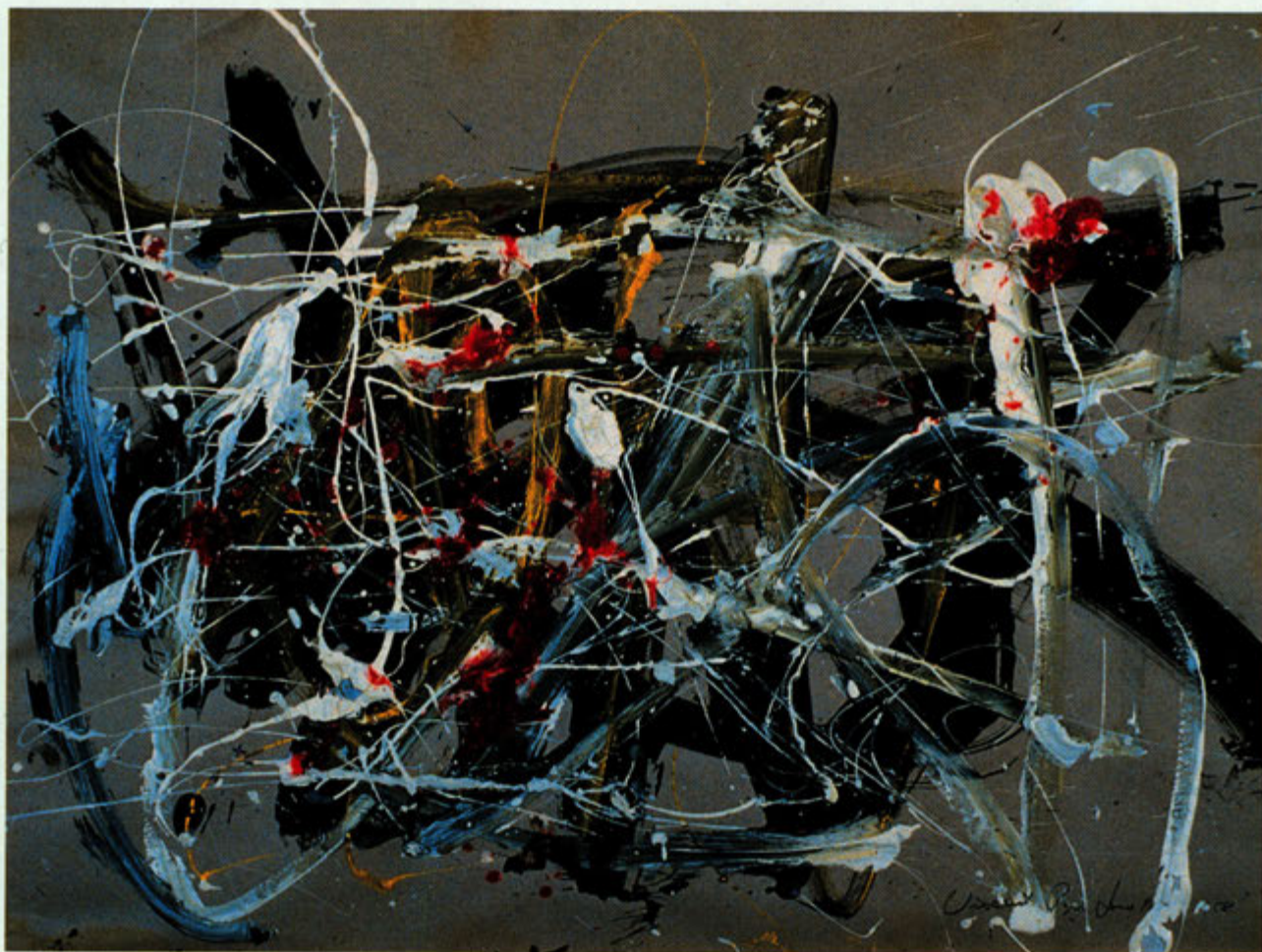


Vincent Pepi



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

Vincent Pepi by Harry Rand

Currently, it is impossible to discuss Vincent Pepi in the present tense. His art, Janus-like, looks to a past moment of elective seclusion and a future moment of restitution to his history. That makes him an "interesting" painter for the New York School and something of a test case for historians. As his contemporaries' prestige ascended, their pictures began to be sought, and now, with a dwindling supply at astronomical prices, all sorts of minor or ersatz reputations are being proffered as facile alternatives to the "names"; that is not Pepi's problem. There is nothing counterfeit or inauthentic about his work.

