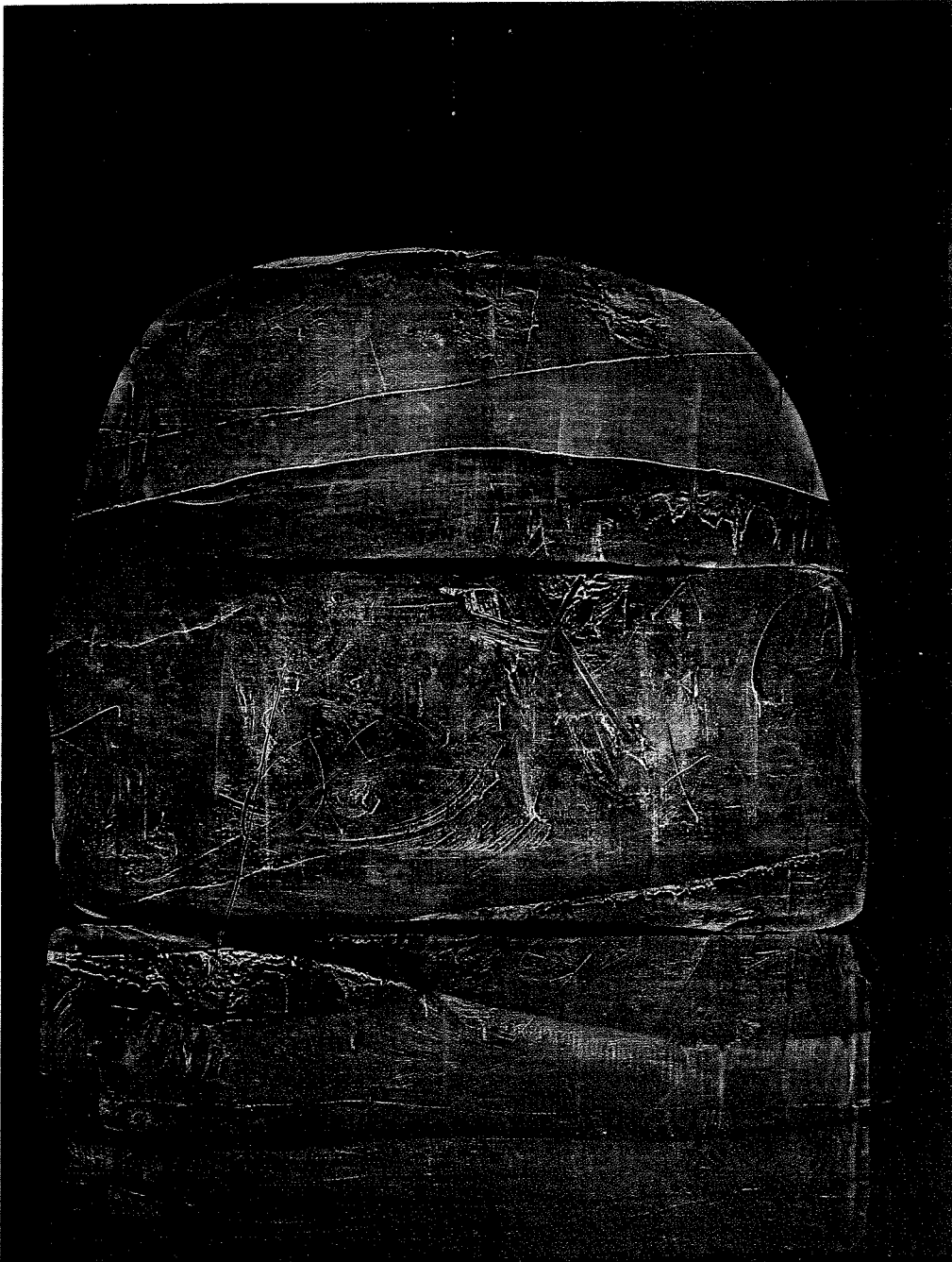


# “Introducing” Reigl

*Well into the seventh decade of her career, the highly regarded Hungarian painter Judit Reigl is enjoying her first exhibition in New York.*

BY MICHAEL AMY



*Judit Reigl: Guano-Menhir, 1959-63, mixed mediums on canvas, 83½ by 68 inches.  
All photos this article courtesy Janos Gat Gallery, New York.*

**H**aving survived World War II and the Stalinist rule imposed in 1948, Judit Reigl (b. Kapuvár, 1923) escaped from her native Hungary in 1950 and settled in Paris, where she remained until moving to nearby Marcoussis in 1963. The veteran artist's first exhibition in the United States is likewise the first show at Janos Gat Gallery's new premises on New York's Lower East Side. Though Reigl has produced works that depict the human figure, this introductory selection focuses on eight abstract paintings (all oil or mixed mediums on canvas) drawn from five different series and spanning the period from 1956 to 1975.

