

RUTH ABRAMS

microcosms

PAINTING AND FILM



6" x 3" oil on paper



6" x 2" oil on canvas

Washington International Art Show, May 12-16, 1976, Washington, D.C.
Delson-Richter Galleries, June 27-July 18, 1976, Jerusalem, Israel
Loeb Student Art Center, N.Y.U., February 3-25, 1977, New York, N. Y.

"In her film 'Paradox of the Big,' Ruth Abrams has put the painted image into relationship with an outer space conception. The tiny scale of her paintings opens up the image to project vast areas." HAROLD ROSENBERG



5 1/2" x 2" oil on canvas

"When I first saw these microcosms they struck me as lyric gossamer moods of monumental nature. Varied in subject matter as well as color and form, they convey a spirit of awesome expanse, at once abstract in esthetic and satisfying as an experience of vast scenes." SEYMOUR LIPTON

"They prove you don't have to paint big to paint a big canvas." PERCIVAL GOODMAN



5 1/2" x 3/4" oil on canvas paper

IMAGE, PROCESS AND SCALE: THE MICROCOSMS OF RUTH ABRAMS

"Images in process move so quickly. The image is so quick and passing that I have to work in full control. The sable brush and small format help to give me that control. The hand is able to leave an image on the paper instantly without having to elaborate a construction. If I labor on the image, process is lost." Ruth Abrams' commentary on her work reveals the key elements of her motivation as a painter: Image, Process and Scale. In her series of tiny oil paintings called *Microcosms*, Abrams has crystalized the struggle of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School, which has been to relate space (i.e. figure, image and symbol) to process.

Her *Microcosms* reveal images of light and images of the continuous. Her "Weightless Series" expresses the forces of energy, its gravity and its levitation. In the terms of these paintings, form is less form-in-fixity than formation. Forms are emergents, atmospheric creations and disintegrations of image. In the *Microcosms*, motion is at the center of image; forms break and change direction. Swellings, ripples and streakings show the internal movements of matter as opposed to the external fixing of form. Abrams' forms are the elements of energy systems. Like clouds, they mirror the borderline forms of the cosmos, which hover between invisible energy and the visible shapes of matter. Abrams' lines are the basic lines of nature's abstraction, lines of growth, expansion, erosion and decline. Her rhythms are not those of composed structures. They are the natural sequences of vibration and radiation, the intervals of hidden process. Her lines are the great cosmic lines of galactic forms, of galactic superimposition, lines based on the spinning wave, on patterns found in hurricanes and ocean currents, the spiraling forms of the universe. These are the great weather patterns; and their images reveal the hidden systems that course through matter and structure its energy into visible forms.

In the *Microcosms*, the motion and contact of the brush with the canvas give us a telescoped close-up of process. Abrams' small format blows up the brushstroke and renders its process visible to the naked eye. The brushstroke, framed in its smallest scale and enlarged for the eye, reveals the act of painting. Brushing, splotching, dribbling, flinging and splattering turn picture plane into action of liquid; volumes, into viscosity; and rhythms, into texturing vibrations. These dynamic imprints mirror the infinitely larger-scale processes and emergent forms of the cosmos.

Scale is that mysterious relationship of man with the world. Scale defines the nature of man's psychological or spiritual proportions with things. The importance of Ruth Abrams' vision lies in its

demonstration of the meaning of scale. These small paintings allow people to adjust their sights to a space larger than anything they could otherwise behold in terms of information fed to the naked eye: "I had been painting ten-foot canvases, but discovered that to depict the vastness of space, I had to view space telescopically. Small paintings, three and four inches in size, paradoxically projected vast distances. This new realization was more vivid to me as a concept of space than the one I had conceived on wall-sized canvases."

One cannot comment on Ruth Abrams' *Microcosms* without dwelling on her color. In her "Blue Series," she has caught in its fullest range the cosmic color blue, the most predominant color in the universe. Other series elaborate the yellowish white of moon and starlight. Her "Sunset Series" expresses the oranges and reds of stars, as well as the luminous violets of haloes. It should be kept in mind that the purest colors visible to the eye are not those of the earthbound landscape, but those spectral colors of atmospheric phenomena such as rainbows, dawn and sunset.