The artists who gathered in New York, as those who formerly convened in Paris, came from many points in an aesthetic empire invisible to the map-maker. Guston from Canada, Kline from Pennsylvania, Pollock from California, Still from the Northwest, de Kooning from the Netherlands, Rothko from Russia, Gorky from an unresurrected Armenia—only Newman and Gottlieb were locals growing up in the vortex that attracted the others. Few really left: Jacob Kainen for Washington and a form of security, Harry Jackson for a dream of a western sunset, and Vincent Pepi, who, though born in Boston and trained in New York, returned from Europe to an America where he was invisible in plain sight.

Pepi graduated from the High School of Music and Art in 1943 to spend the next year as an apprentice in a New York illustration studio before he volunteered for the Navy in 1944, which allowed him to paint in North Africa. Only James Brooks, of the major Abstract Expressionists, actually served in the war, but his military apprenticeship secured Pepi to a generation of which his peers were mainly older. After discharge from the military, Pepi spent four months in Mexico City, which had been a lodestone for the ambitious muralists or would-be muralists then working in New York. The real rupture with his generation came in 1949 when he left for Rome, from which he made sidetrips to Florence, Assisi, Orvieto, Pompei, and Milan, always studying the art and art history around him. More important perhaps, in Rome he was befriended by Roberto Matta who recommended the younger man's abstract paintings in oils and watercolor, such as *Piazza del Popolo* [#502], an oil on canvas.

Like "first generation" Abstract Expressionists, Pepi never lost his grounding in manual virtuosity and drew incessantly from still lives and nudes, and, as in other first generation Abstract Expressionists, the residue of this surety of line and form elevates his art, as its absence can be felt as a hollowness in subsequent abstract art. In a calligraphic work like *Abstract* [#525F], 1950, the sense of the brushwork's conviction and certitude would be lacking from American art for the next two generations as artists groped for any tenet to rebut camp's faithlessness. Then Pepi used his enamel-loaded brush with the assurance of a writer con-scripting letters or a draftsman outlining an apple. Untethered from hard-won form, Pepi's color roamed free chromatically. If his work recalls Gorky and de Kooning, with flourishes of others, Pepi is very much an individual, with a consistency that courses through all his works, right into *Eclipse/Kiss* [#657], 1981, a richly painted oil, redolent of certain lyrical de Koonings of thirty years earlier without in any way emulating him.

A work like *Rome Abstract* [#501C], 1950, though apparently an all-over composition, possesses special qualities. In it, form overwhelms any themes or subjects so that a representational basis can only be supposed; the work is never geometric, but gentle, a trait that Pepi exhibited thereafter. His compositions are neither as rigid as European abstraction nor uncontrolled. His pictures are never doctrinaire, which may have lost him a coterie of ardent, and perhaps influential, people willing to spout formulas they neither understood nor questioned. Pepi's pictures never suggest that some theory is governing these pieces' evolution, yet his work is both thoughtful and fervent.

Yet, in the watercolor *Abstract* [#540], 1951 Pepi restricts his interest to the transparency of watercolor. This quality elevates the medium to the expressive equal of oils, a position it has often enjoyed in America. The work's cur-sive sketchiness recalls Gorky—without mimicking him any more than de Kooning at that time — and balances energetic washes and forms to supply that most satisfying quality of Abstract Expressionism: the conviction that something originated the work, some idea or relationship, that reality mattered. That urgency distinguishes the original practitioners from a later generation's neo-abstraction, and it can be sensed in more recent work like *Abstract* [#702], 1986, where a firm morsel of some green reality insists about itself. Another characteristic visible in *Abstract* [#540], 1951 is a touch of bright egg-yolk yellow, a hue now so much associated with this era as a period-color to be found in Pollock and de Kooning, but not subsequently.

