

The background of the entire image is a 3x4 grid of 12 abstract paintings by Fritz Bultman. Each painting is a square panel with its own unique composition of colors and textures. The colors range from deep reds and oranges to blues, yellows, and dark browns. The textures are varied, with some panels showing thick, impasto brushstrokes and others showing more fluid, blended colors. The overall effect is a rich, multi-colored mosaic.

Fritz Bultman

New York - Paris

12 Paintings

FRITZ BULTMAN:

Seven Years of the Past Recovered

Fritz Bultman (1919-1985) led a very rich and colorful artistic, social, and intellectual life. Seven years of it, between 1955 and 1962 were part of “the best painting time of his life”, according to his wife Jeanne. They moved into a townhouse on the upper east side, the top floor of which was a large studio for Fritz, a huge improvement over his previous situation. He was physically and mentally fit at 36 in 1955, with two sons moving out of childhood and able to be helpful instead of handfuls. Making paintings vigorously and having good dealers and sales, he was in an ideal situation. One Paris dealer, Rodolphe Stadler, who was introduced to Fritz’s work by French critic Michel Tapiès, bought many paintings outright and showed and sold them in galleries in Munich, Turin, and Rome as well as Paris. The 12 Bultmans he kept in his collection were very well cared for, and when he closed the gallery and retired, he sold them back to Jeanne. The first glimpse of part of this recovered cache was at the Albert Merola Gallery in Provincetown in the summer of 2004. This catalogue provides the whole view.

All but a few of the paintings have titles reflecting something about New Orleans where he was born, and the Louisiana delta environs nearby. The title *King Zulu*, for his 1959 painting, is a direct reference to a Mardi Gras figure, the leader of the so-called Mardi Gras Indians, who form the second line in the festive parade. *Delta (The Lame Tramp)*, *Heat of the Sky*, *Horizon: The Envelope of Obscurity*, *Trembling Prairie II, IV and V*, and probably *Dialogue of the Hills*, all hint or tell of the delta landscape that Bultman loved. *Horizon: The Envelope of Obscurity*, 1956-58, has “New Orleans, October 25, 1930” written on its verso, in recollection of some childhood event there of lasting importance to him. Fritz and Jeanne and the boys went down to New Orleans at least once a year to stay at the family compound in the middle of the New Orleans Garden District where Fritz grew up. Full of art (belonging to them and to his sister Muriel Bultman, an avid collector of contemporary art), and idiosyncratic furnishings – sea shell chairs, horned furniture everywhere, a traditional chaise lounge in every room, and the two story, glassed-in tropical garden Tennessee Williams wrote of in *Suddenly Last Summer* – it was and remains a very exotic mansion.

Bultman was fascinated by the delta prairie, miles of grassland floating on the bayou waters and creating a trembling sensation, he conveys through restless, everactive brushwork in his *Trembling Prairie* series of 1959. Periodically the grasses would be deliberately set afire, which was always terribly exciting to witness. Even if you weren’t seeing it directly, the fiery red sky announced what was happening. *Heat of the Sky*, 1959, reflects this phenomenon, seeming to generate tremendous heat through orangey-reds. Only its triptych format and folding-screen

size have implications that take your mind to quieter, more contemplative regions, than where the artist apparently was when he painted it. Excitement was and is still rife in New Orleans. It is an unpredictable and dangerous place, and the big yearly Mardi Gras celebrations, are wild and drunken revels often out of control that, at least in the past, saw battles between rival krewes, which were known to end in death. Though much of that rivalry has been channeled into outdoing the other krewes' costumes, the edge of violence remains. Rulers of the white revelers have changed characters and names over the years, but King Zulu remains the leading figure among the Mardi Gras Indians, descendants of African Americans and Native Americans in the area.

In 1932, when Fritz was 13, the young west coast artist Morris Graves came for an extended visit to the Bultman compound generating a new kind of excitement in Fritz's world with his tales of life in the Far East. "There was a whole magic about everything he did" Fritz recalled.¹ Graves was the first important artistic influence on Bultman, taking him for drawing sessions in the Audubon Park and the zoo, teaching him about form from plants, birds, and animals, and showing him how to paint with heavy impasto – both of which stayed with Fritz for a lifetime. Bultman's second major influence was Hans Hofmann, particularly in his structured manner of drawing the figure and constructing a painting along axial intersections, but also in the vigorous impasto paint application, characteristic of all of these paintings. Rectilinear forms predominate in this body of work, curves appearing suggestively interstled in *Dialogue of the Hills*, 1955-56, and erotically in *Two Together* of 1962 where they writhe passionately in red and purple against the powerful brown and black upright form on the right. *Delta* and *The Gate*, both of 1959, share an architectural quality, which is true of some of Bultman's sculpture as well. Red dominates his palette, appearing in every painting but one, *Horizon*, and black and ocher are almost always present, as they are in most of his paintings and collages over a lifetime. Like his teacher Hofmann, Bultman has a wide range of gestural approaches to the canvas, from scrawl to stroke and scumble to drip, using brushes of different widths and types, palette knives, and his hands. Intensity, even anguish, is conveyed, but also driving sexuality and extreme sensitivity to the power of forms in nature and in the built world.

April Kingsley

¹ Irving Sandler. Interview with the artist, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



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