In 1975, Ruth Abrams subjected her *Microcosms* to film, the artistic medium of process. In her film, "Paradox of the Big," the still plane of painting meets the moving, sequential plane of the screen. Through the camera, we grasp even more clearly the visual mystery of scale. The camera unravels scale in relation to form and structure by setting color, tone and brushstrokes into serial motion. Here Abrams' micro-frame is no longer fixed but begins to move with the camera. What was an image of process is reactivated back into pure process. The lens of the camera takes us away from the small measurement of the paintings and adjusts our eye to the psychological scale of their images, which is cosmic. Set in motion, images are further abstracted, and this abstraction increases their monumentality. It seems that the paintings no longer have any limits placed upon them. Motion dematerializes the painted surface, releases us from the plane and immerses us in the dynamics of color, tone and texture. What was the smallest of formats is now definitively and magically transformed into cosmic gradations of change. Thus through essential reduction and transformation, Ruth Abrams has given us a visual memory of spaces and forces too large for the naked eye, if not for the imagination, to behold.

CARL JOHN BLACK

BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Abrams is clearly a painter of the New York School. As early as the 1940's she exhibited at the American Contemporary Art Gallery along with Hans Hofmann, I. Rice Pereira and Giorgio Cavallon and has remained over the years closely associated with the Abstract Expressionists. Her painterly concerns, however, more than her associations, underscore her New York genesis as an artist: Abstraction, the image of process, space and scale were a closely meshed repertory of formal and symbolic problems to which the New York School gave sustained, intense and often common attention. Ruth Abrams has devoted an impressive body of work to these problems. Pure abstraction has not interested her so much as how a meaningful image or symbol emerges from the abstract phenomena of process, energy and movement.

Ruth Davidson Abrams was born in Brooklyn, New York. In the 1930's, she studied painting at Columbia University School of Fine Art and at the Art Students' League; and sculpture, in the ateliers of Zorach and Archipenko. She practiced stone cutting with Jose de Creeft. Her sensitive and versatile gift of brushing was developed in her formative years while working alongside such established artists as Raphael Soyer, Kunyoshi, Wallace Harrison and John Graham.

Since her first one-person shows in New York City at the American Contemporary Art Gallery, from 1934 to 1950, she has shown in one-person exhibitions at the Artists' Gallery, Provincetown, Mass. (1954); Roko Gallery, N.Y.C. (1956, 1959); Camino Gallery, N.Y.C. (1957, 1959); Smolins Gallery, N.Y.C. and D'Arcy Gallery, N.Y.C. (1962); Museum of Fine Arts, Caracas, Venezuela (1963); Columbia University (1966, 1967); M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass. (1964, 1969); Shepherd Gallery, N.Y.C. (1968); Stamford College, Danville, Va. (1974). Miss Abrams has participated in major group shows at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; American Abstract Painters, Riverside Museum, N.Y.C.; and at the Stable Gallery and Egan Gallery in New York City.

Her work is included in the permanent collections of Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; the Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Mass.; the Rose Art Museum, Waltham, Mass.; New York University Art Collection, N.Y.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Caracas, Venezuela; the University of Caracas, Venezuela; Birmingham University Museum of Art, Alabama; Cornell University Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York; and Stratford College Art Collection, Va. Her work is in the private collections of W. Averell Harriman, Thomas Hoving, Kay Hillman, the late Sybil Moholy-Nagy, Elinore Gimbel, Jose Luis Sert, Hans Neumann and Carlos Villanueva of Caracas, and the late Jacob Bronowski of the Salk Institute at La Jolla, California.

Ruth Abrams was Director at the New School of Social Research Associates Art Gallery from 1965 to 1966. She has lectured at the Parsons School of Design and elsewhere on changing perceptions of space, as affected by the impact of the Hiroshima explosion and by advanced space-technology.

Ruth Abrams has been preoccupied, since the late 1950's, with the technique of action painting in relation to cosmic space. In the late 1950's Ruth Abrams began to produce her series of paintings in small format called "Microcosms" or "Microcosmic Spacescapes." She has continued to develop this theme until the present. Taken as a whole, her work shows a continuous philosophy of vision, which picks up the strands of archetypes, older traditions as well as classical problems of painting, and casts them in and against our contemporary feeling for space. The present exhibition is a selection of oils on paper from 1962 through 1976.

C.I.B.



6" x 3" oil on paper