Upon his return to America, Pepi became an in-house graphic designer for New York University; that was his day job. At the same time, he remained in the center of the art world, with Pepi's painting studio one floor below Franz Kline's and across the hall from Conrad Marcarelli. In 1953 he showed at the Stable Gallery, which again situated him at the center of the painters' world; yet, his absence of only a few years and his return as a mature artist made him a difficult personage to market. He was too young to be taken seriously or seriously promoted. Pepi retreated from this quirky but harsh reality; he became an outsider. His career quiescent, he never ceased to aspire artistically.

In 1955 he once more travelled to Italy, to which he returned in 1967 and again several times in the 1970s, but not until the 1970s did Pepi attempt to reappear in the art world's consciousness. Then, works like *Abstract* [#591A], 1958, showed a working method that owed something to only recently completed Pollocks, like *Eyes in the Heat*, without in any way merely mimicking Pollock. Thirty years later, *Abstract Orange* [#848] continued an energetic and suave easel painting, full of self-questioning, but ultimately graceful and robust.

Pepi's career seems to owe more to his famous contemporaries and friends than is, in fact, the case. Yet, even if his were only a reply in the Socratic dialogue of questions posed by more famous artists, his answers have been solid, thoughtful, accomplished, original, and beautiful. Of few artists, or others, can that be said in any era. If Pepi is less celebrated than others, time can ameliorate that temporary demotion, but passing time will not elevate the works of less-accomplished but better-known quantities. Long overlooked, partly by his own choices, Pepi is returned, a player in history. The past will care for the future.



Abstract Orange – #848, 1987

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width. All works are lent courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise indicated.

1. **Rome Abstract - #501C**, 1950
Mixed media on canvas, 10- $\frac{1}{2}$ x 13- $\frac{3}{4}$ "
2. **Piazza del Popolo - #502**, 1950
Oil on canvas, 28 x 18"
Lent by The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Gift of the artist.
3. **Abstract - #525F**, 1950
Enamel on paper, 12 x 18"
4. **Abstract - #532**, 1950
Oil on canvas, 20 x 29"
5. **Abstract - #540**, 1951
Watercolor on paper, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ "
Lent by the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ.
Purchase, FA1990.4
6. **Abstract - #591A**, 1958
Tempera on colored paper, 19 x 25"
7. **Abstract - #592**, 1958
Oil on canvas, 40 x 24"
8. **Lilac - #593D**, 1959
Oil on canvas, 47 x 34"
Lent by Dr. Edward H. Einhorn, East Norwich, NY
9. **Token - #600**, 1962
Oil on canvas, 46 x 44"
10. **Eclipse/Kiss - #657**, 1981
Oil on masonite, 36 x 48"
11. **Abstract - #702**, 1986
Oil on masonite, 48 x 36"
12. **Abstract - #845**, 1987
Oil on canvas, 50 x 48"
13. **Abstract Orange - #848**, 1987
Oil on canvas, 46 x 34"
14. **Abstract - #1051A**, 1990
Oil on canvas, 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 67 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
15. **Birds Are - #1225A**, 1993
Oil and enamel on board, 14 x 17"
16. **White Forest - #1302**, 1995
Oil and enamel on canvas, 22 x 28"
17. **Mandarin Rhythms - #1305**, 1994-96
Oil on canvas, 22 x 28"
18. **The Crowing Cock - #1306**, 1994-95
Oil on canvas, 22 x 28"
19. **Abstract - #1311**, 1996
Oil and enamel on canvas 36 x 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Most of all, I wish to thank Vincent Pepi for sharing his work with the Stony Brook Community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Cover photo: **Abstract - #591A**, 1958