

SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2025 - OCTOBER 25TH, 2025



MAKING HIS MARK: SEVEN DECADES OF PAINTINGS BY ADGER COWANS

*Wave Series #10, 1970***OPENING RECEPTION:**

SEPTEMBER 11TH / 6PM - 8PM

PRIVATE PREVIEW:

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

Bruce Silverstein is pleased to announce the exhibition *Making His Mark: Seven Decades of Paintings by Adger Cowans*. Well known for his photography, this is the first exhibition dedicated solely to the paintings of Adger Cowans (b. 1936). Featuring a selection of works spanning his career, 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, electric drills, found objects, perforated screens, and even the patterned surfaces of crystal to apply and manipulate paint. These experimental techniques, used to scrape, push, fling, 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. Yet, Cowans' pioneering vision remains uniquely his own.

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. The result was a deeply personal body of work free from the concerns of the commercial market.

"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."

In 1963, Cowans became a founding member of the Kamoinge Workshop, a collective of Black photographers dedicated to dignified portrayals of their communities. The community thrives today, recently culminating in an important 2020 group retrospective traveling to The Whitney and The Getty museums among other prestigious institutions.

Cowans' success with the Kamoinge Workshop led him to join AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) in 1979. An influential collective founded in Chicago in 1968 to define a "Black aesthetic" promoting solidarity across the African diaspora, these artists focused on painting instead of photography. As 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.

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 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 lent 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, 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.