spans from post-World War II to the present. Embraced by the first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters on the East End of Long Island, she represents one of the last living links to central figures in the avant-garde of 20th-century American art, including such artists as Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Philip Pavia, Ibram Lassaw, John Little and Balcomb Greene. During this period, Joffe had solo exhibitions at Vered Gallery, Elaine Benson Gallery, Bologna Landi Gallery, and showed at Guild Hall Museum, and Ashawagh Hall in the Hamptons. Joffe also worked among the pioneering Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass or DUMBO artists, finding a voice within the then emerging New York City avant-garde in the mid-to-late 70s. She then broke with many of her contemporaries and began a systematic examination of Renaissance, Classical, and neo-Classical European painting. She subsequently began a long period of exploring ancient American civilizations in Mexico and the Southwest. Now sharing her time between Western Massachusetts and New York, her work has continued to evolve into the 21st century. Harriette Joffe has exhibited nationally in galleries and museums; her work has been published extensively and reviewed in publications across the US. Her contribution to the culture of American Abstract Expressionism is featured in the East Hampton Parrish Museum's "East End Stories" oral history series.

photo by: sabine vollmer von falken

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I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Robert Brenner for supporting my work. His faith and devotion has brought me back to New York's East End of Long Island, and to this retrospective exhibition. In the same breath, I thank my daughter Danielle Hampton, for her fervent support and for showing Robert her mother's work.

Happily, Robert chose Michael McDonough, an architect, writer, and artist, whose life experience and knowledge of the New York art world has facilitated, celebrated, and generally moved this project forward. He saw a continuum in my paintings, connecting them to East End artists and colleagues of the 1960s, through the DUMBO and SoHo-based avant garde of the 1970s, to the present. I thank Michael deeply for his writing and research, and for helping me hold a steady course.

Critic and curator Robert Linsley served as interpreter and caretaker of this retrospective exhibition. His essay put 50 years of my aesthetic searching into context, shedding light on both its art historical connections and its personal aspects. Photographer Stephen Donaldson was instrumental in the production of the monograph as well. Thank you.

I am fortunate to know Howard Shapiro of Davenport and Shapiro Gallery in East Hampton. He and his partner, Leonard Davenport, have given me a place to share, and patient, generous, and sensitive support. Thank you to those who also helped me set my compass in the right direction: Lawrence Zupan, Howard Brassner, and Steve Gass. My gratitude to my legal team: Eve Schatz, Esq.; and Martin Gitlin, who worked out complex contracts and was always there for me.

Hugs and thank you to my daughter, Kathy Gitlin, my inveterate supporter; and to my son, David Rumpler, whose wonderful music has graced many of my openings. Thank you also to my brother, Arnold Rutkin, whose ongoing generosity has allowed me both continuities and new beginnings; and to Sam Joffe for his devotion to and enthusiasm for my work during my time in the Hamptons.

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Harriette Joffe

cover: *Matanza*, detail, 1993. Oil with mixed media on canvas, 72 x 58 in.
Artwork © Copyright 2012 Harriette Joffe
Courtesy of Davenport and Shapiro Fine Art

inside front: *Red Horse Dawn*, detail, 1984. Oil on canvas, 52 x 72 in.
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inside back: *Harriette Joffe Paint Bowls*.
Digital Photography. Photographed at Harriette Joffe Studio,
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Nutrition Facts

DAVENPORT AND SHAPIRO FINE ART