

JOSEPH GOLDBERG  
(1947-2017)

Joseph Goldberg was born in 1947 in Seattle and raised near Spokane in Eastern Washington. He was educated at the University of Washington until he dropped out in 1968 at the encouragement of some of his teachers who knew that academic rigor wasn't going to teach (or tame) this most natural of artists.

His first few exhibitions in the late 1960s, with Francine Seders Gallery in Seattle, revealed two separate inquiries into abstraction. At the time he was living as a caretaker in a studio that was part of the gallery and then later in the basement of Seders' Greenwood area gallery. He was producing small landscape drawings and paintings that were somewhat surrealistic in nature. At the same moment, he was beginning the course of abstraction that would define his early career. In these first delicate works on paper, small shapes of colors floated within larger planes of color, the central shape often echoing the shapes the larger fields. They were mindful of both the Russian Suprematist work of Kasimir Malevich and the work of post-war abstract artists such as Albers, Rothko, Martin and Held. This paring down of essentials had, by the 1970s, become a direction followed by various contemporary artists. While certainly not a Minimalist, Goldberg was pursuing something akin to it in sparseness of details but different in evoking the natural world.

By 1975, these works on paper would develop into larger works in oil or wax over linen stretched over wood panels. The central floating images became striated and sometimes even gestural. A series of tall vertical paintings in the late 1970s and early 1980s suggested classical columns or stacks of rectangles within the larger rectangular plane.

Goldberg had traveled in England in 1978, staying for a month in an Elizabethan country home near Sussex, visiting ancient Roman ruins and Greek revival manors. He would later travel extensively in the western regions of the U.S., particularly the Southwest where the artist visited Zuni and Navajo reservations, Anasazi ruins and Hopi pueblos.

In 1980, Matthew Kangas said of Goldberg, "His true significance...lies in the fact that he turned his back on "mysticism" in art and squarely faced the more rewarding challenges of 20th century painting (cubism, neo-plasticism, abstract expressionism, color field painting), as routes to personal expression."

By the early 1980s, Goldberg had perfected the technique of encaustic painting for which he would become most well-known. By mixing brilliantly hued raw pigments and minerals with translucent beeswax, Goldberg worked with a tradition of painting with wax that dates back to Greco-Romans working in Egypt in the third century. Goldberg built his painted surface with layer after layer of color and wax until a palpable luminescence is achieved. The surface was flamed and buffed developing a waxy, lustrous sheen.

In his 1981 show with Foster/White Gallery, Goldberg debuted a suite of irregularly shaped paintings in encaustic on linen over wood panels. Generally, still somewhat geometric in nature, they floated like unfurled banners or waving flags against the wall. In most of these a vaguely rhomboid panel of shimmering gray would contain an interior shape just as solid walls frame a roomful of space.

One of his most innovative shows was of true three-dimensional paintings; landscapes still but this time somewhat more urban. The remnants of architecture appear as buildings that protrude from the wall. A corner view might be held in perspective or a courtyard would be suggested by three walls.

In the mid-1980s Goldberg produced paintings that were oval shaped or had round or ovoid shapes in them suggestive of planets or their rings and moons. In the later 1980s and early 1990s a broader sense of abstraction encompassed the suggestions of trees, rural architecture, even pueblo ruins the artist had seen in the southwest.

As the work progressed through the 1990s, this expansive vision of the natural world embraced an increasingly larger scope of imagery though often reduced to its essence by a rigorously applied sensibility of abstraction. In the late 1990s, Goldberg exhibited a group of landscapes depicting the familiar forms of gorges, ridges, fields found near Soap Lake in Eastern Washington, where the artist had been living since 1984. These land, sky and waterscapes revealed that this appreciation of the natural world have been the most enduring images in Goldberg's work. In more recent paintings, Goldberg adds elements of weather and observations of the sky to these abstracted landscapes. Lightning, to be specific, was a recurring theme in a number of works. Other paintings were overtly representational with figurative elements in the forms of silhouettes and skeletons, as well as group of haunting paintings of owls in flight. The owls grew out of Goldberg's quite personal interactions with several owls who became familiar to him in his daily life after he moved to Harrington, about an hour west of Spokane. In some they are observers, in others they are hunters.

The paintings since 2000 have often returned to the severity of the earliest work, though now filtered through the artist's keen sense of art historical precedence and of the grandness of nature surrounding him, often filtered through Goldberg's earlier interests in reductive painting. Several pieces investigate a severely reduced composition – a field of rich, nuanced white is edged with small bands and rectangles of high key color intruding slightly into it. These are mindful of the late Mondrian works and also of Motherwell's ongoing Open Series in which he would create a painted space suggestive of the openness of doors or windows without being representational. Similarly, much of Goldberg's past and present work seems related to architecture. Suggestions of archeological relics, mosaic panels, floor plans, doors, tunnels, arches, windows and columns, have figured in nearly every body of his work.

In addition to the encaustic paintings, Goldberg created mysterious three-dimensional box sculptures. Minimal wooden boxes contained gridded compositions made of tightly strung steel wires with coke cinders attached and arranged in seemingly random compositions resembling constellations of stars or rocks strewn across a desert landscape. When viewed from directly in front of the sculptures, the viewer realizes the coke cinders are generally arranged in strictly symmetrical patterns. These also relate to paintings made in the early 2000s where small squares of color are arranged in bilateral, quadrilateral or mirrored symmetry.

I noticed if you have chaos on one side and then mirror it, on the other you end up with balance, order, and a peaceful stillness.

-Joseph Goldberg

The Northwest region has so little history with reductive art that Goldberg seems a refreshing comment on a minimalist aesthetic with his newest works. Whether painting the indigo space between the glowing stars in the deep, dark night skies of Eastern Washington, or poetic suggestions of stars reflecting in the marshy water of a murky pond, Goldberg has produced a sensitively wrought body of work. In the starkest paintings, Goldberg renders the expansive white ground between disparate objects of rural detritus abandoned at the edges of a snow-covered field.

A look at Goldberg's entire career reveals him to be a peripatetic artist, circling back from time to time to meaningful images and painterly issues which have fascinated his constantly seeking curiosity. This practice also reveals the remarkable consistency of thought particular to the best of artists.

Joseph Goldberg died from injuries sustained in an automobile accident near his home in Harrington, Washington, in December 2017.

Joseph Goldberg's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Northwest Art in La Conner, WA; Seattle Art Museum, WA; Tacoma Art Museum, WA; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA; Museum of Arts and Culture, Spokane, WA; Nona Bismarck Foundation, Paris, France; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, BC; and San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA.

His work is in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Art Museum, NY; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Seattle Art Museum; Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, WA; Wichita Art Museum, KS; Long Beach Museum of Art, CA; and Municipal Museum of Dublin, Ireland; and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC.