

JUDITH GODWIN (b. 1930)

"[Painting] is an act of freedom and a realization that images generated by the female experience can be a powerful and creative expression for all humanity."

-Judith Godwin, Statement: *Celebration of Women in the Arts* (Northern Michigan University, 1978).

From 1950, when Judith Godwin first exhibited her work, and throughout her entire career, she held to her convictions, using a language of abstract form to respond with unbowed directness and passion to life and nature. Her aim was always to "emphasize what is important by painting the image of my feelings on canvas—to accept my feelings honestly, and not [to] falsify." [2] Through her studies with Hans Hofmann, her long association with Martha Graham and Graham's expressive dance movements, her participation in the early burgeoning of Abstract Expressionism, and her love for Zen Buddhism and gardening, Godwin forged a personal and unique career path.

Like many other women artists of her generation, Godwin received less attention in the mid and late twentieth century from the press and public than her male counterparts. Godwin explained the bias behind this imbalance, recalling that at the time, "the men simply said, 'Women can't paint.'"¹ However, the steadfast creativity and accomplishment of Godwin and other women of her time have become increasingly acknowledged and given overdue consideration. Among the recent efforts at such restitution was the June–September 2016 groundbreaking exhibition, *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, held at the Denver Art Museum, curated by University of Denver professor Gwen F. Chanzit. In the show, Godwin's work is featured along with that of Mary Abbott, Jay DeFeo, Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Sonia Gechtoff, Grace Hartigan, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Deborah Remington, and Ethel Schwabacher. Additional venues are the Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina (October 22, 2016–January 22, 2017) and the Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, California (February 18–May 28, 2017). Godwin's art has also been represented in recent solo exhibitions at McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas (2008), the Telfair Museum, Savannah, Georgia (2011), and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (2012).

Born in Suffolk, Virginia, Godwin was encouraged in her aspirations to paint by her parents. Her mother Judith Brewer Godwin was president of the Garden Club of Virginia and active in the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. Her father, Frank Whitney Godwin, was an amateur architect and gardener. In 1948 Godwin enrolled in Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia. There, as president of the athletic association, she proposed that the school establish a dance program. At the time Martha Graham was on tour, Godwin made arrangements for the company to perform at the college. Graham and Godwin felt an immediate affinity—both later recalled that on their initial meeting, they had a long conversation, while sitting on wicker chairs, in which Graham urged Godwin to study dance in New York. Godwin knew that dance was not her calling, but Graham's recommendation inspired her to come to New York and study painting. When she first arrived, she stayed at the Barbizon Hotel, down the street from Graham. They would become good friends, and Godwin often would attend Graham's performances and watch from the wings.

Godwin's first exhibition was held in 1950 at Mountcastle in her hometown. At the time, the influence of Martha Graham's dance methods were already apparent in the works in her *Nucleus* series (1950), where abstract, organic shapes press Cubist grid lines outward even while they are being drawn to the center. In 1951, Godwin transferred to the Richmond Professional Institute, now known as Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, where she received her BFA in 1953. She studied at the Institute with Theresa Pollock and Jewett Campbell, the latter an alumna of Hans Hofmann's school and proponent of his teaching methods. On seeing Godwin's work, Jewett was insistent that she study with Hans Hofmann in New York.

After her graduation from the Institute, Godwin pursued this path. Settling in New York, she enrolled at the Art Students League and began attending Hofmann's school. The move was daring at the time for a young woman from the South. Godwin remembers that she "didn't know a soul" in the city.² However, she quickly felt at home. Her teachers at the league were Will Barnet (the first person to take her to lunch in New York), Harry Sternberg, and Vaclav Vytlacil. Godwin soon made other connections with her classmates. Like many others who studied with Hofmann, Godwin derived inspiration and discipline from his instruction. Hofmann held to a belief that painting should undertake issues of depth and volume but retain the flatness inherent to the medium. His ideas about the expressive and spatial qualities of color and his seemingly mystical reverence for the act of painting made a deep impression on Godwin. However, she developed a vocabulary of her own, consisting of open, gestural strokes often

featuring chevron, spiraling, and arc forms that she dynamically interwove into complex figure/ground relationships. Examples are *Yellow Figure* (1953) and *Blue Figures* (1954), in which she left behind the grid for shapes that move of their own accord, while responding to the surrounding space and each other.

Godwin's study under Hofmann in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts, brought her into contact with leading figures in the New York avant-garde. Through Hofmann, and while frequenting the famed Cedar Bar, she associated with Jackson Pollock, James Brooks, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Marcel Duchamp, and Kenzo Okada. Godwin also became drawn to Zen Buddhism in the 1950s. Her friend, Okada, a Japanese abstract painter, introduced her to the meditation-based school, and she was further informed by the writings of the Zen master D. T. Suzuki, who sought to coalesce Buddhist concepts with Western thought. Works such as *Abstraction No. 15* (1955) are suggestive of the calm coloration and allusions to the natural world in Okada's work. Using calligraphic brushwork, Godwin stayed within an abstract framework while evoking the rocks and water that are so prevalent in Japanese art and gardens.

Toward the end of the 1950s Godwin developed a harsher, rougher facture. She recalls that at the time "if you were a [woman] painter . . . you had to paint as strongly, as violently as the men did."³ Works such as *Black Pillar* (1956) reveal her use of slashing and dragged strokes, with which she abraded the canvas. By the late 1950s, Godwin's work began to receive attention. She was included in the inaugural exhibition at Betty Parsons's Section Eleven Gallery in 1957, along with David Budd, Agnes Martin, and Sidney Wolfson. In the following year, she participated in the Stable Gallery Invitational Show, to which she was invited by James Brooks. She was one of few women to exhibit in the Stable Gallery shows. Beginning to use much larger canvases, Godwin worked on sailcloth that she primed and stretched herself in a studio that contained the paraphernalia of a carpentry shop, as she indicated to a reporter for the *Richmond News Leader*.⁴

In February 1959, Godwin had a solo exhibition at Betty Parson's Section Eleven. Of the eleven large abstract works on view, Dore Ashton noted in the *New York Times* that Godwin had achieved a sense of large spaces and succeeded in "suggesting echoing emptiness."⁵ In 1960, Godwin had another show at Section Eleven. Ashton wrote of works in the show such as *Scorpio* (1960) that Godwin had now "strengthened the compositions of her paintings by eliminating half-tones. The large black and blue structures that dominate her paintings seem inspired by those of Franz Kline, but have been altered by soft suggestions of light behind and around them."⁶ *Black Support* (1960), also in the exhibition, was singled out by reviewer for *Arts Magazine* who called it "the most spatially fixed; the major black and white shapes are nearly equal and dominate, as color, the smaller, stained, purple area at the top and the phthalo blue one at the bottom, resulting in a final proportion of color."⁷

In 1963 Godwin purchased a brownstone in Greenwich Village that had previously been owned by Franz Kline. There she created a formal garden, expanding an interest in gardening that began in her youth. At the same time, she restored a studio in Connecticut. She recalled: "I found a studio in Connecticut with lots of trees and a brook, and began working hard. I moved rocks, built stone walls and gardens. I discovered for the first time both the pleasure and the excruciating pain of my encounter with physical weight."⁸ At the time, Godwin also became increasingly involved with interior design and architectural restoration.

In the 1960s Godwin distanced herself from the New York art world when Abstract Expressionism receded in favor of Pop Art. At the time she expanded her repertoire, drawing on a range of sources including Native American art. She also continued her study of interior design by serving as an apprentice to a plasterer, a mason, and a carpenter. This led her to take on several jobs restoring eighteenth-century homes in Connecticut. While Godwin continued to paint, she also worked as a landscape gardener in New York and Connecticut and also created Abstract Expressionist designs for a New York fabric house.

Godwin returned to New York in 1974. In the period that followed, her paintings gained complexity and force as she incorporated into her canvases the physical force of her work in the outdoors, while maintaining painterly spontaneity. Among the paintings from this time are *Flying Steel No. 1* (1975) and *Bent Steel* (1974), which were included in her December 1977 solo exhibition at Ingber Gallery, New York. There they were described by Gordon Brown in a review in *Arts* as "grand and impressive." Brown went on to observe that in the works on view Godwin seemed to be discovering forms "rather than fully conceiving them."⁹ Godwin had shows at Ingber as well in 1979 and 1981. In other paintings from this time, such as *Betrayal* (1976) and *Elegy to a Slain Deer* (1978), she referenced

architectural forms, nature, and pure abstraction to create dynamic yet balanced arrangements.

In the 1980s Godwin brought a new sensuousness into her paintings, employing pastel colors and incorporating decorative motifs, as demonstrated in works such as *Beating Time* (1984) and *White Support* (1988). In the 1990s she stretched her work in yet another direction when she began creating assemblages. Integrating materials found in her studio— including pennies, beads, hacksaw blades, sections of wood veneer, ribbons, gold leaf, stretched-out wool—into unified compositions, she broke from modernism’s insistence on transparency, delving into “postmodern notions of identity and gender.”¹⁰ Godwin has continued to work actively as a painter to her death. In a 2010 review of her exhibition at Spanierman Gallery, Gerard McCarthy wrote in *Art in America* of Godwin’s “ebullient sensibility” noting that her work proved “the vitality of Abstract Expressionism by one of its early practitioners . . . [who] continues to use physical gesture to convey metaphorical spaces.”¹¹

