

## Jack Bush on Paper: A Selection

JACK BUSH(1909-1977) is best known for his large, exuberant abstract paintings on canvas: idiosyncratic compositions distinguished by surprising shapes and unpredictable orchestrations of radiant hues. Works such as these assured the Toronto-based Canadian artist's place in the front ranks of the loosely associated abstract painters who posited alternatives to Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s. Bush was included, for example, with Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Sam Francis, and Frank Stella—among others—when Clement Greenberg organized the prescient exhibition *Post-Painterly Abstraction* for the Los Angeles County Museum in 1964. What linked this multi-generational, notably diverse group was their common distaste for the “painterly”—read “layered, wet-into-wet, gestural”—version of Abstract Expressionism that had dominated the American art world since the 1950s. Rather than evoking existential angst and contingency, as Abstract Expressionism did, “post-painterly” abstraction (later known as “Color Field” painting) celebrated the expressive, associative, and structural potency of color. Bush's luminous canvases, with their stacks and swoops of intense, unnamable hues clearly sprang from similar impulses as those of his American colleagues but in the way he constructed his paintings with clearly bounded zones of unmodulated color seemed to ally him with his friend Noland, his free-wheeling “imagery” also made him seem close to Frankenthaler; like her, Bush used often improbable sources within his everyday experience as points of departure, translating them into a language of playful, energetic abstraction at once highly individual and seamlessly connected with the history of modernism. “What I'd really like to do,” Bush famously said to Noland, “is hit Matisse's ball out of the park.” “Go ahead,” Noland told him. “Matisse won't mind at all.”

Yet Bush came relatively late to large scale painting on canvas. His first art training and his first success, when he initially began to exhibit in Canada, was with small scale works on paper. An early career as a commercial artist polished his naturally fluent and accurate drawing, and made him an accomplished painter in watercolor and gouache. Like many aspiring Canadian artists of his generation, Bush cultivated these skills at evening art classes, producing “fine art” watercolors for his own pleasure and to advance his ambitions as a serious painter. As a mature, internationally known artist, wholly committed to the formal possibilities of abstraction and the emotional resonance of color relationships, he continued to work on paper, chiefly with

gouache, for extended periods.

Working on paper, for Bush, was never secondary to working on canvas. His gouaches were neither preparations for working at a larger scale, conceived as sketches intended to be executed in some other medium, nor were his paintings ever direct enlargements of compositions first developed on paper. It's true that working on paper frequently played a significant role in the development of Bush's imagery and in the evolution of his paintings, but working on canvas could also influence his paper works. If he sometimes anticipated in his gouaches notions that he later explored on canvas, he often recapitulated and enlarged upon ideas that he first proposed in his paintings, on paper, in an effort to see where they might lead. Perhaps the most accurate description is to say that while the gouaches are intimately related to Bush's major paintings, they are also independent, accomplished works of art in their own right.

Bush often seems particularly inventive and especially uninhibited on paper. Motifs that would engage him for years often make their initial appearance under the liberating influence of working rapidly, in watercolor or gouache, on a relatively small scale. On paper, he could quickly test the limits of spontaneity and economy, in a watercolor such as *Red and Blue*, 1961, (plate 2), creating drama out of an encounter between a pair of urgently swirled, tensely related discs of primary colors. Or (especially early in his career) he could slowly develop a resonant configuration on paper, gradually moving, step by step, from figuration towards wholehearted abstractness. The dominant motif of one Bush's earliest major series of abstract paintings, the *Thrusts* of the early 1960s, for example, had its origins in a sequence of watercolors that began as simplified landscape and flower images in the late 1950s. The configuration developed into such unequivocally abstract works on paper as the explosive *Late Summer No.1*, 1961, (plate 3), and finally made its appearance, on canvas, in a group of works that expanded the implications of the *Late Summer* series without precisely replicating their imagery..

These *Thrust* paintings were exhibited in Bush's first solo show in New York, at Robert Elkon Gallery, in 1962. Because of the Elkon exhibition, Bush spent the month of October 1962 in New York, staying at the Chelsea Hotel. Eager to keep his rhythm of work going but deprived of his usual studio and constrained by the limitations of the hotel room, he was forced to paint on paper. He produced approximately twenty five gouaches on 23rd Street, a series of bold, improvisatory images including this exhibi-

tion's Spindle (plate 5) and On the Way Back from Washington (plate 4), among others, all of which demonstrate Bush's rather uncanny ability to transform acutely observed experience of actuality into apparently uncompromising but remarkable animated abstract configurations.

Some of the Chelsea Hotel gouaches would provide the basis for structures and "imagery" that Bush would pursue for the next several years. The series includes, for example, Red Sash with Black, (plate 6) probably the first manifestation of a format of stacked, brilliant colors that he would explore, with many variations, on paper and canvas until about 1966. (Characteristically, this apparently abstract image was triggered, Bush later revealed, by something that caught his eye during his New York stay: a Madison Avenue shop window display of a woman's shirt and voluminous skirt, cinched with a wide belt.) The Sash motif and its permutations elicited some of Bush's lushest, most delectable paintings on canvas, as well as a series of no less lush or delectable related gouaches. For all their visual opulence, however, the Sashes painted on paper, such as Nice Pink, 1965 (plate 1) or Untitled, 1965 (plate 7), tend to be sparer than the canvas versions. On paper, each band of color is forced to carry considerable visual weight and each nuance of edge or abutment is forced to become eloquent.

The relationship of Bush's gouaches and his canvases is so close that it is often difficult to determine which came first, despite his meticulous dating and careful record-keeping; his concerns appear to be identical, whatever his medium. From September through November 1970, for example, Bush painted a group of gouaches, such as Test (plate 12) and Fast Break (plate 11) that develop more fully the broadly brushed crisp and calligraphic figures that first appear in canvases made earlier that year. Like the canvases, the gouaches oppose geometric and non-geometric shapes, deployed in sizzling colors, often against mottled grounds. Yet the paper works are both freer and more concentrated than the paintings they echo. Their intimate size draws us close, so that we become particularly aware of small variations of edge and surface, of eccentricities and deliberate awkwardnesses of drawing.

In the spring of 1971, working on paper became Bush's dominant activity. In a burst of energy, he turned his full attention to a large series of gouaches that celebrate the end of winter and the return of leaves, flowers, color, and milder air to Toronto. Bush was an avid gardener and the lovingly cultivated shrubs and flower beds surrounding his home frequently served him as sources of inspiration

for his palette and for shapes, even after he had dedicated himself exclusively to working abstractly; the pivotal Thrust series, for example, can be traced to early watercolors of, among other things, a monumental tree trunk and a long stemmed rose, and other “garden” configurations animate some of his most energetic paintings of the early 1960s. But in the spring of 1971, Bush seemed to respond to this familiar source in unexpected ways, inventing in his gouaches a new vocabulary of non-literal but potently evocative shapes. The ebullient white scribble of Apple Blossom Burst (plate 13), to name just one work in the series, takes great liberties with actuality, distilling a sense of energetic growth, light, and possibly even scent into a single gesture whose speed and vitality serve as eloquent equivalents of the artist’s intense feelings. A pale golden cascade of spring blossom becomes an assertive, calligraphic loop in Forsythia, 1971 (plate 14). The “garden gouaches” of 1971 are among Bush’s most abstract works, despite their having been inspired by something he cared about passionately.

This exhibition is, obviously, far from being a complete survey of Bush’s lifelong enthusiasm for working on paper, either in terms of chronology or of types of pictures. Yet the limited number of examples on view make clear this highly individual painter’s special gifts. His uninhibited, spontaneous watercolors and gouaches bear witness to his extraordinary sense of color, his generous drawing, and his odd and engaging approach to structure. Bush’s works on paper provide, as well, an additional benefit. They are so energetic and direct that we feel that we are looking over the artist’s shoulder, watching him think. This illusion of privileged intimacy is not only a pleasure in itself but it can also help to sharpen our perceptions and lead us to make new discoveries in the works before us.

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New York, January 2009