MAKING HIS MARK: SEVEN DECADES OF PAINTINGS BY ADGER COWANS

SEPTEMBER 11TH - OCTOBER 25TH, 2025

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | FALL 2025 EXHIBITION



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OPENING RECEPTION: SEPTEMBER 11TH / 6 - 8 PM

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Bruce Silverstein is pleased to announce the exhibition *Making His Mark: Seven Decades of Paintings by Adger Cowans.* While Adger Cowans (b. 1936) has been painting since the 1960s, this is the first exhibition dedicated solely to his paintings. Featuring a selection of works spanning his career, made from the mid-1960s to the present, the show offers a rare and overdue opportunity to engage with an artist whose innovative use of found and handmade tools has produced a deeply original body of abstract work, While friends such as Peter Bradley, Ed Clark, and Jack Whitten have received long-overdue recognition in recent decades, Cowans has continued to work in near-total obscurity. Yet his contributions to abstraction—and the material innovations that would later be echoed by others—have been substantial and singular.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Cowans pioneered a distinctive approach to mark making, employing combs, sticks, serrated edges, found objects, and even the patterned surfaces of crystal to apply and manipulate paint. These experimental techniques—used to scrape, push, and layer pigment—resulted in abstract compositions of remarkable depth and complexity. Rather than using paint to render images, Cowans treated the paint itself as the subject: a material to be sculpted, moved, and illuminated. This approach, developed early and independently, quietly resonated within the work of other artists who would later adopt similar tools and techniques. Cowans' pioneering vision remains uniquely his own.

Early in his career, Cowans could not afford new canvases and painted on whatever materials were available—paper, wood, plastic. He often reused canvases, painting over and transforming earlier works out of necessity. These practical choices would influence the aesthetic direction of his work moving forward and would reflect the resourcefulness and dedication that have defined his lifelong painting practice.

In 1979, Cowans joined AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), an influential collective founded in Chicago in 1968 to define a "Black aesthetic" that would promote solidarity across the African diaspora. While many AfriCOBRA members embraced figurative and symbolic approaches, Cowans's commitment to abstraction set him apart. The collective has produced some of the most celebrated Black artists of the late 20th century, including Wadsworth Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams, whose work has achieved significant critical and commercial success.

Cowans was also a founding member of the Kamoinge Workshop in 1963, a collective of Black photographers dedicated to dignified portrayals of their communities. Kamoinge continues to thrive today, with its work recently featured in a major traveling exhibition originating at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and touring prestigious institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Getty Museum. This renewed attention affirms Kamoinge's lasting influence on American photography and cultural history.

Cowans' ability to be recognized as a painter was doubly challenged by his identity and background. As a Black artist working during a period when racial discrimination was systemic, he faced barriers to exhibition and acceptance. At the same time, his established reputation as a photographer created an additional obstacle in the fine art world, where crossing between disciplines was often fraught. Unable to endure repeated rejection, Cowans eventually chose instead to look inward for motivation—painting quietly and persistently over six decades. "I took all that racism and rejection and everything, and I put it in my work, as one of the big things I learned from Gordon Parks was to take negative energy and turn it into positive power."

While Cowans maintained long-standing relationships with a wide circle of artists, including Romare Bearden, Peter Bradley, Robert Indiana, and Jack Whitten, his inner circle, however, included Daniel LaRue Johnson, George Preston, Peter Bradley, Nelson Stevens, James Phillips, Al Loving, and, importantly, Ed Clark. Clark, who was especially supportive of Cowans' painting practice—often lending him his studio while spending summers in Paris. In 1998, the two artists presented a joint exhibition, Sweeps & Views: Clark & Cowans, titled in reference to Clark's sweeping brushwork and Cowans' combing techniques. Yet, perhaps the most formative relationship in Cowans' early career, though, was with Gordon Parks, who mentored him as a young photographer. Parks famously described Cowans as both "one of America's finest photographers" and "one of its finest painters," praising his individualism and mastery.

Making His Mark is both a celebration and a corrective: an opportunity to recalibrate the record and recognize a visionary artist whose paintings deserve a central place in the story of American abstraction.

For all press inquiries, please contact inquiries@brucesilverstein.com.



Previous Page: **Adger Cowans (b. 1936)** *White Bolt Shimmer,* 1991 Acrylic on canvas Signed, titled, and dated on verso 11 1/2 x 9 1/2 in (29.2 x 24.1 cm) ACO-00192-SP

This Page: **Adger Cowans (b. 1936)** *Untitled,* 1971 Acrylic on canvas Signed and dated on verso 11 1/2 x 11 in (29.2 x 27.9 cm) ACO-00184-SP







Adger Cowans (b. 1936)

Wave Series #10, 1970 Acrylic on black canvas Signed, titled, and dated on verso 19 1/2 x 35 in. (49.5 x 88.9 cm) ACO-00070-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936) Untitled, 1970 Acrylic splatter over acrylic ground on canvas Signed and dated on verso 28 x 38 in (71.1 x 96.5 cm) ACO-00186-SP





Adger Cowans (b. 1936) Ancestral Memory, 1997 Acrylic on canvas Signed, titled, and dated on verso 32 x 40 in (81.3 x 101.6 cm) ACO-00198-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936) Untitled, 2006 Acrylic on canvas Signed and dated on verso 18 x 18 in (45.7 x 45.7 cm) ACO-00190-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936)

For Mom, 1969 Acrylic and gold powder on heavy black woven fabric Signed, titled, and dated on verso 25 x 34 in (63.5 x 86.4 cm) ACO-00183-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936) Untitled, 1970 Acrylic on canvas Signed and dated on verso 14 1/2 x 19 in (36.8 x 48.3 cm) ACO-00193-SP





Adger Cowans (b. 1936)

Late Night Muse, 2006 Acrylic pushed through perforated screen on canvas Signed, titled, and dated on verso 24 x 24 in. (61 x 61 cm) ACO-00069-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936) The Slow Drag, 1997 Acrylic on canvas Signed, titled, and dated on verso 26 x 35 in (66 x 88.9 cm) ACO-00217-SP



Adger Cowans (b. 1936) Untitled , 1970 Acrylic on heavy black woven fabric Signed and dated on verso 16 1/2 x 22 in (41.9 x 55.9 cm) ACO-00195-SP







Tools Cowans used to treat the paint itself as the subject: a material to be sculpted, moved, and illuminated.

AfriCOBRA Members, 1979











Frank Smith

AFRICOBI 19/9





Michael Harris

James Phillips

Gerald Williams







Kamoinge Members, 1973

Front row from left: L-R Herman Howard, Ming Smith, Jimmy Mannas, Louis Draper, Calvin Wilson, Anthony Barboza;Back row from left: Adger Cowans, Ray Francis, Herb Randall, Danny Dawson, Beuford Smith, Herb Robinson, Al Fennar, Shawn Walker

Photography credit Anthony Barboza, 1973



Adger Cowans and Peter Bradley



Sweeps & Views Exhibition Poster

Ed Clarke and Adger Cowans holding tools used in their work



From Left to Right: Romare Bearden, Adger Cowans, Norman Lewis, and Ernest Crichlow

Museum Collections

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, Cincinatti Art Museum, Cincinatti, OH, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI, Howard University, Washington D.C., Milwaulkee Art Museum, Milwaulkee, WI, Montclaire Art Museum, Montclaire, NJ, Mosaic Templar Cultural Center, Little Rock, AR, Mott Museum Collection, Flint, MI, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, Museum of The National Center of Afro-American Arts, Boston, MA, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., The National Museum of African-American History and Culture, Washington D.C., The Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ, Reginald L Lewis Museum, Baltimore, MD, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY, Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE, St Louis Fine Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, University of Delaware, Wilmington, DE, Whitney Museum, New York, NY.