

## Peter Blume

ACA GALLERIES

The most surprising works in this exhibition of Peter Blume's art were the drawings, which were made with an exquisitely fine-tuned hand, an ingeniously variable touch—sometimes delicate, sometimes firm. Intense and self-dramatizing, these pieces seem to incubate a grand gesture even as they evince a keen command of nuanced observation. Blume is conventionally thought of as a social realist, but it is clear from such drawings as *Untitled (Town and Woods)*, 1937, and *Allegheny Range*, 1938, that he was also a descriptive realist.

The pencil-on-paper work *Man with Camera*, ca. 1938, shows just how light and lyrical Blume's mark-making could be—the figure is almost insubstantial, more white paper than shadowy line—while *Poppies #1*, 1964, a rendering in ink and chalk on colored paper, evidence a hand that is firm and determined. Blume was clearly a master of his medium, playing it for its own uncanny effect, but drawing was not an end in itself: He enlisted ink, pencil, or chalk in the service of rendering empirical facts—the world beyond art—always with clear, sharp eyes. The facts are almost always those of nature, whether landscapes, as in *Rolling Hills*, 1957; beach scenes, as in *Untitled (Man Walking on the Beach)*, 1961; or trees, as in *Tree Trunk #3 (Sketch for Summer)*, 1964. For Blume, nature gives life to art; his works glow with its élan vital. Blume was interested in the density of matter, which, however static, seems to be in perpetual motion: *Reaching Woman*, 1972, a nude seen from different angles, her natural form repeated over a dozen times—just as he rendered tree trunks many times—is but one example of this tendency. Meanwhile, as *Orchard*, 1957, and *Untitled (Desert Trees)*, ca. 1961, make particularly clear, Blume was drawn to contrast, the more abrupt the better. To call these works “studies” is to sell them short; they are consummate works in themselves—“minor” perhaps, but aesthetic masterpieces.

In two works titled *Composition Study for Recollection of Flood*, from 1967 and 1968, respectively, there is a sudden surge of gesture, an unexpected excitement, but it is always the “gesture” found in nature. Consider, too, the three charcoals titled *Study for Crashing Surf*, 1981. These works show the depth and power of Blume's consciousness—the seriousness and persuasiveness of his devoted attention to and knowledge of external reality.

If Blume is a surrealist, then he is an abstract surrealist, as the various works called *Study for Boulders of Avila*, made between 1971 and 1975, suggest. Slowly but surely natural forms grow abstract—but ambiguously and incompletely. Blume's so-called metamorphosis seems to have been an effort to “catch up” to abstraction but not to completely surrender to it; notably, it was inspired by a trip to Europe—an alien, “abstract” place compared to the “concrete” America Blume knew firsthand. It was perhaps a “devilish” place, as the painting *Still Life with Satyr and Paint Brushes*, ca. 1967, suggests, prompting him to play the devil's advocate; that is, to ironically advocate for abstraction while also denying—subverting—it by holding on to reality. The Avila boulders are fantastic abstractions; they show that nature is inherently abstract. Blume confirms it, hold on him while acknowledging its profundity.

—Donald Kuspit



Peter Blume,  
*Poppies #1*, 1964, ink  
and chalk on colored  
paper, 9¾ × 13".