

EDVINS STRAUTMANIS



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University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook

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In the four years since Edvins Strautmanis's untimely passing at age 58 in August of 1992, the shadow he casts as an important and vital contemporary abstract artist only grows larger and more intense. Known for big, dynamic paintings characterized by his trademark large-scale strokes produced with outsized brooms, brushes, and rakes, Strautmanis was recognized in the United States and in Europe as a unique inheritor of the mantle of Abstract Expressionism. Those familiar with his work over the years understood that Edvins was at the height of his powers and had entered an important creative phase with "The Silver Paintings," which became his last completed canvases.

Occasionally, the biographical facts of an artist's life provide the viewer with information that clearly enhances one's perception of the art. Edvins Strautmanis was born in 1933 near Liepaja, Latvia. At the time, Latvia had only been an independent country since the end of World War I, and, by 1940, it was annexed by force into the orbit of the USSR only to be invaded by Hitler's Germany and then re-annexed by the USSR at the end of World War II. Moving between Latvia and what was to become West Germany for several years, the Strautmanis family was able to make its way to the United States in 1950, settling in Chicago. Two years later, at age 18, Edvins enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago, a veteran of shifts between three languages, three cultures, two continents, and, most important, between the Old World and the New.

Strautmanis remained at the Art Institute from 1952 to 1956, at a time when Abstract Expressionism was at its height and when the belief that this was America's most provocative and liberating conception of what painting should be began to gain wide acceptance. He started to show his work with consistency in Chicago in 1960. A few years later, Edvins and his wife Irja relocated to New York, where he was to live and maintain his legendary studio for the next twenty-seven years.

Having looked at Strautmanis's paintings over the course of a good part of the past two decades, it became increasingly evident to me that he was an artist whose work is unabashedly spiritual in that it speaks directly to and of the human spirit. His is not the self-conscious, macho, one-with-God brand of spirituality that characterized the beginnings of Abstract Expressionism, but, rather, as critic Dennis Adrian has commented:

"...the emotional content of Strautmanis's work is the exalted range of feeling from sensuous ecstasy to meditative gravity of an almost mystical sort. It is the transcending intensity of this kind of feeling, directed at the nature of the artistic experience itself, which is the content and subject of his art. Strautmanis's painting has a genuine easy largeness of spirit and unfettered nobility."

In describing the Abstract Expressionist "credo" of making paintings about painting, which would be informed by the assumption that the entire being of the artist would somehow find its way into the materials used, noted art historian and critic Karen Wilkin states:

"It is clear from the testimony of his art that Strautmanis remained generally faithful to this approach and to these assumptions throughout his lifetime as a painter. The specific painters whom he admired and apparently chose as his ancestors are easy to identify, as well: Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann.... Strautmanis was closest, in many ways, to Hofmann, in terms of how he conceived a picture and how he put a picture together. Like Hofmann, Strautmanis thought of the architecture of a picture as inseparable from the physical and optical properties of his materials; like Hofmann, too, he built his images out of the differences between edges, densities, directions and hues – that is to say, out of the raw material of painting itself – with the fundamental gesture – that of spreading pigment across the surface – focused upon and enlarged to become both the essential element of construction and the bearer of maximum drama."¹

More specifically, when Wilkin wrote about his last completed series of work, "The Silver Paintings," she talked about the passion and honesty of Strautmanis's work:

"Strautmanis's overscaled brushstrokes, sometimes insisting on the dimensions and proportions of the canvas, sometimes fighting against them, and his brooding color seem motivated by authentic emotional impulses. In the context of the nineties, Strautmanis's Silver Paintings, as his current series is known, become the abstract paintings that Gerhard Richter's recent work parodies. Like Richter's, Strautmanis's canvases are rough-hewn, layered, full of sensually ploughed paint, and monumentally scaled. The difference is that Strautmanis's paintings are "straight" – the real thing, minus the modish irony, the detachment, and the cynicism. Strautmanis has been at it a long time, with unflagging seriousness and energy, and his new pictures, with their luminous darks and odd veillings of dragged color, are the strongest of his works that I've seen to date. It's easy to identify the artists he regards as his ancestors...but I suspect this is largely due to like conviction that a painting is a visible record of a state of mind. That the state of mind is a passionate one is what separates Strautmanis's assertive works from much recent abstract painting."²

Anyone who was ever invited to Edvins's distinctive studio immediately understood that it was a place of meditation, concentration, and work – a fitting setting in which this remarkable man focused his mental and physical energies to produce paintings that are authentic, powerful, and timeless. To have known him was one of the great joys of my life. To represent his estate is a bittersweet privilege.

Stephen Rosenberg
May, 1996

1. Karen Wilkin, Catalogue Essay, *Edvins Strautmanis, Painter*, Kunst-Museum, Ahlen, Germany 1994
2. Karen Wilkin, "At the Galleries", *Partisan Review*, 1992, Volume LIX No. 1



Venetian, 1982

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width. All works are lent courtesy of Rosenberg + Kaufman Fine Art, New York, NY.

1. **Fly Turtle Sea**, 1979
Acrylic on canvas, 68 X 77"
2. **Venetian**, 1982
Acrylic on canvas, 95 X 83"
3. **Skylark**, 1989
Acrylic on canvas, 90 X 66"
4. **Titan**, 1990
Acrylic on canvas, 99 X 80"
5. **One More**, 1990
Acrylic on canvas, 94 X 71½"

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Rhonda Cooper
Director