



39 Jack Hamilton Bush

ARCA CGP CSGA CSPWC OSA P11 1909 – 1977

Narrow Image

oil on canvas, on verso signed, titled, dated 1963 and inscribed oil / to Barry Austin with best wishes, love, and all that jazz, Jack 80 x 70 in, 203.2 x 177.8 cm

PROVENANCE

A gift from the Artist to Barry Austin, December 1964
 Evelyn Aimis Fine Art, Toronto
 Christie's, New York, May 8, 1984, lot 23
 Frank H. Porter, Cleveland
 The Main Trust of Frank H. Porter, Cleveland
 Acquired from the above by a Private Collector
Open House, Christie's, New York, January 12, 2009, lot 59
 Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto
 Private Collection, Alberta

LITERATURE

Elizabeth Kilbourn, "Art and Artists: The Greenberg Gospel,"
The Toronto Daily Star, February 22, 1964, page 30
 Iris Nowell, *Painters Eleven: The Wild Ones of Canadian Art*,
 2009, reproduced page 52

EXHIBITED

Gallery Moos, Toronto, *Jack Bush*, February 20 – March 4,
 1964, catalogue #5
 Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art, Calgary, *Bush and
 Pehudoff: Modern to Contemporary*, May 28 – June 25, 2011

IN 1953 JACK BUSH participated in the groundbreaking exhibition *Abstracts at Home*. Shortly thereafter, Painters Eleven was formed to promote exhibitions dedicated to abstraction, and their work showed their admiration of second-generation Abstract Expressionism. A breakthrough occurred when Painters Eleven exhibited at the Riverside Art Museum, New York, in 1956. Clement Greenberg, the most astute observer and powerful art critic of the day, was invited to Toronto to conduct solo studio visits, and Bush clearly benefited from his counsel. Greenberg's main messages were to forget the "Tenth-Street Touch," the Abstract Expressionist "hot licks," a pervasive habit that inhibited many artists from making a stylistic evolution. He also advised Bush to minimize the use of black to allow colour to take precedence (the default painterly solution of the 1950s was a dominant flourish of black gestures). Greenberg preferred Bush's watercolours and suggested that he emulate their effect in his oils. Bush was, after all, the president of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour.

The 1957 Park Gallery Painters Eleven exhibition sounded another wake-up call. *Warrior* (1956, 84 x 108 inches) by Oscar Cahén dwarfed the other works in the room. The other Painters Eleven works were domestic-scaled, easel-sized pictures. In the last months of his life, Cahén had anticipated the format necessary to address the needs of contemporary spaces. *Warrior* employed a new touch, a muted olive-coloured stained background offset by full-intensity opaque paint on top. These promising explorations were cut short by Cahén's untimely death.

Bush began the total reinvention of his approach in 1959 and 1960. He selected larger canvases, and thereafter only infrequently used black as small accents. He primed his canvases with a protective barrier coat of rabbit-skin glue. This allowed him to simulate a "stain" background without the glaring harshness of an

undercoat of brilliant white gesso. It is this lightness of touch that produced the soft warmth and glow that is in keeping with the spirit of Mark Rothko, Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard. The progress of his transformation was meteoric.

Nothing, however, prepared us for the sheer inventive audacity of his *Fishtail* series, such as *Narrow Image*. In his other works from the early 1960s, the vertical elements are "grounded." One can conjure them as abstracted recollections of flowers, the solitary pine, or a standing figure. *Narrow Image* free-floats—it is simply a central image of stacked colour interactions operating upon a coloured atmospheric ground. Its example would greatly inspire the work of David Bolduc.

The colour palette of *Narrow Image* is vintage Bush. The colour juxtapositions approach being a primary triad of red, yellow and blue. Yet tangerine certainly is not yellow and that is not primary red. Bush's colour notes are akin to a virtuoso jazz master—just when you anticipate where he is headed next, he throws things off-kilter, all to the positive. His mature work has always been linked to Post-Painterly Abstraction, but Bush is an anomaly within the shared tenets of the group. To progress he moved backwards: his works relish old-school, classic compositional devices, such as figure-ground and illusory space.

Throughout his early career his aesthetic frame of reference was Canada, consequently, up to 1961 his exhibitions were primarily in Canada. Paintings such as *Narrow Image* gained him entry into a world dialogue. After 1962 the preponderance of his exhibitions occurred at renowned international venues, commercial dealers such as the Robert Elkon Gallery and the André Emmerich Gallery, both in New York; Waddington Galleries, London; Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles; and David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto. His clientele and following became global.

Bush's work was exhibited at the Tate Gallery, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris. He was included in the historic exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction* (1964) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He and Jacques Hurtubise represented Canada at the 1967 *Bienal de São Paulo*. Bush's work made important contributions to international contemporary art. He and Jean Paul Riopelle are the sole Canadians chronicled in *History of Modern Art* by H.H. Arnason, used worldwide as a university survey text.

His works have been avidly collected (often in depth), by some of the most astute, discerning international private collectors and corporations. Notable among these, *Narrow Image* was previously part of the distinguished collection of Frank H. Porter, of Cleveland. Frank and his wife Nancy were enthusiastic and sharp collectors who owned works by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jean Dubuffet, Kenneth Noland, Ellsworth Kelly and Morris Louis. In 2003, the Porter estate gifted an unrestricted bequest valued between \$60 million and \$70 million to the Cleveland Foundation, which funds arts, education and community programs. It is no surprise that *Narrow Image* was once included in such a smart collection.

We thank Jeffrey Spalding for contributing the above essay. Spalding is an artist, curator, author and educator. For more than 40 years, Spalding has served in leadership roles at art museums and educational institutions. He is a member of the Order of Canada.

This work will be included in Sarah Stanners's forthcoming *Jack Bush Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*.

ESTIMATE: \$350,000 – 450,000