



# MICHAEL WEST

PAINTINGS FROM THE FORTIES TO THE EIGHTIES







# MICHAEL WEST

PAINTINGS FROM THE FORTIES TO THE EIGHTIES

JUNE 5 - SEPTEMBER 25, 2010

MIRIAM L. SMITH

**art resource group**

art advisory and appraisal services since 1984

20351 IRVINE AVENUE, SUITE C-1

NEWPORT BEACH, CA 92660

949-640-1972

**artresourcegroup.com**

590 MADISON AVENUE, 21ST FLOOR

NEW YORK, NY 10022

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a privilege to be able to present such a significant collection of works of art by Michael West, and I have been honored to collaborate with such a talented team in the preparation of this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. I would like to thank all those who lent materials and paintings to the exhibition; Lauri Mendenhall, who worked tirelessly to promote this exhibition; Melissa Tominac of our New York City office for her assistance in locating and procuring significant Michael West paintings; Kris Evans for her initial design guidance and expert editing; Stuart and Roberta Friedman for their continued support of our shared mission to celebrate and promote the art of Michael West and for lending some of the archival material in their collection; Lilla Hangay for the beautiful design of this catalogue; and Steve Gorman and Gerard Vuilleumier for photographing the works of art.

I am also very grateful to Dr. David Lewis for his superb scholarship and exhibition essay and to Dr. James Lodge, who throughout our 30-year professional association has provided meticulous scholarly research and who relentlessly pursued leads on Michael West paintings. Finally, I am particularly indebted to Gallery Director Nora Desruisseaux for her unwavering enthusiasm in researching and writing the chronology and biography of Michael West; her expertise was essential to this project.

Miriam L. Smith  
Art Resource Group

*Cover: Detail from Moments, 1970, Plate XIII*

*Inside cover: Michael West, 1930. Photo: John Boris  
Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman*

**Harlequin, 1946**

Oil on canvas

55 x 36 inches

137.5 x 90 centimeters

*Private collection; gift from the artist c. 1958*



# FOREWORD

Art Resource Group is pleased to present *Michael West: Paintings from the Forties to the Eighties*. Much has been written about American culture fifty years ago, the impassioned, explosive spirit of post-World War II America that spawned an enlightened period in American art. Michael (Corinne) West (1908-1991), poet, painter, actress and writer, was both a product of and a major contributing force behind that period. She lived her life devoted to what she called "The New Art," later known more formally as the Abstract Expressionist movement.

West made an exceptional contribution as one of the early proponents of Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting, both of which she embraced more closely than did many of her contemporaries. She formed friendships with many other founding members of the New York School, such as Hans Hoffman, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock. She exhibited alongside other important artists, including her close friends Richard Pousette-Dart, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Joan Mitchell and Phillip Guston. The Abstract Expressionist movement was decidedly dominated by males; West was one of the few female artists who were active figures in this most important 20th century American art movement.

West's own accomplishments and contributions to modern art are sometimes overshadowed by her intense relationship with her friend and soul mate, Arshile Gorky. Gorky himself recognized the significance of West's innovative paintings, writing in a letter to her, "Corinne, your work is like no other American painter."<sup>2</sup> Although Gorky repeatedly proposed marriage to her, Michael West refused his offers because she believed that such a union would mean forgoing her own artistic career, a sacrifice that she could not make.

Although she acknowledged the intellectual and artistic influence of many figures in the development of her artistic philosophies, Michael West remained true to her own vision throughout her life: her style was consistent and always her own. Fiercely independent, she was a true intellectual and a free spirit. As celebrated art critic Dore Ashton recently wrote, "Where others wrestled with the dubious possibility that there could be an 'inner self' to which one must be true, West had no doubts."<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately West's works, studio notes and records were preserved along with clippings, letters and her exhibition records. These personal photographs and notes have provided valuable information and scholarship on her work and also serve to reinforce her important contributions to art history, which have been largely overlooked.

This exhibition is a retrospective of West's work: from a 1941 painting composed in the Cubist style, through her feverish action paintings of the 1950s to 1970s culminating in a large-scale

***"Michael West, whose life spans American abstract art like a heroine in a historic novel, has left behind some truly thrilling paintings."*<sup>1</sup>**

-Art critic Jeanne C. Wilkinson



Michael West, c. 1945, taken by her friend and fellow artist, Richard Pousette-Dart.  
Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman

canvas exploding with bold brushstrokes, painted in 1980. West's work is quintessential action painting as espoused by Hans Hofmann: immediate and confident, it comes from the hand of an artist unafraid to explore an authentic spontaneity that declares itself with conviction.

The importance of revisiting this period in art history, and West's work in particular, is clarified in this observation by *New York Times* critic Phyllis Braff: "Talented women enriched the Abstract Expressionist movement during its first 15 years, but their career histories differ greatly from those of their male counterparts. Along with less recognition, there were fewer exhibition opportunities and fewer chances to make an impact and find a place in the dialogues and networks of the time. Re-examination is warranted, especially as the generation of the first key participants passes on."<sup>4</sup> Art Resource Group is proud to play a role in that essential reassessment.

Miriam L. Smith  
Art Resource Group

- 1 Wilkinson, Jeanne C. "Michael West: 'Automatic' Paintings that Thrill." *The Tribeca Trib*, n.d., c. 1999.
- 2 Michael West archives, Collection of Roberta and Stuart Friedman.
- 3 Ashton, Dore. "On Michael West." *Michael West: The Automatic Paintings*, ed. By Josée Bienvenu and Walter Maibaum. New York: 123 Watts Gallery, 1999, n.p.
- 4 Braff, Phyllis. "Recognition for Female Expressionists." *The New York Times*, June 1, 1997.

# MICHAEL WEST: MORE THAN GORKY'S MUSE

by Dr. David Lewis



August 14, 1945: Crowds swarm Times Square in response to the news of the Japanese surrender.

*“Gorky and I . . . were both obsessed with painting to the fanatical point. . . . Gorky said I inspired him to paint. . . . It’s the painting that counts.”*

—Michael West, “Notes on Gorky”

On August 14, 1945, the horrors of World War II behind them, New Yorkers took to the streets in a cacophonous display of patriotism. American artist Michael West watched the makeshift parade from her Fifth Avenue window, and wrote ecstatically, “The noise is deafening – hysterical – as the planes soar overhead . . . This glorious roar – this beautiful abstract scene of people lined all along the curb – looking up – is the new poetry the new art the new peace [sic] . . . the triumph of active mysticism realized – for a moment – good surpasses evil.”<sup>1</sup>

Like the spontaneous, exuberant scene she saw unfolding before her, Michael West also viewed post-war American art as essentially experiential and life-affirming. She actively participated in the formation and development of a new art movement – what we know as Abstract Expressionism, which she called *The New Mysticism in Painting* – and went on, in later decades, to continue pushing the boundaries of modern art based on her highly developed personal and artistic philosophies. Innovation characterized her canvases, making her a significant contributor to the work of first generation Abstract Expressionists. Yet at the time of her death in 1991, she was chiefly remembered for her relationship with fellow artist Arshile Gorky; her own story has largely remained obscure.

Born Corinne Michelle West in Chicago in 1908, she displayed an artistic temperament from an early age, taking up the piano at the age of five and enrolling in the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music at seventeen. Two years later, while simultaneously developing her career as a budding actor, she began to study painting at the Cincinnati Art Academy (1927-30). In 1932 she moved to New York, where she enrolled in Hans Hofmann’s first class at the Art Students League alongside students including George McNeil, Betty Parsons and Louise Nevelson. Hofmann became West’s first important mentor, and she was particularly drawn to his theories regarding the inner spiritual dimension of art. Such ideas would later inform her own theories about art, and she references Hofmann a number of times in her extensive journal notes. Ultimately, however, she found the instruction of this “maestro” rather oppressive, switching over to courses taught by Raphael Soyer in 1933.



In the winter of 1932-33, West met Arshile Gorky (figs. 1, 2) when Lorenzo Santillo, a class monitor at the Art Students League and Gorky's tenant, introduced them at a party held at Gorky's home. Though West, still chafing from the "cultish" instruction of Hans Hofmann, was wary of egomaniacal artists, she was quickly won over not by Gorky's charm, but by his art, which was on display. She later recalled, "As we walked down the long wall of pen and ink I felt that I *knew* him – the best of him – was overjoyed with the style and character of these drawings . . . It was in Gorky that I found the Great American Painter."<sup>2</sup>



Gorky and West quickly developed an intensely intimate and, perhaps, romantic relationship that would span several years. They spent much time together at art museums and galleries, passionately discussing the modern art theories of such artists as Hofmann and reinforcing one another's belief in painting as a matter of mystical experience and spiritual substance. West later described their relationship as "a platonic love of two artists driven by our love for our work."<sup>3</sup> Gorky tried to convince West to marry him as many as six times, but she recognized that this choice would necessitate forgoing her own career, something she was not willing to do. In her journals West wrote that she thought Gorky "needed a strong woman – not an artist . . . I was obsessed with my own work – it stood in the way."<sup>4</sup> Over time their prolific correspondence ceased, and in 1941 Gorky married Agnes Magruder, a painter of less ambition than West.<sup>5</sup>

At this time, renewed in her determination to earn recognition as a professional artist, West began using a masculine moniker. In her attempt to overcome the biases of male exhibition jurors, West joined the ranks of fellow female Abstract Expressionists such as George (Grace) Hartigan and Lee (Lenore) Krasner. By 1941 she had adopted the name "Michael,"<sup>6</sup> and in 1945 "Michael West" had her work represented in an exhibition at the Pinacotheca Gallery alongside that of Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, among others.

By the mid-1940s, West began keeping a journal of her "Notes on Art," a collection of miscellaneous writings that document her intensive study of modern art theory and praxis. These notes clearly reveal the mind of a complex individual with diverse interests. Another undercurrent of these journals is West's thoughtful and perceptive analysis of current events and their implications for her artistic and personal philosophies.



Fig. 1 Pen and ink drawing of Michael West by Arshile Gorky, c. 1935, drawn on a page from the 1934 Wadsworth Atheneum Picasso exhibition catalog. Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman

Fig. 2 upper left Arshile Gorky, c. 1936, in a photograph he gave to Michael West the same year. Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman



Fig. 3 *Egjan Girl*, 1942  
 Courtesy Stuart and Roberta Friedman



Fig. 4 *Girl with Guitar*, 1944  
 Private collection

In an essay dated January 1946, West observed, “The new peace has brought about a world of opening facts—and a speed which causes change both of matter and a way of doing things—a different system—the world by the artist is suddenly viewed and felt in a new way.”<sup>7</sup> West’s personal vision of this new world guided her on a mission to invest post-war American painting with a new and fervent spirituality, and in this she was joined by a new friend, artist Richard Pousette-Dart. West also found inspiration in the existentialist works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Parisian metaphysical philosopher Henri Bergson, whose theory of “living energy” resonated with her. She remained connected to the Parisian avant-garde through her interest in these philosophers as well as through the social connections of her new husband, filmmaker Francis Lee, whom she married in 1948.

Lee was known for his footage of D-Day and the interview he conducted with Picasso after the Liberation of Paris; he brought to their relationship an impressive circle of friends, including French Surrealist poets Claire and Ivan Goll, the artist Robert Motherwell, and art critic Clement Greenberg. Together, Lee and West visited the Cedar Tavern, a bar in Greenwich Village famous as an Abstract Expressionist meeting place and a center for artistic debate.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1930s, Michael West had embraced Cubism and would continue to do so through the mid-1940s. In her 1941 painting *Poet with a Brown Hat* (plate I), West demonstrated her thorough understanding of synthetic Cubist principles in the application of multiple vantage points, flat planes of arbitrary color, reintegrated figures, and collage, which here is used for portraying the bouquet. West’s *Girl with Guitar* of 1944 (fig. 4) was, according to the artist, adapted from Juan Gris’s *Woman with Mandolin* of 1916, which in turn, was based on Camille Corot’s painting of the same subject. However, West departs radically from the calm, classic formality of Gris’s three-quarter length portrayal of the figure—cropping it to a half-length composition, which she effectively destabilizes through the introduction of numerous floating planes, dagger-like forms that pierce the body, and bold, curvilinear elements that suggest potential movement. West’s personal journals from the latter part of the decade indicate that she was not content to linger as a Cubist painter. She was driven by artistic ambition and personal philosophy to delve further, to forge a road toward what would become Abstract Expressionism.

In 1948, recalling Picasso’s maxim, “The only thing that could come out of Cubism was a new form of Cubism,” Michael West asserted, “[It] is happening today and is called—the new mysticism



in painting—Existentialism.”<sup>9</sup> In her “existential” Neo-Cubist works, West moved beyond the conventions of the synthetic Cubist style that had characterized her work through 1945. *Harlequin* (1946, fig. 5, 6) is representative of this new Cubism. Marked by expressive brushwork and heavy impastos, the Neo-Cubist work is decidedly more painterly, more expressionistic, more alive. In *Harlequin*, West creates abstract movement by applying linear brushwork in gestural sweeps and meandering swirls; she activates the canvas in a network of contiguous, rolling arabesques. These continuously active forms, also seen in *Transfiguration* (1948, plate II), cover all areas of the canvas, referencing the Bergsonian interconnectedness of all things, while also placing her firmly among the early practitioners of the new “all-over” painting style that was emerging in the 1940s in the works of Pollock, de Kooning, and other pioneering Abstract Expressionists.

Michael West’s existential investigation of *art as process* accelerated, and her lyrical abstractions soon evolved into more assertive action paintings, such as the highly abstracted *Space Poetry* (1951, plate V). These paintings form part of a series that may have begun with *Harlequin* (see fig. 5 for its original state in 1946 and fig. 6 as altered), in which the artist re-painted earlier, finished, Neo-Cubist pictures. In each case, the original painting is largely covered over in a shroud of flat and metallic colors. This over-painting is decidedly aggressive, even violent; bombardments of paint (often silver) effectively bury the original pictures, although glimpses remain visible.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1950s, West gave the altered *Harlequin* to a colleague of Francis Lee, telling him that she had painted over an earlier work as a response to the Atomic Bomb, and that the over-painting was her reaction to the tensions of the Cold War. The visual annihilation of her earlier paintings, she said, was reflective of the destructive capability of the Atomic Bomb.<sup>11</sup> By the early 1950s, the “Bomb” had already become a horrifying symbol of the devastating potential of the then developing Cold War arms race, and for many, it may have confirmed the “doubt” associated with Existentialist philosophy.

Michael West committed herself to action painting during the 1950s, exhibiting such explosive all-over compositions as *Space Poetry*, which was a highlight of her most important solo exhibition, an eponymous show at Manhattan’s Uptown Gallery in late 1957. Reviewing West’s exhibition for *Arts Digest* magazine, Suzanne



Fig. 5 *Harlequin*, original state, c. 1946



Fig. 6 *Harlequin*, altered state

Burrey pronounced West's early metallic-shrouded paintings "rather startling in their abrupt changes of direction" and declared that the more recent work conveyed "emotional force and a considerable breadth of space." Significantly, Burrey also recognized West's importance as "a close participant in the genesis of Abstract Expressionism."<sup>12</sup>

In an essay that seems to have been circulated with the exhibition checklist, the literary critic Clark Mills provided what is quite probably the most insightful assessment by any of West's contemporaries: "What is impressive in the work as a whole is that it differs from most other abstract painting – which too often consists of mere exercises in form, color and line – in that it communicates to the viewer an immediate sense of the presence of vast and perhaps uncontrollable forces in motion around us. It is a warning and an affirmation; it is also an astonishing expression, palpable and direct, of dynamic power."<sup>13</sup> With the launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite on October 4, 1957, Mills's observations took on added poignancy, for the "Space Race" had begun.

Clark Mills's assessment aptly describes West's later works as well, even as her style began to change noticeably in the late 1950s and 1960s. She increasingly experimented with more varied compositional patterns and investigated the expressive potential of collage. At the same time, she began to focus on the concept of the "uncontrollable forces" Mills mentioned and their physical manifestations, as she envisioned them. Her paintings *Mt. Sinai Clinic* (1962, plate X) and *Vietnam Summer* (1963, plate IX) highlight this phenomenon: their dramatic brushstrokes, mostly black against soft, pale backgrounds, evoking the sensation of cosmic explosions, suggest matter displacing a void. At this time, West began to make use of staining, a technique not unlike the soak-stain oils of Helen Frankenthaler and the acrylic "veil" paintings of Morris Louis. Differentiating herself from Frankenthaler and Louis, West used thin oil washes on unprimed canvas in combination with large masses of impasto in such works as *Mt. Sinai Clinic*. Here, she used the effect to amplify the viewer's sense of flotation in a cosmic image of unorganized matter drifting freely and ever expanding outwardly to fill the seemingly unfolding space around it.

In 1958 the Domino Gallery in Washington, D.C. presented a solo exhibition of West's paintings. A review in *The Washington Post and Times Herald* described West as belonging "to the 'action' group of Abstract Expressionists" and called her work "abstract calligraphy [of] great force and energy."<sup>14</sup> This unattributed article documents West's new emphasis on the "calligraphic" abstraction that was to strongly characterize many of her later canvases, notably *Adios* (fig. 7) and *Beacon of Light and Strength* (plate XIV), as well as her extensive series of enamel paintings on paper. These were created using enamel paint on oaktag, a heavy card stock that she used in a standard 28 x 22 inch format for the creation of so-called "automatic paintings." (plates XX-XXV) These are rooted in the surrealist practice of automatism, where the painter allows the subconscious mind to "direct" the creative process. In freeing the artist to work unfettered by





Fig. 7 *Adios*, 1966  
Private collection

consciously “planned” subject matter, this approach encourages spontaneity of execution and variety of abstraction in form and space.

Michael West was to continue using actionist strategies in her painting for the rest of her life, as she created compositions that explore the boundaries of reality and spirit. For example, the mystical *Iguana* (1964, plate XI) seems to form itself from out of the dust, evocatively moving and shifting in vigorous, almost sculptural brushstrokes. The iconic *Totem* (1974, plate XVII) forms part of a series of large paintings in which West employs threshold imagery to evoke spiritual kinship. Such threshold imagery as doorways, gates, bridges, and other structures that physically link one space to another are familiar in the art of all cultures. West also incorporates the concept of a threshold in the layers of her paintings, a technique especially visible in *Red Squares* (1971, plate XVI), wherein the viewer must look through a lattice-like white grid in the foreground to see the composition beyond.

Michael West had three additional solo exhibitions in New York: one at the Granite Gallery (1963), another at Imaginary Art (1966) and a third at Woman Art Gallery (1979). In 1976 West suffered a stroke, and although she recovered enough to continue painting, she began to distance herself from public life, particularly exhibitions. In 1981 she wrote, “No more shows – I just want to paint in peace,”<sup>15</sup> which she did until her death ten years later. An impassioned artist, West’s artistic and spiritual convictions remained firm to the end, and she never doubted the significance of her work as an ultimately life-affirming engagement with mystery, a “black space of possibilities,” as she wrote in a 1947 poem, wherein she moved “strongly and sure.”<sup>16</sup> Five years after her death, her convictions were confirmed when she was honored with a major retrospective at the Pollock-Krasner House (1996). In theory and in practice, Michael West was very much of her time, and she contributed significantly to the history of modern art, synthesizing modernist strategies, current world events, and an intense appreciation for philosophy and mysticism in her vibrant, powerful, and expressive paintings.

David Lewis is a Professor of Art History at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he served as the first Director of the School of Art (2005-2007). He received his Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the general editor of LaNana Creek Press and serves as art editor for the Stephen F. Austin State University Press. Dr. Lewis has curated many exhibitions, including retrospectives of watercolors by the Vorticist Dorothy Shakespear Pound (1886-1973), and works by the American expressionist Rico Lebrun (1900-64). Prof. Lewis is currently working on a traveling exhibition of New Deal-era drawings by John Heliker (1909-2000).

- 1 Michael West, "Notes, 'Armistice Day—2nd World War.'" The Michael West Papers ("Notes," "Poems," and other documents) quoted here are unpublished and are in the collection of Stuart and Roberta Friedman, New York.
- 2 Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Works*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 240.
- 3 Michael West, "Notebook on Gorky," August, 1978.
- 4 Hererra, 246.
- 5 Matthew Spender, *From a High Place, a Life of Arshile Gorky*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 153-156.
- 6 Patricia Richmond, *Michael West's Paintings from the 1940s and 1950s*, MA Thesis. (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, 1995), 8-9.
- 7 Michael West, "Notes on Art, Cezanne," 1947.
- 8 Stuart Friedman, "Chronology," New York School Art Gallery, n.d.
- 9 Michael West, "Notes, 'Edge Texture,'" March, 1948.
- 10 As an additional example, see *Nihilism* (1949) and *Dagger of Light* (1951), which appeared in the 1957 Uptown Gallery exhibition. Both paintings are pictured in *Michael (Corinne) West*, by Borghi Fine Art Gallery. See bibliography.
- 11 Interview conducted with anonymous owner of *Harlequin* by Nora Desruisseaux, April 3, 2010.
- 12 Suzanne Burrey, "Michael West," *Arts Digest* 32 (January 1958): 57.
- 13 Clark Mills, Untitled review or insert for *Michael West Paintings* exhibition, Uptown Gallery. ([New York]: Voyages Press, n.d. [c. December 1957]).
- 14 "Gallery Notes," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, Sunday, June 26, 1958.
- 15 Michael West Papers, cited in Chris McNamara and Patricia Richmond, *Michael West, Painter-Poet*. Exhibition Cat. (East Hampton, New York: Pollock-Krasner House, 1996); Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism, Other Politics*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), 5.
- 16 McNamara and Richmond, 12.

*Plate I*

**Poet in a Brown Hat, 1941**

Oil on canvas

26 x 20 inches

66 x 50 centimeters



# PLATES



*Plate II*

**Transfiguration**, 1948

Oil on canvas

53 x 40 inches

132.5 x 100 centimeters

Private Collection

*Exhibitions:*

*Michael West: Painter-Poet*, Pollock-Krasner House, East Hampton, NY 1996

Rose Fried Gallery, New York City, New York, 1948

*Publication:*

*Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, by Ann Eden Gibson, New Haven:  
Yale University Press, 1997, pg. 80, fig. 76.









*Plate III*

**Flowers**, 1952

Oil on canvas

36 x 36 inches

90 x 90 centimeters

*Exhibition:*

Second Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, The Stable Gallery, New York City, 1953

*Publication:*

*New York School Abstract Expressionists*, by Marika Herskovic, New York:

New York School Press, Ltd., 2000.





*Plate IV*

**Road to the Sea, 1955**

Oil on canvas

30 x 39 inches

75 x 97.5 centimeters

*Plate V*

**Space Poetry**, 1956

Oil on canvas

38 x 28 inches

95 x 70 centimeters

*Exhibitions:*

*Michael West: Paintings*, Uptown Gallery, New York City, NY, 1957

*Michael West: Painter-Poet*, Pollock-Krasner House, East Hampton, NY 1996









*Plate VI*

**Still Life**, 1955

Oil on canvas

44 x 29 inches

110 x 72.5 centimeters

*Exhibition:*

*Michael West: Painter-Poet*, Pollock-Krasner House, East Hampton, NY 1996





*Plate VII*

**Untitled**, 1961

Oil on canvas

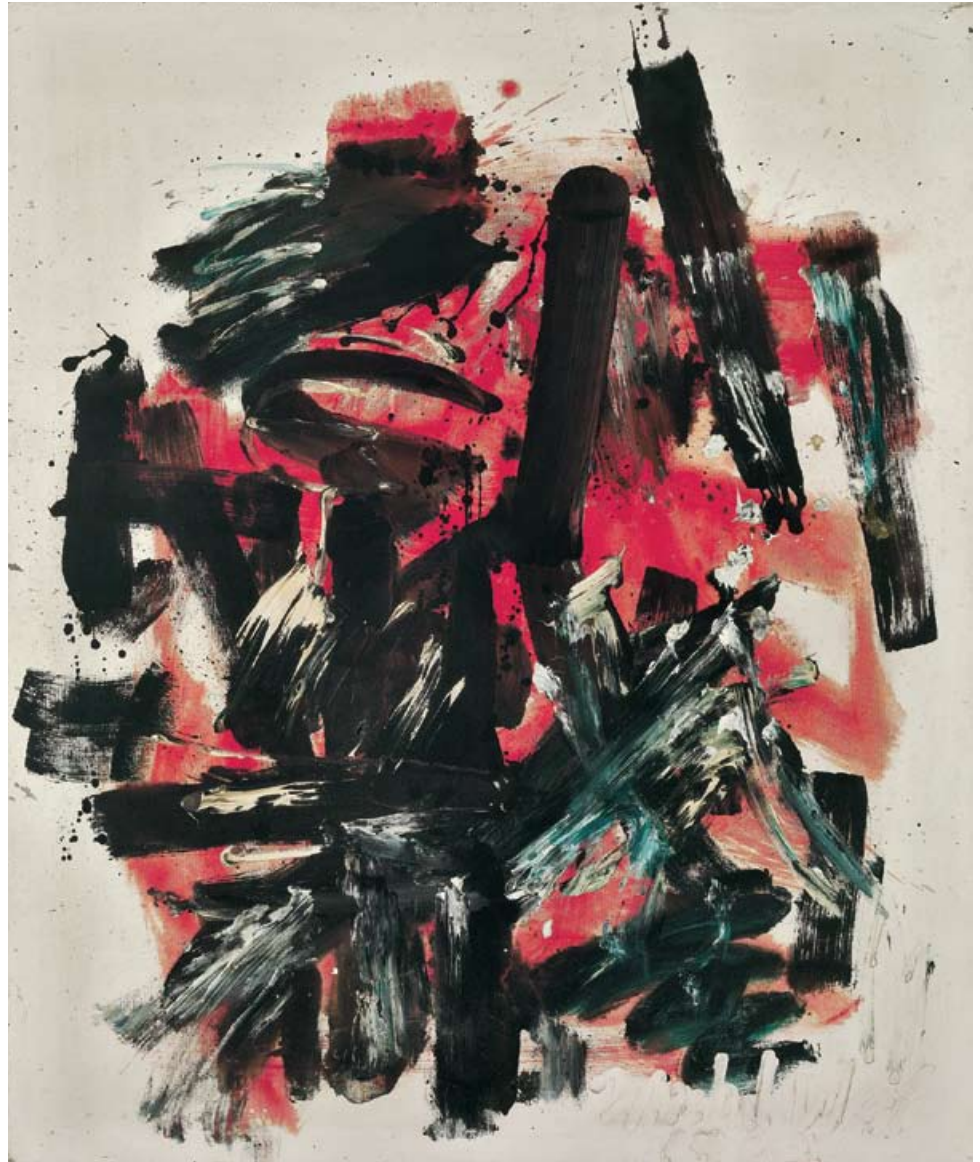
18 x 24 inches

45 x 60 centimeters



*Plate VIII*  
**Study, 1962**  
50 x 60 inches  
125 x 150 centimeters





*Plate IX*  
**Vietnam Summer, 1963**  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 40 inches  
120 x 100 centimeters







*Plate X*

**Mt. Sinai Clinic**, 1962

Oil on canvas

48 x 64 inches

120 x 160 centimeters



*Plate XI*

**Iguana**, 1964

Oil on canvas

50 x 35 inches

125 x 87.5 centimeters





*Plate XII*

**Narkisses**, 1966

Oil on canvas

60 x 50 inches

150 x 125 centimeters

*Plate XIII*

**Moments**, 1970

Oil on canvas

60 x 50 inches

150 x 125 centimeters









*Plate XIV*

**Beacon of Light and Strength, 1972**

Oil on canvas

50 x 30 inches

125 x 75 centimeters





*Plate XV*

**Red Composition, 1967**

Oil on canvas

60 x 48 inches

150 x 120 centimeters

*Plate XVI*

**Red Squares**, 1971

Oil on canvas

75 x 50 inches

187.5 x 125 centimeters









*Plate XVII*

**Totem**, 1974

Oil on canvas

75 x 50 inches

187.5 x 125 centimeters





*Plate XVIII*

**Gento Niese**, 1978

Oil on canvas

76.25 x 49.5 inches

190.5 x 124 centimeters

*Plate XVIII*

**Save the Tiger**, 1980

Oil on canvas

35 x 48 inches

87.5 x 120 centimeters







*Plate XX*

**Totem**, 1960s  
Enamel on paper  
22 x 28 inches  
55 x 70 centimeters

*Exhibition:*

*Michael West: The Automatic Paintings*, 123 Watts Gallery, New York, NY, 1999





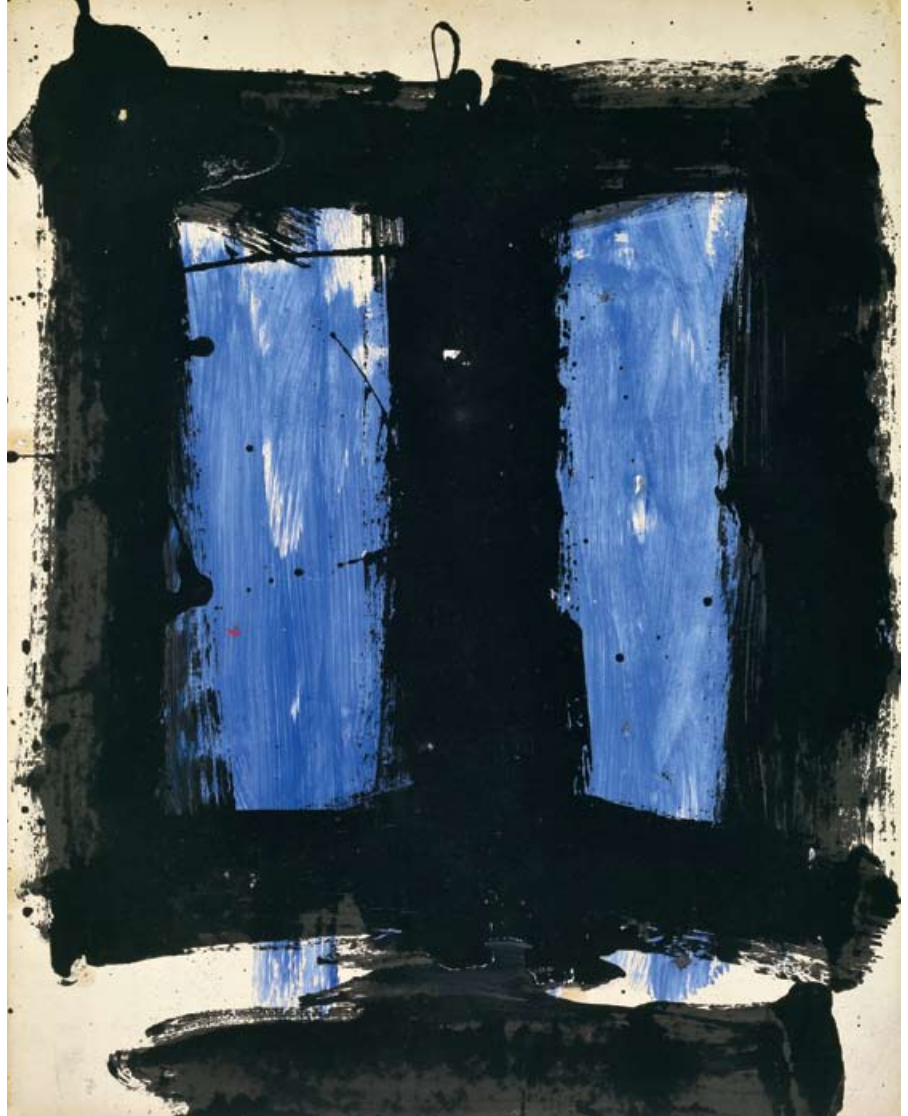
*Plate XXI*  
**Untitled**, 1960s  
Enamel on paper  
22 x 28 inches  
55 x 70 centimeters



*Plate XXII*

**Untitled**, 1960s  
Enamel on paper  
28 x 22 inches  
70 x 55 centimeters





*Plate XXIII*

**Untitled**, 1960s

Enamel on paper

28 x 22 inches

70 x 55 centimeters

# CHRONOLOGY

## MICHAEL (CORINNE) WEST 1908-1991

**1908:** Corinne Michelle West is born to May and William West in Chicago. May is the daughter of a Christian minister, and William works at the Iron Clay Brick Company. She spends her childhood in Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio with her older sister, Faith.

**1925:** Attends the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and studies classical piano, having played the instrument since the age of five.

**1927:** Enrolls in art classes at the Cincinnati Art Academy, where she studies drawing and portraiture under John Weis and Frank Meyers. She finds another creative outlet in the dramatic arts and joins a local theater group.

**1930:** Graduates from the Cincinnati Art Academy. The same year, West plays the role of Vivian, an ingénue pressured by her parents to wed a lecherous property developer, in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* at the Cincinnati Civic Theater. Randolph Nelson plays the lead role of "The Stranger." West and Nelson wed, but their marriage is ill fated, and the two divorce within the year.

**1932:** West moves to 21 West 10th Street in New York City and attends Hans Hofmann's first class at the Art Students League, alongside students including Mercedes Matter, Harry Holtzman, George McNeil, Betty Parsons and Louise Nevelson. Although West develops her own artistic sensibilities, she credits Hofmann with introducing her to the concept of depicting the essence of things using an "inner eye."

**1933:** Writing "I have had enough of *maestros*," West forgoes Hans Hofmann's "cultish" instruction and enrolls in Raphael Soyer's class. Soyer later refers to her as "too brilliant." She also takes courses from painter Kenneth Hayes Miller.

**1934:** Lorenzo Santillo, a class monitor at the Art Students League and a tenant of Arshile Gorky, introduces West to Gorky. West and Gorky develop a close relationship, spending a great deal of time visiting local museums and galleries to discuss art theory and practice. Gorky introduces West to European Surrealism and encourages her appreciation of the Old Masters' linear approach to painting. Though Gorky proposes marriage as many as six times over the course of their relationship, West later describes their relationship as "platonic."

**1935:** Moves to Rochester, New York, along with her parents. She is active in the Rochester Art Club and exhibits at the 22nd Annual Exhibition of Rochester Artists at the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, receiving critical praise for her *Portrait of Manuella*. The same year, West and Gorky borrow her father's car and drive to Philadelphia together to attend Gorky's first solo exhibition at Boyer Galleries.



**1936:** West is commissioned to create fourteen mural panels for the Ballet Petrouchka and has her first solo exhibition at the Rochester Art Club, where she lectures to a standing-room-only crowd about the “New Art,” building on the theories of Hofmann, Picasso and Cezanne, among others. Determined to seek additional professional opportunities, and after Gorky cuttingly informs her that the name Corinne sounds like that of “a debutante’s daughter,” West begins to go by “Mikael.” By the fall of this year, West and Gorky have ceased their intense correspondence; their relationship cools.



Michael West in her studio, 1947.  
Photo: Francis Lee  
Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman

**1939:** Continues to exhibit at the Rochester Arts Club. With Gorky, visits the World’s Fair in New York, the slogan of which was “Dawn of a New Day.” A line from a promotional pamphlet claims that the Fair will be “presenting a new and clearer view of today in preparation for tomorrow; a view of the forces and ideas that prevail as well as the machines. To its visitors the Fair will say ‘Here are the materials, ideas and forces at work in our world.’”

**1941:** Arshile Gorky marries artist Agnes Magruder. West permanently changes her adopted name from the overtly Russian Mikael to Michael, joining fellow female painters Lee (Lenore) Krasner and George (Grace) Hartigan in choosing a masculine moniker. Beyond simply signing her new name to her canvases, West actually goes by Michael in her everyday life, as well.

**1945:** West moves back to Manhattan, where she meets Richard Pousette-Dart, whose work may have been collected by her sister Faith. He shares her predilection for mysticism in art, believing in the unity of form and spirit; in the catalog of his first exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery, he states, “I strive to express the spiritual nature of the universe.” He photographs West at his Sutton Place studio, and she writes an ode to him titled “To a Great Mystic.” This year, she also exhibits in a group show at Rose Fried’s Pinacotheca Gallery with artists including Milton Avery, Adolf Gottlieb and Mark Rothko. At the suggestion of Richard Pousette-Dart, Peggy Guggenheim and Jackson Pollock visit West at her studio at 1150 Fifth Avenue. According to an annotation on the back of West’s *Man with a Cello*, the two admire this painting in particular; Peggy Guggenheim comments that West painted “life.”

**1948:** Marries avant-garde filmmaker and photographer Francis Lee, well known for his footage of D-Day and his interview with Picasso after the liberation of Paris. Lee’s circle of friends includes many Surrealists – notably the French poets Claire and Ivan Goll – as well as figures including Robert Motherwell, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Judith Malina and Julien Beck, the founders of the Living Theater, also attend Lee’s informal salons. Lee and West visit the Cedar Tavern, a Greenwich Village bar and Abstract Expressionist meeting place known for being a center for artistic debate. This year, West exhibits *Transfiguration* at Rose Fried Gallery.

Plate XXIV

**Untitled**, 1960s

Enamel on paper

28 x 22 inches

70 x 55 centimeters

**1949:** Gives birth to her only child, her son Lionel Sardofontana Lee. In the following decade, West's work changes as she moves away from Cubism and begins to focus more on intersecting lines and planes, extreme movement, and an "all-over" treatment of the canvas.

**1950s:** Meets and befriends composer Edgar Varèse, who is known in part for his visionary appreciation of electronic musical instruments and desire to develop new sounds and sonic experiences. Perhaps inspired by Varèse's groundbreaking atonal symphony "Deserts," West paints *Desert Sounds*, which she exhibits in her 1957 Uptown Gallery solo show.

**1953:** Exhibits at the Stable Gallery's Painters and Sculptors Annual alongside art world notables including Poussette-Dart, Robert Motherwell, Phillip Guston, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Bourgeois, Michael Goldberg, William de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Hans Hofmann.

**1957:** In November the Uptown Gallery hosts a solo exhibition for West that is reviewed by *Arts Magazine*. The exhibition checklist includes an insert featuring an essay on West's work by noted literary critic Clark Mills. One of the paintings Mills singles out for particular praise is 1951's *Space Poetry*.

**1960:** West and Lee divorce, and she distances herself from many of his friends, deeming them "too sophisticated for me." During this decade, she gives more attention to the calligraphic qualities of her canvases. The titles of many of her 1960s works suggest that her paintings are intended to reference current events. See 1963's *Vietnam Summer*.

**1965:** West's painting *Oliver* is sold at Park Bernet auctions.

**1974:** Claire Goll, West's friend and a noted Surrealist poet, arranges a show of West's work at the Galerie Mouffe in Paris. West, unable to pay the international shipping costs, declines.

**1976:** Suffers a stroke. Although West is able to recover and continue to paint, she appears to use the stroke as a reason to distance herself from public life and from gallery showings in particular.

**1979:** The last exhibition of her life takes place at Woman Art Gallery. In 1981 West writes, "No more shows – I just want to paint in peace – as this drive to paint forces me on."

**1980s:** West continues painting large-scale canvases, including 1980's *Save the Tiger*, despite her poor health.

**1991:** Michael West dies in her New York City studio.





# SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2009: Taylor, Michael R., ed. *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art

2009: Spender, Matthew, ed. *Arshile Gorky: Goats on the Roof: A life in letters and documents*. New York: Ridinghouse.

c. 2009: Olds, Kirsten. "The New Mysticism in Art: The 1950s Paintings of Michael West." In *Michael (Corinne) West*. New Jersey: Borghi Fine Art Gallery, n.d.

2008: Smith, Roberta. "Wide World of Abstract Expressionism." *New York Times*, 30 Dec. 2008.

2007: Kingsley, April. *Suitcase Paintings: Small Scale Abstract Expressionism*. Chicago: Thomas McCormick Gallery.

2003: Herrera, Hayden. *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

2001: Spender, Matthew. *From A High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

2000: *Second to None: Six Artists of the New York School*. Chicago: Thomas McCormick Gallery.

2000: Herskovic, Marika. "Michael (Corinne) West." In *New York School Abstract Expressionists*, pp. 130-137. New Jersey: New York School Press.

1999: Ashton, Dore. "On Michael West." In *Michael West: The Automatic Paintings*, edited by Josée Bienvenu and Walter Maibaum, n.p. New York: 123 Watts Gallery.

1999: Maibaum, Walter. "Michael West: The Automatic Paintings." In *Michael West: The Automatic Paintings*, edited by Josee Bienvenu and Walter Maibaum, n.p. New York: 123 Watts Gallery.

1999: Snyder, Gary. *Other Artists of the 50's*. Miami: Kendall Campus Art Gallery of the Miami-Dade Community College.

1999: Wilkinson, Jeanne C. "Michael West: 'Automatic' Paintings that Thrill." *The Tribeca Trib*. n.d., c. 1999.

1996: Braff, Phyllis. "Review: Michael West, Painter-Poet at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center." *New York Times*, 22 Sept. 1996.

1996: McNamara, Chris, and Patricia Richmond. *Michael West, Painter-Poet*. East Hampton, NY: Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center.

1996: Slivka, Rose C.S. "From the Studio." *East Hampton Star*, 3 Oct. 1996.

1995-1996: Fine, Elsa Honig. "One Point Perspective." *Women's Art Journal* 16.2 (1995-6): 2.

1995: Richmond, Patricia. "Michael West's Paintings from the 1940s and 1950s." MA Thesis. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University.

1963: Jaffe, Jane. "West at Granite" [Review of Michael West's solo show at Granite Gallery, NY]. Publication information unknown.

1958: Burrey, Suzanne. Review of "Michael West: Paintings at Uptown Gallery." *Arts Digest* 32, Jan. 1958.

1957: *Michael West Paintings*. New York: Uptown Galleries.

Mills, Clark. Untitled [Review of the art of Michael West]. New York: Voyages Press with Uptown Galleries.



*Mudlark*, 1969  
Oil on canvas board  
12 x 16 inches,  
30 x 40 centimeters



## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010** *Michael West: Paintings from the Forties to the Eighties*, Art Resource Group, Newport Beach, CA
- 1999** *Michael West: Automatic Paintings*, 123 Watts Gallery, New York, NY
- 1996** *Michael West: Painter-Poet*, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY
- 1978** *Michael West*, Woman Art Gallery, New York, NY
- 1966** *Michael West*, Dolly Carlson's Imaginary Art, New York, NY
- 1963** *Michael West*, Granite Gallery, New York, NY
- 1958** *Michael West*, Domino Gallery, Georgetown, DC
- 1957** *Michael West*, Uptown Gallery, New York, NY
- 1935** *Michael West*, Rochester Arts Club, Rochester NY
- 1935** *Michael West*, Rochester Memorial Arts Gallery and Fingerlakes Exhibitions, Rochester, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008** *Beyond the Cannon: Small Scale American Abstraction, 1945-1965*, Robert Miller Gallery, NY
- 2007-2008** *Suitcase Paintings Small Scale Abstract Expressionism* Various: Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA; Ball State University Museum of Art, Muncie, IN; Utah Museum of Fine Art, Salt Lake City, UT; Sydney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, New York, NY; Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC; Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL
- 2005** *Rapt in the New York School*, The Studio Armonk, NY
- 2001** *Second to None: Six Artists of New York School*, Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago
- 1979** Woman Art Gallery, New York, NY
- 1953** *Second New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, Stable Gallery, New York, NY
- 1948** Group show: Rose Fried Gallery, New York, NY
- 1945** Pinacotheca Gallery, New York, NY
- 1943** Rochester Memorial Art Gallery and Fingerlakes Exhibitions, Rochester, NY
- 1941** Rochester Memorial Art Gallery and Fingerlakes Exhibitions, Rochester, NY
- 1939** Rochester Memorial Art Gallery and Fingerlakes Exhibitions, Rochester, NY

***“What is represented [in West’s art] is an immense phantasmagoria, an image of the world of our time. It communicates to the viewer an immediate sense of the presence of vast and perhaps uncontrollable forces in motion about us. It is a warning and an affirmation; it is also an astonishing expression, palpable and direct, of dynamic power.”***

Clark Mills, Voyages Press,  
Uptown Gallery Exhibition, c. 1957



Michael West standing in her studio, 1947, in front of a black and white painting particularly admired by art critic Clement Greenberg.

*Photo by Francis Lee. Courtesy Roberta and Stuart Friedman*

© Miriam L. Smith, Art Resource Group  
20351 Irvine Avenue, Suite C-1  
Newport Beach, CA 92660  
949-640-1972  
[www.artresourcegroup.com](http://www.artresourcegroup.com)

590 Madison Avenue, 21st Floor,  
New York, NY 10022  
by appointment only

© Photography by Gerard Vuilleumier  
© Essay by Dr. David Lewis

Designed by Lilla Hangay, Costa Mesa, California  
Production by Permanent Printing Limited, Hong Kong

All rights reserved. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-615-36752-1

Printed in Hong Kong





art resource group

NEPWORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

[www.artresourcegroup.com](http://www.artresourcegroup.com)