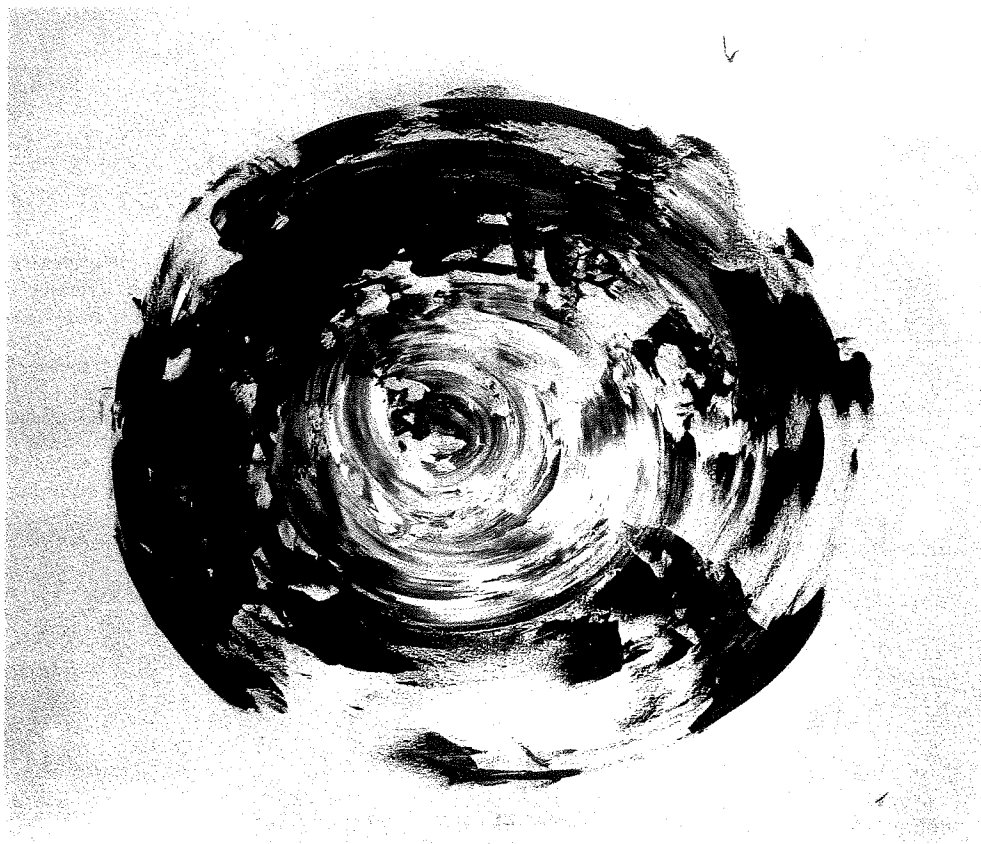
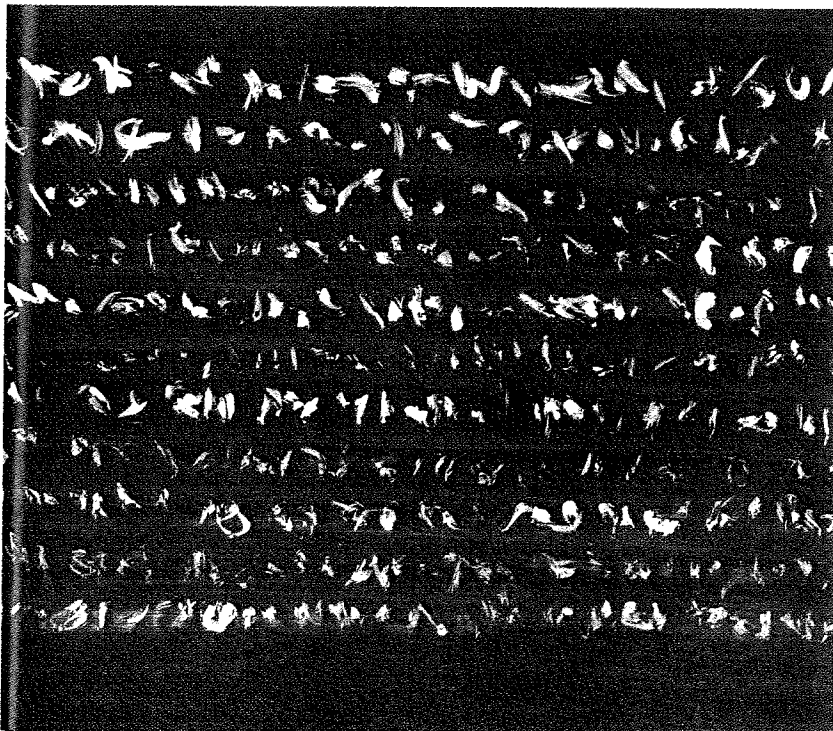
In 1954, Reigl was introduced by her friend and fellow Hungarian émigré Simon Hantai to André Breton, the leader of the surviving Surrealist movement. Since her arrival in Paris, Reigl had been making figurative paintings with distortions of form, space, scale and color, and unexpected juxtapositions of images, all of which justified her inclusion in the Surrealist camp. Duly impressed, Breton immediately offered her a one-person exhibition. In a letter to Reigl dated July 5, 1954, Breton—ever the misogynist—stated, “You are in possession of powers that surprise me in a woman, and I believe you will be able to do great things with them.”

By then, however, Reigl was growing disenchanted with the recognizable, dream-saturated imagery endorsed by Breton. Both she and Hantai went on to embrace *écriture automatique* (automatic writing), the literary technique of expressing unconscious desires unrestrained by reason, which André Masson had successfully transposed to the production of visual art. *Ecriture automatique* provided Reigl with a framework for breaking away from established modes of painting. The technique was fraught with implications of freedom, and therefore particularly attractive to an artist who had experienced repression firsthand. Reigl would later state, “I work with my entire body, with arms wide open. I inscribe the given space with motion, give it rhythm, heartbeat, tempo. This also explains why I use large canvases.”

The earliest works in this trim survey belong to the "Eclatement" (Outburst) series (1955-57), in which the paint seems to have been violently scraped across parts of the canvas, leaving large areas of the support exposed. In fact, Reigl threw pigment mixed with linseed oil onto the canvas, and moved this matter around with assorted metal implements. One of the two horizontal "Eclatement" paintings (both 1956) is more open and lyrical, with diagonal streaks of highly saturated dark blue bleeding into liquid white impasto and small flames of dark red. The airiness of this composition, with its relatively discreet system of signs, feels just right. The other "Eclatement," likewise executed on raw canvas, is largely taken over by powerful though fragmentary black diagonals, which veer to gray and beige in places, and suggest an explosion or forms that are being ripped apart. The canvas may offer a comment on contemporary political violence: 1956 is the year of the Hungarian uprising.

**A**merican viewers might be inclined to compare "Eclatement" to the black-on-white paintings of Franz Kline, and conclude in favor of the weighty austerity of the latter. It is more rewarding, however, to situate Reigl's gestural paintings within the context of postwar European *peinture informelle* (formless painting) in order to properly assess the full measure of her achievement. Wols, Jean Fautrier, Henri Michaux, Jean Degottex, Pierre Soulages and Georges Mathieu (with whom Reigl and Hantai exhibited in 1956-57) were among the European painters who approached gesture and matter in nontraditional ways. Reigl's process-oriented pictures involving actions performed by the whole body also bring to mind works by the Gutai group and Fluxus.

*Unfolding, 1974, mixed mediums on canvas, 60½ by 69¼ inches.*



*Center of Dominance, 1958, oil on canvas, 69 by 81½ inches.*

Reigl's next series, called "Center of Dominance" (1958-60), is represented in the exhibition by a work from 1958 in which a fragmentary maelstrom, black around its broken periphery and shifting to yellow, white and red toward the center, occupies the middle of the unprimed canvas. The image, through which many patches of canvas remain visible, optically projects outward along its border and bores itself into great illusionistic depth toward its center, thereby escaping the picture plane.

The works in the following series, "Guano" (1958-64), arose from an unintended, if prolonged, chance operation carried out by an artist who has always welcomed accident in her practice. Reigl had covered her studio floors with raw canvas to protect them from paint drips and spills. Several years later, she decided to recuperate and rework those randomly stained and layered coverings. *Guano-Menhir* (1959-63) was created by scraping a stratified, gently rounded, vertical oblong out of a dark brown field, and then scratching the form to make its surface look weathered yet richer. The effect is reminiscent of works by Max Ernst and Jean Dubuffet.

The piece that stays most vividly with me, however, is an exquisite painting of 1974 from the "Déroulement" (Unfolding) series (1974-85). Here, 11 registers of white, almost calligraphic marks—somewhat akin to Michaux's, though with the values reversed—seem to float atop a dark brown ground. Significantly, the composition was executed on the verso of the canvas, and the paint was made to bleed through the pictorial support. Certain works by the Supports/Surfaces group, whose activities coalesced in France during the latter 1960s, come to mind. This painting, and the others by Reigl on view, made one long for an in-depth look at the rich history of European painterly abstraction, to which she has made such compelling contributions. □

"Judith Reigl: A Survey" opened at Janos Gat Gallery in New York on Sept. 20, 2007, and was extended through Mar. 1, 2008.

Author: Michaël Amy is associate professor of art history at Rochester Institute of Technology.