

# SERENA BOCCHINO *Paintings*

by *Jonathan Goodman*

ART MORA | APRIL 30 – MAY 27, 2015

The New York School persists in the lively abstractions of New York painter Serena Bocchino. Inevitably, her work calls to mind the 1940s and '50s, when gestural abstraction governed the art scene. Its influence is still felt in Bocchino's art, which offers a riot of colors and exuberant feelings, still the central elements of this kind of painting. But it also needs to be said that there is some danger in perpetuating a legacy whose high points were reached decades ago; Bocchino is taking a chance that the lyricism and abstraction inherent in her aesthetic will remain energetic and authentic after so many years of public inheritance. It is no longer possible to extend the life of Abstract Expressionism as a major current movement, no matter how important it may have been during the American moment just after the Second World War. This being so, the viewers of Bocchino's work ought to see her paintings as the continuation of a still immediate path in an individualistic sense. Bocchino is aware of the complexities of her position, having made them known in conversation with this writer. Yet she presses on, intent on the integrity of a tradition that finds contemporary excellence in established painters such as Louise Fishman or Sean Scully.

The real question facing the audience looking at such work is its historical importance. Just how major is art of this kind? The British critic Edward Lucie-Smith has suggested that the movement of gestural abstraction may be more important as a cultural expression rather than a painterly advance. This is, I believe, an important insight, now that the period separating artists such as Pollock, de Kooning, and Gorky from the present is more than a couple of generations old. Indeed, a good period of time is needed to correctly read the value of the style, which has always emphasized feeling over intellect. But the moment is over: Pop and conceptual art, the movements following lyric abstraction in America, shifted the artistic landscape in profound ways. The grand gesture now has a past, which radically affects our reading of its accomplishments. One of the most important points one must consider now is that gestural abstraction was truly international in nature, despite the fact that its

most famous practitioners were found in New York. Yet, for culturally imperial reasons, painting here remains a test of the city's dominance in art, historically as well as in present times. The question of Abstract Expressionism's staying power will not be quickly decided, but perhaps a debate can begin.

In *Soar* (2015), Bocchino uses enamel paint and mirrors to enliven her already buoyant canvas, whose colors include mauve, dark blue, red, and jade blue. These hues, highly independent and autonomous, both merge and keep a distance from each other. They bring the language of her antecedents, particularly Pollock, up to date. The composition reflects the lively fellowship of jazz improvisation, whose differing melodic, or not so melodic, lines build a skeleton supported by counterpoint and dissociated emotion. This doesn't mean the structure of the painting has been eliminated, but that its supports are intuitive and free form. *Soar* may be a painting, but it aspires more towards music; its spark is originated in a medium close to but outside fine art.

A similar thing happens in *Hold On* (2015). In both this painting and *Soar*, mirrors reflect light and capture the gaze of Bocchino's audience. Their inclusion complicates the conceptual space these works of art occupy—the viewer is literally brought into the work of art, in a way that spontaneously seizes his or her likeness and includes it in the painting itself. The mirrors also contemporize Bocchino's vision, which must detach itself from the weighty, even heavy-handed legacy that impacts her efforts. "Hold On"—the artist's titles are engagingly direct—directs our attention to her inspired scribbling; colors, ranging from brown to light blue to dark blue to a near black, mix and merge in ways that push her chosen style forward.

Lyric abstraction is inherently a dangerous style; its romanticism can overwhelm the discipline needed to keep the painting from becoming self-indulgent or overly emotional. It is not only advantageous for the individual artist to keep sentimentality in check, it is also needed within American contemporary culture, which has made freedom an unqualified virtue—with an inevitable reversal of its actual value. At its best Bocchino's art shows us how to move forward within a method whose implications can remain inspirationally alive. It is an achievement of no small worth.

#### **CONTRIBUTOR**

##### **Jonathan Goodman**

JONATHAN GOODMAN is a teacher and author specializing in Asian art, about which he has been writing for more than 20 years.

<http://brooklynrail.org/subscribe>