Godwin has received many awards and honors, including an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond (1989), a career achievement award from Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia (2002), an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree, also from Mary Baldwin College, and a Professional Achievement Alumni Award from the School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition to the aforementioned exhibitions, Godwin has been the subject of solo shows at venues including Mary Baldwin College (1978), Womansbank, Richmond, Virginia (1981), Northern Michigan University, Marquette (1984), Lockwood-Matthews Mansion Museum, Norwalk, Connecticut (1985), Northern Virginia Community College, Alexandria (1988), Danville Museum, Virginia, and Suffolk Museum, Virginia (1989), Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas (1995), Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke (1997), Albany Museum of Art, Georgia (2000), Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey (2001), Delaware Center for the Arts, Wilmington (2002), and Towson University, Maryland (2003).

Godwin is represented in many important private and public collections throughout the country, including the Amarillo Museum of Art; Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University; Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Frances Lehman Loeb Gallery, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York; Gannett Center, Columbia University, New York; General Electric Company, New York; Greenville County Museum, South Carolina; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; The Hyde Collection, Glenn Falls, New York; The Johnson Family Collection, Spartanburg, South Carolina; JPMorgan Chase Collection, New York; Mary Baldwin College; McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth, Texas; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Massachusetts; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan; National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, South Wales; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; Newark Museum, New Jersey; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California; Sheldon Art Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Smith College Museum of Art, Southampton, Massachusetts; Sovereign Bank, Richmond, Virginia; Suffolk Museum, Virginia; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas; United Virginia Bank, Richmond; University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; United States Navy Y.M.C.A., Norfolk, Virginia; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D.

¹ Godwin interview with Lisa N. Peters, Spanierman Gallery, 2010.

² Godwin interview, 2010.

³ Godwin, interview, with Ann Gibson, New York, cited in Ann Gibson, *Judith Godwin: Style and Grace*, exh. cat. (Roanoke, VA: Art Museum of Western Virginia), 18.

⁴ Sue Dickinson, “Suffolk Artist Shows Giant Oils in New York,” *Richmond News Leader*, May 25, 1960, Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/Godwin-Judith-306778>.

⁵ Dore Ashton, “Art: Gallery Pot-Pourri,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1959, p. 24.

⁶ Dore Ashton, “Paintings by Pollock at Peridot Gallery,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1960, p. 62.

⁷ D. J., "Judith Godwin," *Arts Magazine*, May 1960.

⁸ Davis Interview, p. 5.

⁹ Gordon Brown, "Judith Godwin," *Arts Magazine*, December 1977.

¹⁰ Lowery Stokes Sims, "Judith Godwin: Objectified Gesture," in Lowery Stokes Sims and David Ebony, *Judith Godwin: Paintings 1954–2002* (New York: Spanierman Modern, 2010), p. 5.

¹¹ Gerard McCarthy, "Judith Godwin," *Art in America* (April 2011), 127.

CV

Born, Suffolk, Virginia

1948-50, attended Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia

1952, received BFA, College of William and Mary, Richmond, Virginia

1953, attended the Art Students League, New York; studied there with Will Barnet, Harry Sternberg, and Vaclav Vytacil

1953, attended the Hans Hofmann School in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts

1989, awarded Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts Degree, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

2003, awarded Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia

2005, awarded Professional Achievement Alumni Award, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Mountcastle, Suffolk, Virginia, 1950.

Theatre-Go-Round, Virginia Beach, Virginia, *An Environment of Expression*, 1954.

Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1959.

Betty Parson Section Eleven, New York, 1960.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1976.

Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia, 1978.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1979.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1981.

Womensbank, Richmond, Virginia, 1981.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1982.

Loonan Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York, 1982.

Phoenix II Gallery, Washington D.C., 1983.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1984.

Northern Michigan University, Marquette, 1984.

Mukai Gallery, Tokyo, 1985.

Lockwood-Matthews Mansion Museum, Norwalk, Connecticut, 1985.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, 1986.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1987.

Northern Virginia Community College, Alexandria, 1988.

Danville Museum of Fine Art, Virginia, 1989.

Suffolk Museum, Virginia, 1989.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, *Judith Godwin: Paintings—1953-1992*, 1992.

Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas, 1995.

Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, *Judith Godwin: Style and Grace*, 1997.

Albany Museum of Art, Georgia, *Judith Godwin: Style and Grace*, 2000.

Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, *Judith Godwin, Color and Movement*, 2001.

Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, *Judith Godwin: Paintings*, 2002.

Holtzman Gallery, Towson University, Maryland, *Judith Godwin: Paintings*, 2003.

McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, *Judith Godwin: Early Abstractions*, 2008.

Spanierman Modern, New York, *Judith Godwin: Paintings 1954-2002*, 2010.

Telfair Museum, Jepson Center, Savannah, Georgia, *Judith Godwin: Early Abstractions*, 2011.

Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, *Judith Godwin: Early Abstractions*, 2012.

Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, *Judith Godwin and Abstract Expressionism*, 2012.

Berry Campbell, New York, *Judith Godwin*, 2017.

Berry Campbell, New York, *An Act of Freedom*, 2019.

Berry Campbell, New York, *Modern Woman*, 2023.

Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London, *Judith Godwin: Expressions of Life*, 2024.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Norfolk Museum of Art and Sciences, Virginia, 1951.

Valentine Museum and the Linden Gallery, Richmond, Virginia, 1951-53.

Abington Square Painters, New York, 1952.

Provincetown Art Association, Massachusetts, 1953.

Chase Manhattan Collection, Hong Kong, 1954.

Virginia Intermont College, Bristol, 1954.

Stable Gallery, New York, Invitational Show, 1958.

Betty Parsons Section Eleven, New York, Inaugural Show, 1958.

St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, 1959.

University of Colorado, Boulder, 1960.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1977-79.

Danforth Museum, Framingham, Massachusetts, 1977-79.

University of Michigan, Marquette, 1977-79.

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 1977-79.

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina, 1977-79.

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 1977-79.

Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Massachusetts, Hans Hoffman as Teacher: Drawings by his Students, 1980.

Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York, 1981.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1981.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, Found Objects, 1981.

Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 1982.

Ingber Gallery, New York, 1982.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1983.

American Federation of the Arts, Hans Hoffman as Teacher, 1983.

Ingber Gallery, New York, The Return of Abstraction, 1984.

Randolph Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg, Virginia, 1984.

Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1985.

Ingber Gallery, New York, Survival of the Fittest, 1985.

Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia, 1985.

Graham Gallery, New York, 1987.

PMW Gallery, Stamford, Connecticut, 1987.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1990.

Binatural Museum, Japan, 1990-91.

Daimaru Museum, Osaka, Japan, 1990-91.

Hiroshima Museum of Art, Japan, 1990-91.

Museum of Modern Art, Kanagawa, Japan, 1990-91.

Matsuzakaya Museum, Nagoya-Shi, Japan, 1990-91.

National Museum of Woman in the Arts, Washington D.C., 1990-91.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1991.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1993-94.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida, 1996.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1996.

Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York, 1997.

National Academy of Design, New York, *Annual Invitational Exhibition*, 2004.

Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, *Betty Parsons and the Women*, 2005.

Opalka Gallery, Albany, New York, *The Sage Colleges*, 2005.

Old Dominion University Gallery, Norfolk, Virginia, *The Persistence of Memory*, 2006.

McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, *Recent Acquisitions: Modern And Contemporary Art*, 2009.

McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, *Neither Model nor Muse: Women as Artists*, 2010.

Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn, New York, *Ab-EX/Re-Con*, 2013.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Masters of Expressionism in Postwar America*, 2014.
Berry Campbell, New York, *The Year in Review*, 2014.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2015.
Denver Art Museum (traveled to the Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina and Palm Springs Art Museum, California), *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 2016-2017.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2017.
Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, Nebraska, *Now's the Time*, August 11-December 31, 2017.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2018.
Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany, *A Gesture of Conviction | Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 2018 -2019.
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, *American Dreams: Classic Cars and Postwar Paintings*, 2019.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2019.
Art Students League, New York, *Postwar Women*, 2019.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Women of Abstract Expressionism: Inventory Highlights*, 2020. [online exhibition]
Berry Campbell, New York, *Artist Insights/ Contemporary Highlights*, 2020. [online exhibition]
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, *Something Wicked*, 2022.
Whitechapel Gallery, London, *Action/Gesture/Paint: A Global Story of the Women of Abstraction 1940 – 1970*, 2023. (traveling to Foundation Vincent van Gogh, Arles; Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld).
Berry Campbell, New York, *Perseverance*, 2024.
Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, Nebraska, *Sheldon in Focus: The New York School*, 2024.

SELECTED PUBLIC & PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas
Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond
Art Institute of Chicago
Femmes Artistes Musée Mougins, France
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York
Gannett Center, Columbia University, New York
General Electric Company, New York
Greenville County Museum, South Carolina
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.
The Hyde Collection, Glenn Falls, New York
JPMorgan Chase, New York
Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Massachusetts
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan
National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, South Wales, United Kingdom
National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.
Newark Museum, New Jersey
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Smith College Museum of Art, Southampton, Massachusetts
Sovran Bank, Richmond, Virginia
Suffolk Museum of Art, Virginia
Ulrich Museum, Wichita State University, Kansas
United States Navy Y.M.C.A., Norfolk, Virginia
United Virginia Bank, Richmond, Virginia

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Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City

Vassar College Museum, Poughkeepsie, New York

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut